

THE STORY OF SOLOMON'S PALACE AT HELIOPOLIS*

The present study proposes to deal with a distinctive and unique tradition about king Solomon's building activity at Heliopolis/Baalbek, a city located in Syria, between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains. Attested for the first time in a small number of Christian sources written in Syriac during the sixth century CE, this non-canonical tradition has until now received almost no scholarly attention. In the following I intend to examine the extant attestations of this legend and discuss the problem of its date and possible origins, putting the main stress on the claim that its roots should be sought in the context of Pagan-Christian polemic in the city. In the end, a brief sketch of the legend's afterlife shall be offered.

Syriac witnesses of the legend

1. *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah of Mytilene*

Let us start with one of the earliest dated sources, the so-called *Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah of Mytilene*. This historiographic work was composed in the second half of the sixth century (most likely in the late 560s) by an unknown West-Syrian author who lived in northern Mesopotamia and was closely connected to the city of Amida. The original language of the work was Syriac, and its author drew upon a wide variety of sources, including ones composed in Greek. Due to the fact that the most prominent place among these sources belongs to the *Ecclesiastical History* of Zachariah, bishop of Mytilene, the later Syriac tradition transmitted this work under his name¹.

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¹ For a general introduction to this work, see J. RIST, *Die sogennante Kirchengeschichte des Zacharias Rhetor. Überlieferung, Inhalt und theologische Bedeutung*, in M. TAMCKE (ed.), *Syriaca: Zur Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie und Gegenwartslage der*

a part of the immense religious complex on the city's acropolis, one of the largest cultic structures that had ever been built in the Roman Empire³. There is however, a significant discrepancy between our account and the archeological reality *in situ*, since the three stones of the Trilithon do not stand alone, but are incorporated into the basement of the acropolis. This fact may serve as an indication that the author of the *Chronicle* was not familiar with the architecture of the site personally, but had borrowed this story from some external source, written or oral.

There is a certain ambiguity as to whether the Syriac word ܡܠܚ used by Pseudo-Zachariah to refer to the edifice constructed by Solomon in Heliopolis should be translated as "palace" or as "temple"⁴. This double meaning is attested already in Biblical Aramaic, where ܡܠܚ stands both for "palace" (Ezr 4:14; Dan 4:1,26; 5:5; 6:19) and "temple" (Ezr 5:14-15; 6:5; Dan 5:2-3). Likewise, in the Old Testament Peshitta ܡܠܚ is used to render Heb. ܡܠܚ, "palace" (Isa 13:22, 39:7; Dan 1:4) as well as "temple" (1Sam 1:9; 3:3; 2Sam 22:7; 2Kg 18:16; 24:13)⁵. Contrary to Hamilton and Brooks, who in their translation of Pseudo-Zachariah's chronicle into English rendered ܡܠܚ as "temple"⁶, I have chosen the former meaning. There are several reasons for this choice. First of all, there is no mention whatsoever of cultic activity on the part of Solomon in our narrative. Furthermore, the author of the chronicle explicitly identifies this building with the so-called "House of the forest of Lebanon", a non-cultic construction built by Solomon – see 1Kg 7:2, 10:17,21 (cfr also 2Chr 9:16,20). All this makes the possibility that ܡܠܚ in the account of Pseudo-Zachariah would mean "temple" rather improbable.

In addition to that, we are faced with some uncertainty with regard to the exact date and nature of the disaster that destroyed Solomon's palace. According to our source, the fire occurred during the year 525 ("in the year eight hundred and thirty-six of the Greeks, the year three").

³ See E. WILL, *Du trilithon de Baalbek et d'autres appareils colossaux*, in M.-L. BERNHARD (ed.), *Mélanges offerts à Kazimierz Michalowski*, Warsaw, 1965, p. 725-730; J.-P. ADAM, *À propos du trilithon de Baalbek. Le transport et la mise en œuvre des mégalithes*, in *Syria*, 54 (1977), p. 31-63.

⁴ On the etymology of this word, see K. LUKE, *Etymological Studies in Syriac*, in *The Harp*, 3:3 (1990), p. 127-130. It is an early Akkadian loan in Aramaic, from *ekallu* "palace"; see S.A. KAUFMAN, *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic (Assyriological Studies, 19)*, Chicago, 1974, p. 27.

⁵ It is also used to translate Heb. ܡܠܚ "inner sanctuary" (1Kg 7:49; 8:6,8) and ܡܠܚ "hall (of the temple)" (Ezr 8:29).

⁶ The same choice has been made by the German translators of Pseudo-Zachariah; see K. AHRENS – G. KRÜGER, *Die sogenannte Kirchengeschichte des Zacharias Rhetor (Scriptores Sacri et Profani, 3)*, Leipzig, 1899, p. 154.

Pseudo-Zachariah does not mention a specific time of year. Since he refers to the “lightning from heaven” as the main factor that caused the conflagration, it might be noted that in October of the same year a similar natural disaster befell Antioch, where the great fire, caused according to some sources by lightning, destroyed a large area in the centre of the city⁷. Moreover, the great earthquake of Antioch that took place within less than a year, in May 526, and caused an even greater devastation of the city, was also accompanied by fire coming from heaven. John Malalas, a contemporary source, relates that during this cataclysm “sparks of fire appeared out of the air (ἐκ τοῦ ἀέρος δὲ σπινθῆρας πρὸς φαίνεσθαι) and burned anyone they struck like lightning”⁸. At present it is unclear whether the fire in Heliopolis described by Pseudo-Zachariah is related to one of these disasters or took place independently of them.

2. *The Chronicle of Zuqnin*

Another important witness for the legend comes from the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre*, also known as the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*. This historiographic work belongs to the genre of universal chronicle and was composed in the second half of the eighth century by an anonymous West-Syrian author, who lived in the monastery of Zuqnin, located north of Amida⁹. In the third part of his chronicle, while narrating the events of the reign of Justinian, the author relates the following story about Solomon’s palace in Heliopolis:

“The year 866 (A.D. 554/5): there was (sent) fire from heaven upon the great and mighty idol temple in Baalbek, The City of the Sun which is in Phoenicia between the Mountains of Lebanon and Senir.

Again during the reign of the emperor Justinian, a great miracle took place through the fire (sent) from heaven upon the great and mighty structure of

⁷ See John Malalas, *Chron.* XVII.14. See also G. DOWNEY, *A History of Antioch in Syria: From Seleucus to the Arab Conquest*, Princeton, 1961, p. 519-521 (= DOWNEY, *History of Antioch*).

⁸ John Malalas, *Chron.* XVII.16; ed. H. THURN, *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia (Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae, 35)*, Berlin, 2000, p. 346; tr. by E. JEFFREYS – M. JEFFREYS – R. SCOTT, *The Chronicle of John Malalas: A Translation (Byzantina Australiensia, 4)*, Melbourne, 1986, p. 238. On this earthquake, see DOWNEY, *History of Antioch*, p. 521-526; E. GUIDOBONI, *Catalogue of Ancient Earthquakes in the Mediterranean Area up to 10th Century*, Rome, 1994, p. 314-321.

⁹ For general information on this work, see W. WITAKOWSKI, *The Syriac Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahrē: A Study in the History of Historiography (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Semitica Upsaliensia, 7)*, Uppsala, 1987 (= WITAKOWSKI, *Syriac Chronicle*).

century¹¹. Unfortunately, only the third part of this work has survived in full, and the reigns of Justin I and Justinian, relevant to us are not covered. However, the suggestion that the second part of John's *History* served as one of the main sources for the third part of the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* has been made already by François Nau¹². This suggestion has recently been adopted by Witakowski, who has convincingly argued that the second part of John's work is the main written source behind the third part of the *Chronicle*¹³. Following this lead, I believe that it is reasonable to accept the suggestion made by Nau and Djakonoff that the story about the destruction of Solomon's palace also comes from John's work¹⁴.

