

Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala
University of Córdoba



Once more on the proper name Ḥabbān in *Acta Thomæ*

Today, the most common opinion continues to maintain that the *Vorlage* of *Acta Thomæ* was a Syriac text.¹ This idea dates back more than a century ago when Burkitt stated the hypothesis of a Syriac original for the *Acts of Thomas*.² In a brief note, the author reasserted one of the arguments with which he built his hypothesis: the theory that proper names “sounds much more Semitic than Greek”, and that “they appear in a Syriac form which (to say the least) does not suggest transmission through the Greek”.³

Burkitt, using the first of these two arguments, suggested that the author of the text of the *Acts of Thomas* lived in the territories of Mesopotamia and the Euphrates valley when referring to the proper name *Ḥabbān*, of which he stated the following:

I was not, however, able to say more of the merchant’s name Ḥabbān (ܚܒܒܢ, Ἀββάνης or Ἀμβανής) than that it sounded more Semitic than Greek (*J.T.S.* i 288). The derivation of this name still remains entirely obscure, but it occurs again in the very regions where the Acts took their literary shape.⁴

Burkitt echoed a Latin papyrus dated 166 AD in which *Abban* (Αββᾶ) was mentioned as one of the two names (*nomine Abban quem Eutychem sive quo alio nomine*) of a young slave (*puerum*) of seven years old coming from the other side of the Tigris river (*natione transfluminianum*) acquired for 200 denarii by C(aius) Fabullius Macer, a lieutenant in the

¹ Sebastian P. Brock, “The earliest Syriac literature”, in *The Cambridge History of early Christian literature*, ed. Francis Young, Lewis Ayres and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 167. Against this, although without providing any evidence, cf. Lautaro Roig-Lanzilotta, “A Syriac Original for the Acts of Thomas? The Theory of the Syriac Priority Revisited, Evaluated and Rejected”, in *Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: The Role of Religion in Shaping Narrative Forms*, ed. Illaria Ramelli & J. Perkins. «Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament» 348, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), pp. 105-133.

² Francis Crawford Burkitt, “The Original Language of the Acts of Judas Thomas”, *Journal of Theological Studies* [OS] I (1900), pp. 280-290; F.C. Burkitt, “Another Indication of the Syriac Origin of the Acts of Thomas”, *Journal of Theological Studies* [OS] III (1901), pp. 94-95. Cf. Rubens Duval, *La littérature syriaque*. «Bibliothèque de l’enseignement de l’histoire ecclésiastique. Anciennes littératures chrétiennes» II (Paris: Victor Lecoffre, 1907), pp. 90-92.

³ Cf. F.C. Burkitt, “The Original Language”, p. 289.

⁴ F.C. Burkitt, “The name Habban in the Acts of Thomas”, *Journal of Theological Studies* [OS] II (1901), p. 429.

Imperial Fleet of triremes on the Tigris.⁵ In Burkitt’s opinion “the name of the slave is obviously identical with that of the merchant”⁶ that appears in the *Acts of Thomas*.⁷

The information provided by the Latin papyrus is certainly relevant. Likewise, other potential references from the Semitic environment can be adduced. Thus, we have the Aramaic Nabatean proper names *hbn* and *hbnm*, North-Arabian the first while the second from the Sinai, for which Negev offered the Arabic correspondence خابن (cf. the correct form حابن, “dropsical”) and the Greek transliterations Αβενε, Αβινας y Αβανος, with parallels in Palmyrene Aramaic.⁸

But, in our opinion, the spectrum of possibilities regarding the origin of this proper name must be expanded in a more appropriate way. In fact, the author of the text of the *Acts of Thomas* refers to Ḥabbān saying that he was an Indian merchant (Syr. *tagarā had bendwayā*, Gr. ἔμπορον ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰνδίας) who would have gone to a certain place at the confluence between the Persian Gulf and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.⁹

Both the Greek and Syriac texts run as follows:

(...) ἔμπορον (...) ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰνδίας ἐλθόντα ᾧ ὄνομα Ἀββάνης ¹⁰	(...) ܟܠܘ/ܠܡܢ/ܘܟܘܠܗܘܐ (...) ܟܠܘܟܘܠܘܢܝܘܬܐ/ܟܠܘܟܘܠܘܢܝܘܬܐ
(“(...) a merchant (...) coming from India whose name was Abbanes”)	(“a certain merchant (...) an Indian (...) whose name was Ḥabbān”). ¹¹

According to this information, the proper name, rather than having a “Semitic” provenance, should, consequently, be of Indian origin given the geographical association mentioned in the text. The fact that the Arabic manuscripts of the *Acts of Thomas* give the name as جابان (*Jabān*)¹² must be due to a mistake by the copyist who changed the *hā*’ (ح) to a *jīm* (ج).

⁵ See the text in <https://papyri.info/ddbdp/chla;3;200>. Cf. Ana Isabel Martín Ferreira, “El papiro 229 de la British Library. Transcripción, traducción y estudio de un documento de compraventa”, *Faentia* 32-33 (2010-2011), pp. 93-111.

⁶ F.C. Burkitt, “The name Habban”, p. 429.

⁷ Cf. Albertus F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*. Introduction, Text, and Commentary. «Supplements to Novum Testamentum» CVIII (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2003, 2nd rev. ed.), p. 21.

⁸ Cf. Avraham Negev, *Personal Names in the Nabatean Realm*. Qedem. Monographs of the Institute of Archaeology 32 (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1991), pp. 27, 73, 75, 87, 90, 117. Cf. Stanley A. Cook, *A Glossary of the Aramaic Inscriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898), p. 50, and Delbert L. Hillers and Eleonora Cussini, *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts* (Baltimore – London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 152 (C4571, line 2).

⁹ Nathanael J. Andrade, *The Journey of Christianity to India in Late Antiquity: Networks and the Movement of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 49-50, 215.

¹⁰ Cf. Maximilianus Bonnet, *Acta apostolorum apocrypha* (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1903), II, p. 101.

¹¹ Cf. William Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles I/II* (Hildesheim – Zürich – New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1990), pp. q’g (Syr.), 147 (Eng.).

¹² Michel van Esbroeck, “Les actes apocryphes de Thomas en version arabe”, *Parole de l’Orient* 14 (1987), p. 16. Cf. R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus syriacus*. Collegerunt S. M. Quatremere, G. H. Bernstein et al., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879-83), I, col. 1181.

Therefore, the origin of this proper name is