In the introductory sentence the author of the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* gives the year 866 of the Seleucid era (= 554-555 CE) for the event. However, this date is inaccurate, as one can see from the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah*, where the destruction of the Heliopolitan temple is linked to the disastrous inundation in Edessa, a well known event that had occurred in the Seleucid year 836 (= 524-525 CE)¹⁵. As has been pointed out by Djakonoff, this chronological error shows that the author of the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* employed a historiographic source not of a strictly chronographic kind, but rather one bearing a non-chronicle character, i.e., a history where no precise dates would have been attached to events¹⁶. In such a case he had to calculate himself the probable date of the event and did it incorrectly, as in several other similar instances. In fact, this inaccuracy in dating is typical of the style of the *Chronicle*, whose author was so careless in his use of sources that at

¹¹ For general information on John's life and œuvre, see А.П. ДЪЯКОНОВЪ, *Иоаннь Ефесскій и его церковно-историческіе труды*, С.-Петербургъ, 1908 (= ДЪЯКОНОВЪ, *Иоаннь Ефесскій*); S.A. HARVEY, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage, 18)*, Berkeley, 1990; J.J. VAN GINKEL, *John of Ephesus: A Monophysite Historian in Sixth-Century Byzantium* (Ph.D. dissertation), Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 1995 (= VAN GINKEL, *John of Ephesus*).

¹² See F. NAU, *Analyse de la seconde partie inédite de l'Histoire ecclésiastique de Jean d'Asie, patriarche jacobite de Constantinople († 585)*, in *Revue de l'Orient chrétien*, I, 2:4 (1897), p. 455-493 (= NAU, *Analyse de la seconde partie*).

¹³ His conclusion is that "JE is the most comprehensive source of PD for the part in question. More often than not the lemmas analyzed corroborate this conclusion. With due reservation, this fact justifies the hypothesis that even the lemmas for which we have not been able to establish the source may come from JE." (W. WITAKOWSKI, *Sources of Pseudo-Dionysius for the Third Part of his Chronicle*, in *Orientalia Suecana*, 40 (1991), p. 270 [=WITAKOWSKI, *Sources*]).

¹⁴ See NAU, *Analyse de la seconde partie*, p. 490-491; ДЪЯКОНОВЪ, *Иоаннь Ефесскій*, p. 226.

¹⁵ See *ibidem*, p. 226.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 275.

times he did not even bother to change the first person forms in the eyewitness accounts taken from John's work¹⁷. All this only strengthens the suggestion that the story was borrowed from John's *History*, which is the only non-chronographic work among the written sources of the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* that covers this time-span.

An additional argument in favour of John's authorship of our story is the presence in it of strong anti-pagan bias and rhetoric. This feature accords well with the reputation of John as a vigorous polemicist against paganism. John's proficiency as an inquisitor was so highly regarded by the imperial authorities that, notwithstanding his anti-Chalcedonian affiliation, he was sent by the emperor Justinian with an anti-pagan mission to Asia Minor¹⁸.

Now, after the authorship of John of Ephesus seems to have been reasonably established, we are faced by another, more complicated, issue of the relationship between the two versions of our story – one in the *Ecclesiastical History* of John and one in the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah*. This problem arises from the significant amount of common material shared by the two historiographic compositions that stem from the same period and religious milieu. There is still no consensus among scholars about the exact nature of the relations between these works, although a number of possible scenarios have been proposed and discussed. Some scholars have argued that John of Ephesus used Pseudo-Zachariah for his work¹⁹. Some have insisted on the priority of John of Ephesus²⁰. Finally, some scholars suggest that both John of Ephesus and Pseudo-Zachariah wrote independently of each other while making use of common sources²¹.

What is important in our case is that we are faced with a number of significant differences between the accounts of John of Ephesus and of Pseudo-Zachariah that prevent us from suggesting that one of these two sources depends on another. First of all, there are several elements that

¹⁷ For examples, see WITAKOWSKI, *Syriac Chronicle*, p. 132, n. 54. On the unreliable character of the dates in the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, see *ibidem*, p. 123.

¹⁸ On this aspect of John's career, see F.R. TROMBLEY, *Paganism in the Greek World at the End of Antiquity: The Case of Rural Anatolia and Greece*, in *Harvard Theological Review*, 78 (1985), p. 329-336; M. WHITBY, *John of Ephesus and the Pagans: Pagan Survivals in the Sixth Century*, in M. SALAMON (ed.), *Paganism in the Later Roman Empire and in Byzantium (Byzantina et Slavica Cracoviensia)*, 1), Cracow, 1991, p. 111-131.

¹⁹ See ДЪЯКОНОВЪ, *Иоаннь Ефесскій*, p. 242-246; WITAKOWSKI, *Sources*, p. 255, 269-270.

²⁰ E.W. BROOKS, in HAMILTON – BROOKS, *Syriac Chronicle*, p. 6-7.

²¹ See M.-A. KUGENER, *La compilation historique de Pseudo-Zacharie le Rhéteur*, in *Revue de l'Orient chrétien*, 5 (1900), p. 210, n. 3; VAN GINKEL, *John of Ephesus*, p. 68.

appear only in one version of the story. John's account is more extensive, mainly due to the detailed description of the temple's dimensions and architecture, as well as the anti-pagan rhetoric. None of these elements, however, is present in Pseudo-Zachariah's version of the story. At the same time, John's account does not mention at all the building of the church dedicated to Mary on the spot of the destroyed temple. Another distinction lies in the different stress placed by the two authors on the miraculous element in the story. While in the version of Pseudo-Zachariah it is the fact of the survival of the "wonderful stones", an ancient symbol of the Trinity, for John of Ephesus it is the act of destruction of the pagan temple that serves as a perceptible supernatural sign of the defeat of paganism²².

Furthermore, even in cases when the two stories share certain narrative elements different vocabulary is used. For example, the natural phenomenon that caused destruction of the building is "the fire from heaven" (כֶּסֶף מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם) according to John of Ephesus, whereas it appears as "the lightning from heaven" (כֶּסֶף מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם) in Pseudo-Zachariah. The latter author also reports an additional meteorological detail, namely that lightning occurred during a light rain.

All these dissimilarities between the two stories leave us no reason to propose any direct literary connection between them. Neither would the suggestion of a common written source used by the two authors independently of each other resolve the difficulty, since the amount of editorial changes introduced by them would make any reconstruction of such a source impossible. Most probably, both historiographers drew independently of each other upon some oral sources, whose origins go back to the cultural milieu of the city of Heliopolis, where the connection between the biblical monarch and the pagan shrine had most probably emerged. In this direction points also the phrase "as people used to say" (כְּכַדְּכֵי אֲמָרִים) used by John when he refers to the presumed connection between Solomon and the great pagan temple.

3. *The Cave of Treasures*

This brings me to the third important witness to our tradition, the work known as the *Cave of Treasures*. This anonymous composition belongs to the genre of "rewritten Bible" and covers the time-span from

²² Although there is no explicit mention of the three stones in John's account, they might be implied in "the few stones" (כֶּסֶף מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם) that survived the disaster and remained "as a sign" (כְּכַדְּכֵי אֲמָרִים).

faithfully the legend as it appeared in the original text of the *Cave of Treasures*, from which the two recensions stem. First of all, the Western recension preserves the correct name of the city – “Heliopolis” (ܗܠܝܘܦܘܠܝܫ), while the Eastern recension has “Hierapolis” (ܗܝܪܘܦܘܠܝܫ), which is an obvious mistake, since it does not fit the following etymological explanation, the “city of the sun” (ܗܘܠܘܬܝܘܢܝܫܝܬܐ), that appears in both recensions²⁶. In a similar vein, the two Magi of the Eastern recension are clearly a result of the corruption of the three Magi of the Western recension. Also, according to the Western recension the three Magi sent by Nimrod built “altars” (ܟܠܝܠܝܬܐ), while in the Eastern recension only one “altar” (ܟܠܝܠܝܬܐ) is mentioned. The plural form agrees better with the version of the legend found in the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah*, where the “three wonderful stones” are mentioned.

The crucial element that allows us to regard this story as another variant of the legend found in Pseudo-Zachariah and John of Ephesus is the connection between Solomon and Heliopolis. This serves the author's general aim of illustrating the king's great achievements and celebrating his role as a culture hero, mainly a founder of cities²⁷. Another important detail is the “altars” to the sun built by the three Magi. Most probably, this is a veiled reference to the Trilithon of Baalbek, the three miraculous stones mentioned by Pseudo-Zachariah.

At the same time, there are also several significant differences between the story in the *Cave of Treasures* and the two other versions. According to the *Cave* Solomon built not the temple, but the city of Heliopolis itself. The analogue of the temple in the other two sources, the altars to the sun, was built by the Magi sent by Nimrod to Balaam. This element is unique to the *Cave*.

Another remarkable feature is the spatial proximity between Heliopolis and “the mountain of Seir” (ܗܘܪܝܢܝܫܝܬܐ). This toponym appears already in the Bible (MT שׁעִיר; LXX Σηῖρ)²⁸, where it is located in the region of Edom, i.e. south of the Dead Sea, and not in Lebanon or its vicinity, as in the *Cave of Treasures*. The solution to this problem lies most probably in the fact that in the Peshitta the toponym ܫܥܝܪ was used to translate two Biblical locations – not only the well-known

²⁶ It should be noted, however, that several mss. of the Eastern group have readings close to the Western recension – C: ܗܠܝܘܦܘܠܝܫ; D: ܗܠܝܘܦܘܠܝܫ; ms. A has an addition on the margin: ܗܘܠܘܬܝܘܢܝܫܝܬܐ.

²⁷ In that sense Solomon's role is similar to the one played by Nimrod for the Syriac-speaking Christians living in northern Mesopotamia.

²⁸ Cfr Gen 14:6; Deut 1:2, 2:1-5, 33:2; Josh 24:4; Ezek 35:2-3,7,15.

“Seir,” but sometimes also “Senir” (שניר), the name given to Mount Hermon by the Amorites (cfr Deut 3:9). The most telling example of this kind is 1Chr 5:23, where the Peshitta translates the two separate toponyms “Senir and Mount Hermon” (ושניר והר הרמון) as one – “Seir, the great mountain of Hermon” (ܫܥܝܪ ܕܗܪ ܗܪܡܘܢ)²⁹. It was probably the second location, Mount Hermon, that the author of the *Cave* had in mind. But still, none of the traditions about Mount Seir known to us connects this location with Solomon or with Heliopolis³⁰. This element is also unique to the *Cave of Treasures* and should be regarded as another case of its author’s inventiveness.

Taking all this into account we may conclude that neither the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah* nor the *History* of John of Ephesus should be regarded as direct sources for the story found in the *Cave of Treasures*. While it is clear that its author built his meta-historic narrative using already existing traditions about Solomon and Heliopolis not unlike those found in the two other works, it is impossible to establish his sources with any accuracy. Most probably, it was an oral source that was creatively reworked in order to fit the highly idiosyncratic view of the past promoted by the author of the *Cave*.

Having examined the three main sources in which the story about Solomon in Heliopolis appears, I conclude that it is hardly possible to argue in favour of any direct literary relationship between them. The only common denominator for all three versions of the story is the connection between Solomon and Heliopolis. The most reasonable solution to the problem of the significant differences between the three versions of the legend would be to suggest that all three authors independently of each other made use of an oral tradition and adapted it to their own needs.

Let us now look briefly at the biblical roots of the legend. There is no mention of Solomon in connection with Heliopolis in Scripture, since the city is completely absent from the biblical map. However, there are

²⁹ Cfr, however, Peshitta to Ezek 27:5 and Song 4:8, where Hebrew שניר is transliterated correctly as ܫܢܝܪ.

³⁰ It seems that the toponym “Senir” (ܫܢܝܪ) in connection with the temple of Solomon in the introductory lines that belong to the author of the *Chronicle of Zuqin* himself should be regarded as an attempt to correct “Seir” (ܫܥܝܪ) found in the *Cave of Treasures*. On the *Cave* as one of the sources used by the *Chronicle of Zuqin*, see WITAKOWSKI, *Syriac Chronicle*, p. 125-126; J. TUBACH, *Seth and the Sethites in Early Syriac Literature*, in G.P. LUTTIKHUIZEN (ed.), *Eve’s Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions (Themes in Biblical Narrative, Jewish and Christian Traditions, 5)*, Leiden – Boston, 2003, p. 199-200.

several instances where Solomon's building activity in Lebanon in general is mentioned. Thus, in 1 Kings 9:19 we are told about "Solomon's storage cities, the cities for his chariots, the cities for his cavalry, and whatever Solomon desired to build, in Jerusalem, in Lebanon (MT בלבונון; Pesh **בלבנון**), and in all the land of his dominion" (cfr 2Chr 8:6). In addition to these biblical verses, those passages that speak about a particular building project of the king – the so-called "House of the forest of Lebanon" (MT יער הלבנון בית; Pesh **בית חכר הלבנון**)³¹ are of special relevance. This structure was one of the five major buildings that comprised the palace complex built by Solomon as his royal residence. This structure was the largest among the palaces and may have served as a royal reception hall as well as an armory. The palace's name derives presumably from the fact that its pillars were made from cedar wood imported from Lebanon, so that its interior resembled a cedar forest. Nothing in Scripture connects this building geographically with Lebanon and, as most biblical scholars are inclined to think, it was located in Jerusalem, on the Temple Mount³².

Among the three Syriac sources considered above it is the author of the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah* that connects the legend of Solomon in Heliopolis with this biblical story most explicitly. He refers to Heliopolis as "the city of the house of the forest of Lebanon" (**ܩܘܢܝܬܐ ܕܒܝܬ ܚܝܬܐ ܕܥܝܪ ܗܠܒܢܘܢ**), identifying thus the city as the biblical location, where the palace of Solomon was built. Another link to the biblical account of the "House of the forest of Lebanon" might be recognizable in the phrase **ܘܐܘܪܢܐ ܘܢܘܨܢܐ ܕܥܝܪ ܗܠܒܢܘܢ** in the first sentence of Pseudo-Zachariah's account. This phrase is ambiguous, since due to the polysemic character of the noun **ܘܢܘܨܢܐ** it may be translated as "and (he) adorned it" or as "and (he) stored arms in it"³³. The latter option has been chosen by the translators of Pseudo-Zachariah into English quoted above. On the other hand, Jean Baptiste Chabot, in translating the passage on Solomon in Heliopolis from the *Chronicle* of Michael the Great, renders the almost identical phrase **ܘܢܘܨܢܐ ܘܐܘܪܢܐ ܕܥܝܪ ܗܠܒܢܘܢ** as "et l'orna"³⁴. The solution to this problem depends on what aspect of Solomon's building activity is meant here. It is possible that the word **ܘܢܘܨܢܐ**

³¹ See 1Kg 7:2, 10:17,21; 2Chr 9:16,20.

³² See D. USSISHKIN, *King Solomon's Palaces*, in *Biblical Archaeologist*, 36 (1973), p. 78-105; M. COGAN, *1 Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (*The Anchor Bible*, 10), New York, 2000, p. 254-258.

³³ On Syr. **ܘܢܘܨܢܐ** as meaning both "ornament" and "weapon", see R. PAYNE SMITH, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 2 vol., Oxford, 1879-1901, v. 1, col. 1103.

³⁴ J.-B. CHABOT (ed.), *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, patriarche jacobite d'Antioche (1166-1199)*, 4 vol., Paris, 1899-1910, v. 2, p. 179 (= CHABOT, *Chronique de Michel*).

bears here the meaning “ornament”, referring for example to the “costly stones” (Heb אבנים יקרות; Pesh ܟܘܢܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ) used by Solomon for the building of the House of the forest of Lebanon according to 1 Kings 7:9-11. On the other hand, the phrase might refer to another episode connected with this building. Thus, according to 1 Kings 10:16-17 it was the House of the forest of Lebanon, where Solomon placed a large amount of golden shields. In that case, the appropriate translation for ܘܟܠܘܢܐ would be “weapon”.

These examples allow us to suggest that it was reinterpretation of the biblical account of the “House of the forest of Lebanon” in light of references to Solomon’s building in Lebanon that provided Pseudo-Zachariah, or his unknown source, with the possibility of relocating the king’s palace from Jerusalem to Heliopolis. At the same time, other biblical passages might contribute to the legend’s development as well. Thus, Su-Min Ri suggests two possible lines of development, both of them going back to the story of Solomon in 2Chr 8:4-6³⁵. He considers two scenarios – one based on the toponym “Hamath”, which was interpreted as related to Heb. חמה “heat, sun” (cfr Isa 24:23; Ps 19:7) and thus related to Heliopolis, and another based on the identification of Baalbek with Biblical “Baalath”, one of the cities built by Solomon (cfr 1Kg 9:18; 2Chr 8:6).

As a final point, it should be noted that our tradition appears also in some later Syriac chronicles. But they seem to have no independent value as being derivative of one of the three main sources already discussed.

For example, Michael the Great (XII cent.) in the entry on the seventh year of Justin’s reign in the ninth book of his *Chronicle* (IX.16) tells about the destruction of Solomon’s palace and the three miraculous stones:

“To the south of the palace of Solomon, which is in Baalbek, the city of the thick forest of Lebanon, which Scripture mentions and says that Solomon built it and stored arms in it, there are three miraculous stones, upon which nothing is built, but one to another they are united and held together and joined one to another. They are known for their shape, and all three of them are very big. They are set up as a symbol of the belief in the Trinity. And when lightning struck, and destroyed the whole palace, and broke to pieces its stones, it did not harm these (stones). And not long

³⁵ See A. SU-MIN RI, *Commentaire de la Caverne des Trésors: étude sur l’histoire du texte et de ses sources* (*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 581; *Subsidia*, 103), Louvain, 2000, p. 392.

Syriac sources dated to the second half of the sixth century, it is a more difficult task to establish its *terminus post quem*. No direct information on that subject is provided by the existing literary and archaeological sources. However, there is certain circumstantial evidence that may help us to suggest the time of its origin with a certain degree of probability.

Against the ancient origin of our legend argues the fact that, to the best of my knowledge, no Jewish, Christian or Greco-Roman source antedating the sixth century contains any mention of Solomon in connection with Baalbek. Significantly, this includes a number of Christian hagiographical writings that are connected with the city – the *Martyrdom of Gelasimus*, the *Martyrdom of Barbara and Juliana*, the *Martyrdom of Lucian of Baalbek*, the *Life of Rabbula*.

Even more telling is the evidence of the so-called *Oracle of Baalbek*, an anonymous apocalyptic composition written in Greek. As has been shown by Paul Alexander, who edited this work, it was composed between 502 and 506 CE by an unknown Christian author, on the basis of an older apocalyptic text, the *Theodosian Sybil*³⁹. Of particular relevance for us is Alexander's compelling proposal that the *Oracle* was written in Baalbek. This conclusion is based on the author's intimate knowledge of the city and the area surrounding it, as well as on some elements of local patriotism exhibited in his work. In this composition we find a reference to the building of the pagan temples in Heliopolis, which takes place in the Seleucid and Roman periods and is ascribed to particular monarchs:

“In the fifth generation three kings will arise, Antiochus, Tiberius and Gaius <...> And they will build up the temples of Heliopolis and the altars of Lebanon (ἀνοικοδομήσουσι τὰ ἱερά Ἡλίου πόλεως καὶ τοὺς βωμοὺς τοῦ Λιβάνου); and the shrines of that city are very large and shapely beyond any (other) temple in the inhabited world”⁴⁰.

The verb ἀνοικοδομέω used by the author of the *Oracle* to describe the activity of the pagan emperors in Heliopolis presents a certain difficulty, since it may be translated as “to build up” or as “to rebuild”⁴¹. Besides our passage, this verb appears in the *Oracle* in two other places. Thus, it bears the latter meaning in the section dealing with the future coming of “the king who has a changed shape,” an antichrist-like figure,

³⁹ On the date and provenance of this work, see P.J. ALEXANDER, *The Oracle of Baalbek: The Tiburtine Sibyl in Greek Dress* (*Dumbarton Oaks Studies*, 10), Washington, D.C., 1967, p. 41-47 (= ALEXANDER, *Oracle of Baalbek*).

⁴⁰ ALEXANDER, *Oracle of Baalbek*, p. 13, ln. 76-80 [Gr.], p. 25 [tr.].

⁴¹ See H.G. LIDDELL – R. SCOTT, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., Oxford, 1996, p. 146; G.W.H. LAMPE, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford, 1961, p. 147. This verb means “to build up”, for example, in LXX Prov 24:27.

who among other things “will rebuild the altars of Egypt” (ἀνοικοδομήσει τοὺς βωμοὺς τῆς Αἰγύπτου)⁴². This sentence refers most probably to the forthcoming restoration of pagan cultic places destroyed by Christians. In another place, where the foundation of Constantinople is foretold, it is said about the emperor Constantine that “he will build up Byzantium” (ἀνοικοδομήσει Βυζάντιον)⁴³. This passage allows for both meanings of the verb. As concerns our passage, I have preferred the meaning “to build up” as being more fitting the context of the prophecy. The main reason for this is the absence of any references to the destruction of the Heliopolitan temples before their possible “rebuilding”. In fact, the author of the *Oracle* does mention two destructions of the pagan temples and altars of Lebanon, but both of them are supposed to occur *after* the events described in our passage, during the Christian era, under Constantine the Great, Theodosius II and Valentinian III⁴⁴.

The importance of the *Oracle* for establishing the *terminus post quem* for the tradition linking Solomon and Baalbek lies in the fact that its author makes no mention whatsoever of Solomon in connection with the building of Heliopolitan temples. This silence is especially puzzling if we take into consideration that the *Oracle's* author, although being a Christian, openly takes pride in the grandeur and beauty of the city's pagan monuments, and is prone to indulge into local patriotism⁴⁵. It is difficult to imagine that he would miss an additional chance to glorify his city and suppress deliberately its connection to the legendary biblical monarch. Taken together with the total absence of a Solomonic connection from the earlier Christian sources related to Heliopolis this fact might serve as an argument in favour of the claim that no association between Solomon and the city existed before the first decade of the sixth century.

Our legend was probably born when a person acquainted with the Bible looked at the cityscape of Baalbek, dominated by magnificent pagan buildings, through the lens of the stories about Solomon. To find a satisfactory answer to the question of the confessional affinity of this individual is not an easy undertaking. This is mainly due to the fact that in Late Antiquity the Bible served as an authoritative text for so many

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 21, ln. 192 [Gr.], p. 28 [tr.].

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 14, ln. 91 [Gr.], p. 25 [tr.].

⁴⁴ See *ibidem*, p. 14, ln. 86-88; 16, ln. 115 [Gr.], p. 25-26 [tr.].

⁴⁵ Cfr his assignment of a particular (positive) role in the final eschatological scenario to the “king from Heliopolis” (ALEXANDER, *Oracle of Baalbek*, p. 21, ln. 205-208 [Gr.], p. 29 [tr.]).

different groups. It comprised not only the shared heritage of Jews and Christians of all sorts, but even Pagans sometimes participated in this common Scripture-based discourse.

One possible solution would be to consider our tradition as a part of the vast body of lore associated with biblical heroes that was produced by Jews in antiquity. However, there are several difficulties that make this suggestion questionable. First of all, it is striking, that as opposed to many other big cities of the Roman province *Phoenicia Libanensis*, we have no evidence whatsoever of a Jewish presence in Heliopolis in antiquity, whether archeological or literary⁴⁶. The earliest indication of Jews living in this city known to us belongs to the ninth century⁴⁷. Another difficulty for this proposal is constituted by the total absence of any connection between Solomon and Heliopolis in ancient Jewish sources. As far as my knowledge goes, such a tradition is attested neither in Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, nor in the rabbinic corpus. The earliest attestation of our story in the Jewish tradition comes only from the Middle Ages.

Of course, the arguments offered above are *ex silentio* and, as such, cannot serve as decisive proof of the non-Jewish origins of our legend. Yet, such a hypothesis seems to be even more unlikely if we take into consideration that our story appears only in Christian sources, which stem from the Northern Mesopotamia – region where no active literary exchange between Jews and Christians is attested during the sixth century.

⁴⁶ No archaeological material of Jewish origin is attested for Heliopolis and its vicinity according to J.-P. REY-COQUAIS, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*. Tome 6: *Baalbek et Beqa'* (Bibliothèque archéologique et historique, 78), Paris, 1967; D. NOY – H. BLOEDHORN, *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis*. Vol. 3: *Syria and Cyprus (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism, 102)*, Tübingen, 2004; L. ROTH-GERSON, *The Jews of Syria as Reflected in the Greek Inscriptions*, Jerusalem, 2001 [in Hebrew]. The rabbinic corpus is also silent about a Jewish presence in the city. In fact, Baalbek is barely present on the Talmudic map. It seems that it is mentioned occasionally as the place of origin for some sort of garlic (שום בעל בכי) in *m.Maaserot* 5:8; *t.Makshirin* 3:3), but this phrase could be understood also as a pun meaning “tear-inducing garlic”. Some scholars identify “Ein-Beki” (עין בכי) mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud (*b.Avodah Zarah* 11b) alongside the other great pagan centers of Near East, with Baalbek; see A. NEUBAUER, *La géographie du Talmud*, Paris, 1868, p. 298; E. FRIEDHEIM, *Rabbinisme et paganisme en Palestine romaine. Étude historique des Realia talmudiques (I^{er}-IV^{ème} siècles)*, (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, 157), Leiden, 2006, p. 215-216. In light of all this, one can hardly accept the claim by P. NEAMAN (*Encyclopedia of Talmudical Geography*, 2 vol., Tel-Aviv, 1971, v. 1, col. 281-282 [in Hebrew]) that the city was home to a Jewish community during the Talmudic period.

⁴⁷ See A.F. NACCACH, *A Ninth Century A.D. Judeo-Aramaic Epitaph from B'albak*, in *Orientalia*, 58 (1989), p. 243-245.

Another possibility would be that the connection between Solomon and Heliopolis was invented by the city's "pagans", i.e. the adherents of local Semitic and/or Greco-Roman beliefs. There are enough examples of prominent Biblical figures having been co-opted by Greco-Roman culture⁴⁸. In our case it is significant that the figure of Solomon enjoyed considerable popularity in the Greco-Roman milieu, especially in traditions connected to magic and esoteric lore⁴⁹. However, this hypothesis suffers from the same lack of positive evidence as the theory of Jewish origins, since no Greco-Roman source from Late Antiquity known to me speaks about Solomon in connection with Heliopolis. Besides that, there is some evidence that in the native Phoenician tradition Solomon might have been held in rather low esteem. Thus, in a fragment from Dios, one of the two Greek authors used by Josephus as sources for "the Tyrian archives," where among other things we find the story about an exchange of riddles between the Tyrian king Eirosos and Solomon, the latter loses the contest and is characterized as "the tyrant of Jerusalem" (τυραννοῦντα Ἱεροσολύμων)⁵⁰. Furthermore, one may get a glimpse of the resentment felt by the pagan intellectuals of the Roman Near East towards Judaism and its heroes from Porphyry, a third century Greek philosopher of Tyrian extraction. In his work *Against the Christians* Porphyry investigates the date of Moses in order to challenge the Jewish and Christian claim to antiquity and argues on the basis of the *Phoenician History* by Philo of Byblos that the religion of the Hebrews, although antique, is not as old as the Phoenician religion and is derived

⁴⁸ As an example, one could mention the depiction of Noah and his wife on the coins of Apamea in Asia Minor during the second and third centuries CE; see on this A. HILHORST, *The Noah Story: Was it Known to the Greeks?* in F. GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ – G.P. LUTTIKHUIZEN (ed.), *Interpretations of the Flood (Themes in Biblical Narrative, Jewish and Christian Traditions, 1)*, Leiden, 1999, p. 63-65. Cfr the supposedly positive attitude towards Moses and Judaism on the part of Numenius of Apamea, a second-century Greek philosopher; see L.H. FELDMAN, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian*, Princeton, 1993, p. 215, 241-242. Cfr also the case of Mamre in late antique Palestine, where Jews, Pagans and Christians would meet during annual fairs held at this holy place, dedicated to Abraham; see A. KOFISKY, *Mamre: A Case of a Regional Cult?* in A. KOFISKY – G.G. STROUMSA (ed.), *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land, First-Fifteenth Centuries CE*, Jerusalem, 1998, p. 19-30.

⁴⁹ For a useful review of this diverse material, see K. PREISENDANZ, art. *Salomon*, in *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Supplementband VIII: *Achaïos bis Valerius*, Stuttgart, 1956, col. 660-704. See also P.A. TORIJANO, *Solomon the Esoteric King: From King to Magus, Development of a Tradition (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, 73)*, Leiden, 2002.

⁵⁰ *Ant.* 8.148-149; B. NIESE (ed.), *Flavii Iosephi opera*, 7 vol., Berlin, 1887-1895, v. 2, p. 208-209. Cfr *Ag. Ap.* 1.114-115.

from it⁵¹. We know that Porphyry's anti-Christian work was still circulating among Roman pagans during the sixth century⁵².

It is noteworthy that the legend about Solomon's palace at Heliopolis appears for the first time only in writings authored by Christians. Whereas one might dismiss this fact as a mere coincidence, in my opinion it should be given serious consideration. This is especially important since there is a growing awareness among the modern scholars of apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature that many of those writings that were earlier thought to be of Jewish origin may have been as well composed by Christians⁵³. I believe that attention to the immediate Christian context of our story may provide us with a key to understanding the historical circumstances in which it had emerged.

There is abundant evidence of various localities throughout the late antique Near East having been associated with biblical figures. Leaving aside Palestine, where for understandable reasons examples of this sort are extremely numerous, one discovers a number of such traditions linked to places situated far beyond the borders of the Holy Land. Of particular interest in this respect are Syria and Mesopotamia. One of the earliest examples comes from Julius Africanus (III cent.), who tells us about the tent of the patriarch Jacob being preserved in Edessa⁵⁴. Later on, we hear about a monastery of Noah's Ark at the summit of Mt Qardu

⁵¹ Fragment 41 (extracted from Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* I.9.20-22) in A. VON HARNACK, *Porphyrius, "Gegen die Christen", 15 Bücher: Zeugnisse, Fragmente und Referate (Abhandlungen der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Jahrgang 1916; Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, 1)*, Berlin, 1916, p. 66-67.

⁵² See the *Life of Severus* for the story about Paralios, a convert from paganism who studied law in Beirut and rhetoric in Alexandria, in which he exhibits an acquaintance with Porphyry's works while arguing with his ex-coreligionists; see M.-A. KUGENER (ed.), *Sévère, patriarche d'Antioche, 512-518: textes syriaques publiés, traduits et annotés*. Pt. 1: *Vie de Sévère par Zacharie le Scholastique (Patrologia Orientalis, 2.1 [6])*, Paris, 1903, p. 42. Cfr also C.M. BRIÈRE – F. GRAFFIN (ed.), *Les Homiliae Cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche: traduction syriaque de Jacques d'Édesse (suite). Homélie XXVI à XXXI (Patrologia Orientalis, 36.4 [170])*, Turnhout, 1974, p. 662-663.

⁵³ See, for example, the works of D. SATRAN, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine: Reassessing the Lives of the Prophets (Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha, 11)*, Leiden, 1995; M. DE JONGE, *The Christian Origin of the Greek Life of Adam and Eve*, in G.A. ANDERSON – M.E. STONE – J. TROMP (ed.), *Literature on Adam and Eve: Collected Essays (Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha, 15)*, Leiden, 2000, p. 347-363; R. NIKOLSKY, *The Provenance of The Journey of Zosimos (Also Known as The History of the Rechabites)* (Ph.D. dissertation), The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2003 [in Hebrew]. For a most recent discussion of the problem, see J.R. DAVILA, *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian, or Other? (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, 105)*, Leiden, 2005.

⁵⁴ See M. WALLRAFF – U. ROBERTO – K. PINGÉRA – W. ADLER (ed.), *Iulius Africanus. Chronographiae: The Extant Fragments (Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhundert, NF 15)*, Berlin, 2007, #F29, p. 64-65.

(modern Judi Dagh) in Tur Abdin that was in existence already by the middle of the fifth century⁵⁵. Deacon Theodosius, who visited holy places in the sixth century, mentions the tombs of Daniel and of the three young men in the Persian city of Susa⁵⁶. According to a local tradition preserved by another sixth century Christian author, John Malalas, the city of Palmyra was the real place where David defeated Goliath⁵⁷.

One of the problems posed by these traditions is that it is rather difficult to establish with certainty whether they were forged by Christians on the basis of information provided by the Bible or they form a part of the Jewish background that may be recognized in the development of many Christian communities of the late antique Near East. It is unfortunate that our sources provide almost no information about the motives that inspired the inventors of these legends and their respective aims. It seems that one of the main reasons why traditions of this kind were created is local patriotism, i.e., the authors' wish to glorify their native places and gain more prestige through association with respected figures from the past. An additional factor in the development of these stories could be a wish to promote the respective places as destinations for pilgrimage, which was an important phenomenon whose impact on cultural and social life grew dramatically after the conversion of the Roman empire to Christianity⁵⁸. These reasons would be sufficient for the Christians of Heliopolis to invent a story about the Solomonic origins of the most remarkable building in their city.

Yet, I believe that these explanations do not exhaust all the possible reasons for the association of Heliopolis with Solomon. One may also recognize apologetic or even polemical overtones behind this legend, while looking at it as an expression of the argument from antiquity, an extremely popular polemical stratagem in inter-cultural and inter-religious debates during antiquity. Widely attested in a variety of Greek and Roman writings, this motif was used by such Hellenistic Jewish authors as Philo and Josephus in their apologetic efforts vis-à-vis the

⁵⁵ See E. NESTLE, *Die Auffindung der Arche Noä durch Jakob von Nisibis*, in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 26 (1905), p. 241-243; A. VÖÖBUS, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East*. Vol. 1: *The Origin of Asceticism; Early Monasticism in Persia (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 184; Subsidia, 14)*, Louvain, 1958, p. 305.

⁵⁶ See P. GEYER (ed.), *Theodosii De situ Terrae sanctae*, in *Itineraria et alia geographica (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 175)*, Turnhout, 1965, p. 124, §30.

⁵⁷ Cfr John Malalas, *Chron.* V.39; XVIII.2.

⁵⁸ On various aspects of Christian pilgrimage in Late Antiquity, see E.D. HUNT, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire, AD 312-460*, Oxford, 1982; B. BITTON-ASHKELONY, *Encountering the Sacred: The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage, 38)*, Berkeley, 2005.

dominant Greco-Roman culture. Later on, it was also adopted and further developed by Christian thinkers as a useful tool for subversion of the pagan cultural hegemony⁵⁹. Accordingly, I think that it is the context of Pagan-Christian relations in late antique Heliopolis that might help us to understand how our tradition came into existence.

Baalbek was one of the most important centers of late antique pagan worship, where native Semitic traditions blended with Greco-Roman beliefs forming the *pot-pourri* that was the Hellenistic culture of the Roman Near East. The most outstanding cultic building in the city was dedicated to the so-called Heliopolitan Triad – Jupiter, Venus and Mercury, a Hellenized variant of the indigenous Semitic divine triad. In addition to that, there were separate sanctuaries in honour of Venus, Bacchus and the Tyche of Heliopolis⁶⁰. The city had its own solar calendar consisting of 365 days, with months bearing distinctively Semitic names⁶¹. The prestige of Heliopolis with its temples and the many *baetyls* in its vicinity was so high that it became a destination for religious tourism among Neoplatonic philosophers and theurgists. Thus, in the *Philosophical History* of Damascius, the last head of the Neoplatonic academy at Athens, one finds an account of how in the last decades of the fifth century he and his colleagues visited the city with the intention of testing the knowledge of the local philosophers and performing acts of theurgy at one of the *baetyls*⁶².

In speaking about Pagan-Christian relations at Heliopolis, one should take into account the considerable variation in the pace of Christianization through Syria. For example, whereas the limestone massif east of

⁵⁹ On the origins and development of this notion, see A.J. DROGE, *Homer or Moses? Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture (Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie, 26)*, Tübingen, 1989; P. PILHOFFER, *Presbyteron Kreiton. Der Altersbeweis der jüdischen und christlichen Apologeten und seine Vorgeschichte (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe, 39)*, Tübingen, 1990.

⁶⁰ On the city's temples and cultic activity, see Y. HAJJAR, *La Triade d'Héliopolis-Baalbek: son culte et sa diffusion à travers les textes littéraires et les documents iconographiques et épigraphiques*, 2 vol. (*Études préliminaires aux religions dans l'Empire romain*, 59), Leiden, 1977; IDEM, *La Triade d'Héliopolis-Baalbek: iconographie, théologie, culte et sanctuaires*, Montréal, 1985 (= HAJJAR, *La Triade*); IDEM, *Baalbek, grand centre religieux sous l'Empire*, in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II.18.4 (1990), p. 2458-2508.

⁶¹ See J. TUBACH, *Der Kalender von Ba'albek-Heliopolis*, in *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins*, 110 (1994), p. 181-189.

⁶² See P. ATHANASSIADI (ed.), *Damascius. The Philosophical History*, Athens, 1999, fr. #138, 140, p. 308-313. More on this episode, see G.W. BOWERSOCK, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 60-61 (= BOWERSOCK, *Hellenism*); F.R. TROMBLEY, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization c. 370-529*, 2 vol. (*Religions in the Graeco-Roman World*, 115.1-2), Leiden, 1993-1994, v. 1, p. 51-52 (= TROMBLEY, *Hellenic Religion*).

Antioch was mostly Christianized by 420, in the rural areas of Hauran pagan cults persisted until the late sixth century⁶³. The city of Heliopolis belongs to these few pockets within the Roman Empire where the local population successfully resisted Christianization. The vitality of paganism in this city is well attested throughout the ancient sources. As the extensive archaeological and literary evidence shows, paganism was the dominant social and economic force in the city until as late as the second half of the sixth century CE⁶⁴. In this regard Heliopolis may be compared to such "strongholds" of paganism as Harran in Osroene, the city that retained a pagan majority until the Arab conquest⁶⁵, or Aphrodisias in Caria (Asia Minor), the city where the process of Christianization was completed only by the first half of the sixth century⁶⁶.

The history of Christianity in Baalbek was far from that of swift triumph⁶⁷. The inhabitants of Heliopolis were firmly attached to their traditional way of life and were not in a hurry to surrender the city to the new faith, even after it came to be backed by imperial power. Inevitably, this entailed the escalation of social tensions, which, at times, resulted in outbursts of violence and the active persecution of Christians. We know of several episodes of martyrdom connected with Heliopolis. The first Christian martyr in the city was Eudocia, a native of Samaria, who perished in the second century, during the reign of emperor Trajan⁶⁸. Later on, during the Diocletian persecutions of the third century, Heliopolis turned into a stage for the last bloody performance of the mime Gelasimus⁶⁹. Another story of martyrdom in the city, which allegedly took place in the third or beginning of the fourth century, is described

⁶³ See *ibidem*, v. 1, p. 34-35.

⁶⁴ See *ibidem*, v. 2, p. 154-158; BOWERSOCK, *Hellenism*, p. 36.

⁶⁵ On Harranian paganism, see T.M. GREEN, *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, 114)*, Leiden, 1992; J. TUBACH, *Im Schatten des Sonnengottes: Der Sonnenkult in Edessa, Harran und Hatra am Vorabend der christlichen Mission*, Wiesbaden, 1986.

⁶⁶ See TROMBLEY, *Hellenic Religion*, v. 2, p. 52-73.

⁶⁷ Unfortunately, no satisfactory scholarly account of the history of Christianity in Heliopolis is available. General information on this subject may be found in E. HONIGMANN, art. *Heliopolis*, in *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft. Supplementband IV*, Stuttgart, 1924, col. 715-728. For a concise account of Pagan-Christian relations in the city, see HAJJAR, *La Triade*, p. 379-383.

⁶⁸ For references to the published texts, see F. HALKIN, *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*, 3 vol. (*Subsidia Hagiographica*, 8a; 3rd ed.), Bruxelles, 1957, v. 1, p. 183-184 (= HALKIN, *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*).

⁶⁹ See John Malalas, *Chron. XII.50; Chron. Pasch. 297*. On Gelasimus' Greek life, see HALKIN, *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*, v. 3, p. 45; W. WEISMANN, *Gelasinos von Heliopolis, ein Schauspieler-Märtyrer*, in *Analecta Bollandiana*, 93 (1975), p. 39-66.

in the *Martyrdom of Barbara and Juliana*, but the historicity of this narrative is rather doubtful⁷⁰.

However, the most notorious instance of anti-Christian persecution in Heliopolis, one that left a deep trace in Christian memory, were the outrages that took place already in the post-Constantinian era, during the years 360-361, in the reign of the emperor Julian⁷¹. During that time the pagans of Heliopolis took revenge upon the Christians, who in the years of Constantine and Constance II had managed to gain a foothold in the city, using the imperial patronage to destroy a number of pagan cultic objects. The central event of this outbreak of violence was the martyrdom of the deacon Cyril and the group of virgins. So great was the hatred and the desire for revenge that one of Cyril's executors, sized by frenzy, ate a piece of the victim's liver. Another, lesser known case of martyrdom from this period is that of Lucian of Baalbek⁷². This zeal of the inhabitants of Heliopolis for their ancestral religion is corroborated by epigraphic evidence. Thus, a Latin inscription honoring the emperor Julian has been discovered there, in which he seems to be explicitly commemorated as "the reviver of the cults and the destroyer of superstition" (*recreatori sacrorum et exstinctori superstitionis*)⁷³.

The last case of Christian martyrdom in the city nearly occurred at the beginning of the fifth century, when two young Syrian Christians, the future bishop of Edessa Rabbula and his friend Eusebius, stirred by zeal for the crown of martyrdom, chose Baalbek, "the pagan city" (ܒܥܠܒܝܩ), as the most suitable destination for getting killed by pagans. When the two friends arrived in the city with the purpose of destroying its idols and tried to fulfill their intention, they were caught and savagely beaten by the citizens, and afterwards thrown down from the monumental stairs of the temple of Jupiter Heliopolitanus, thought to be dead⁷⁴.

⁷⁰ For the text, see P. BEDJAN (ed.), *Acta martyrum et sanctorum*, 7 vol., Paris – Leipzig, 1890-1897, v. 3, p. 345-355; A.S. LEWIS, *Select Narratives of Holy Women from the Syro-Antiochene or Sinai Palimpsest as Written above the Old Syriac Gospels by John the Stylite, of Beth-Mari-Qanûn in A.D. 778* (*Studia Sinaitica*, 10), London, 1900, p. 77-84.

⁷¹ See Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.* III.7.1-4; Philostorgius, *Hist. eccl.* VII.4; Sozomen, *Hist. eccl.* V.9-10.7; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 4.86-87.

⁷² Only a Georgian version of his martyrdom has survived. It has been recently republished alongside with an introduction and Russian translation by A.V. MURAVIEV, *A Forgotten Martyr sub Juliano Apostata: A Georgian Martyrium of St Lucian of Baalbek*, in *Scrinium*, 2 (2006), p. 144-164 [in Russian].

⁷³ For the text, see L. JALABERT, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de Syrie. Deuxième série, in Mélanges de la Faculté Orientale de l'Université Saint Joseph*, 2 (1907), p. 266.

⁷⁴ See the *Life of Rabbula*; J.J. OVERBECK (ed.), *S. Ephraemi Syri, Rabulae episcopi Edesseni, Balaei aliorumque Opera selecta*, Oxford, 1865, p. 169-170. On this episode,

that the best explanation for the origins of our legend is provided by this context of the ongoing urban conflict between Christians and pagans in Heliopolis, which intensified during the sixth century, due mainly to the increasing level of imperial pressure on the followers of non-Christian beliefs. Certainly, this process entailed not only physical confrontation between the two social groups, but ideological competition as well. In that rivalry the biblical text would serve the Christian minority as a convenient tool for the appropriation of the city's pagan past as well as for the transformation of its inherently pagan landscape. Battles for the past formed an indispensable element of inter-religious conflicts in antiquity. It seems that in the particular context of sixth-century Baalbek a necessary step towards the successful, even if only virtual, Christianization of the cityscape would be to "biblicize" it, thereby challenging the pagan claim to antiquity⁷⁹. The invention of the story about Solomon's building activity in Heliopolis would provide the local Christian community with a necessary argument for forging a new version of cultural memory, where they and not their opponents would be the true heirs to the magnificent monuments that dominated the city.

The afterlife of the legend

Once put into circulation, the legend linking the ancient pagan monuments of Heliopolis with Solomon gained considerable popularity and became an essential element of local cultural memory. Whoever might be responsible for the original creation of this legend, during the Middle Ages it spread through the all religious communities of the city, being shared by Christians, Jews and Muslims alike.

As noted above, the earliest attestation of the tradition about Solomon and Heliopolis in Jewish sources comes only from the Middle Ages. Benjamin of Tudela, a Jewish traveler, who visited Baalbek in the twelfth century, gives us the following information on the city in his *Itinerarium*:

"Thence it is half a day's journey to Baalbec, which is Baalath in the plains of Lebanon, and which Solomon built for the daughter of Pharaoh. The

⁷⁹ The history of Pagan-Christian relations in antiquity knows of other ways of handling this claim as well. Cfr the story about the conversion of the temple of Rhea/Cybele in Cyzicus (north-west Turkey) into a Marian church in the second half of the fifth century, when an oracular inscription was "discovered" that predicted the future triumph of Christianity. See on this John Malalas, *Chron.* IV.12; the anonymous *Oracles of the Hellenic Gods* (§§53-54) published by K. BURESCH, *Klaros. Untersuchungen zum Orakelwesen des späteren Altertums*, Leipzig, 1889, p. 111-112.

palace is built of large stones, each stone having a length of twenty cubits and a width of twelve cubits, and there are no spaces between the stones. It is said that Ashmedai alone could have put up this building”⁸⁰.

There are several details in this story that are not found in the Syriac versions of the legend. First of all, Heliopolis is identified with the biblical Baalath and connected to the tradition about Solomon building a house for the daughter of Pharaoh (cfr 1Kg 7:8). In addition to that, apparently impressed by the size of the Trilithon stones, Benjamin makes use of the well-known apocryphal tradition about Solomon resorting to the help of demons for his building projects⁸¹. It seems that Benjamin in his report merges the local legend about Solomon with more wide-spread Jewish traditions about the king's building activities.

In Muslim tradition the earliest attestation of this legend known to me comes from the writings of Muhammad al-Idrisi, a twelfth century Arab traveler and geographer. In the section dealing with Baalbek of his *Kitāb nuzhat al-muštāk* he gives the following description of the city's monuments –

“It contains remarkable monuments that due to their height as well as due to the stability of their construction deserve particular mention. We would like to speak about the two amphitheatre buildings, one big and one small. It is said about the big one that it was built in the days of Solomon, son of David. And it is marvelous to behold. For its construction were used stones each of them more or less ten cubits long. And one part of the building rests on columns of stunning height”⁸².

Later on, a similar report appears in the work of another Muslim scholar, Zakariya al-Qazwini (13th cent.). In his geographical compendium *Āthār al-bilād*, after giving a review of Baalbek's natural resources, he makes the following remark about the city's architectural wonders:

ومش هذي يوم لبعبلحך وهيا بعلوت ببكعت الهبنون אשר بנה سلمه لبت فرع. بنيقن الهارمقن
 ما بنين غدوليم. ادرخ الهبن عشرين زرتوت ورحبو ي” ب زرتوت. واين بين ابنن وابنن كلوم. واومئ שלא
 البنين الملعبين وهما الكبير والصغير فالكبير يحكى انه بنى فى ايام سليمان بن داود وهو عجيب المنظر فيه
 حجارة يكون طول الحجر منها عشرة اذرع واقل واكثر ومنه شىء مبنى على عمد شاهقة يروع منظرها
 M.N. ADLER (ed.), *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Critical Text, Translation and Commentary*, New York, 1964, p. 31 [Heb.],
 p. 31 [tr.].

⁸⁰ This tradition enjoyed considerable popularity in antiquity and is attested in a number of sources, Jewish as well as Christian; cfr *Testament of Solomon* 2:5-9; *b.Gittin* 68a-b; Copt. *Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX,3) 70:1-24; John of Nikiu, *Chron.* 38.1-2.

⁸² ومنها من عجيب البناء المذكور اثار يجب ذكرها لشماختها ووثاقه صنعها وذلك ان بها من عجيب
 البنين الملعبين وهما الكبير والصغير فالكبير يحكى انه بنى فى ايام سليمان بن داود وهو عجيب المنظر فيه
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 J. GILDEMEISTER (ed.), *Idrisi's Palaestina und Syrien im arabischen Text (Beilage zu der Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins, 8 [1885])*, Bonn, 1885, p. 15. I thank Dr. Miriam Goldstein for help with translation of this and the following Arabic fragment.

“It has buildings and wondrous monuments, and palaces with marble columns, unlike anywhere else. It is said that it was the dowry of Bilqis. And the palace of Solomon, son of David, peace be upon him, is there”⁸³.

It is noteworthy that each community of faith in Baalbek adapted the basic myth of Solomon as the city’s founder to make it fit its own tradition. Thus, while for Benjamin of Tudela the city was built by Solomon for the daughter of Pharaoh, al-Qazwini connects it to Bilqis, the Muslim counterpart of the legendary Queen of Sheba.

As one can see from the passages quoted from Benjamin of Tudela, al-Idrisi and al-Qazwini, the legend of Solomon was not confined to learned books, but constituted a part of popular local lore. In this guise it found its way to the West, due mainly to reports by European travelers who visited the city and obtained information from the locals. One of the first Europeans who made this legend known to the Western public was Lithuanian prince Nicolas Christopher Radzivil, who visited Baalbek in 1583 on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem⁸⁴. In the seventeenth century we find it mentioned by Jean de la Roque, a French traveler who visited Baalbek in 1689 and noted briefly in his travelogue the local legends about Solomon⁸⁵. Another French traveler, Constantin-François Volney, who visited Syria in 1780’s, relates that the inhabitants of Baalbek believe that the city’s gigantic monuments were constructed by the demonic *jinn* in the service of King Solomon⁸⁶. The “ecumenical” character of the legend about Solomon was aptly noted by Robert Wood, an Englishman who stayed at Baalbek in the 1750’s: “The inhabitants of this country, Mohomedans, Jews and Christians, all confidently believe that Solomon built both, Palmyra and Baalbek”⁸⁷.

Conclusion

The figure of Solomon has fascinated many readers of Scripture from antiquity until modern times. This fascination resulted in the creation of a great number of non-canonical stories featuring the renowned biblical

⁸³ وبها ابنة واثار عجيبة وقصور على اساطين الرخام لا نظير لها قبل انها كانت مهر بلقيس وبها قصر سليمان بن داود عم H.F. WÜSTENFELD (ed.), *Zakariya Ben Muhammed Ben Mahmud el-Cazwini’s Kosmographie*, 2 vol., Göttingen, 1848-1849, v. 2, p. 104.

⁸⁴ For the reference, see F. RAGETTE, *Baalbek*, New Jersey, 1980, p. 82.

⁸⁵ J. DE LA ROQUE, *Voyage de Syrie et du Mont Liban*, 2 vol., Amsterdam, 1723, v. 1, p. 128.

⁸⁶ C.-F. VOLNEY, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte, pendant les années 1783, 1784 et 1785*, 2 vol., Paris, 1787, v. 2, p. 224-225.

⁸⁷ R. WOOD, *The Ruins of Palmyra and Balbec*, London, 1827, p. 58.

monarch. In this study I have analyzed one particular tradition that connects Solomon to the city of Heliopolis/Baalbek. Its earliest attestation comes from three sixth-century Syriac works – the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah*, the *Ecclesiastical History* of John of Ephesus and the *Cave of Treasures*. The absence of literary interdependence between the three versions of the legend indicates that the authors were, most probably, dependant for their information on oral sources. It has been argued that this tradition was invented by the Christians of Baalbek, not earlier than the first decade of the sixth century. Furthermore, it has been proposed that the most plausible context explaining the origins of this legend would be that of apologetic efforts waged by the Christian minority of the city vis-à-vis the dominant pagan community. I hope that this contribution will enrich our knowledge of Pagan-Christian polemic in Late Antiquity and help us to understand better the genesis of apocryphal traditions that developed around biblical figures during this period.

Hebrew University of Jerusalem
 Department of Comparative Religion
 Mt Scopus, Jerusalem, Israel
 sergey.minov@mail.huji.ac.il

Sergey MINOV

Abstract — This article deals with the non-biblical tradition about the palace built by King Solomon in the city of Heliopolis/Baalbek in Syria. The earliest attestation of this legend comes from the three Syriac texts dated by the sixth century – the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah*, the *Ecclesiastical History* by John of Ephesus and the *Cave of Treasures*. The different versions of this tradition are examined in their relation to each other and an attempt is made to situate it against the background of Pagan-Christian relations in Late Antiquity.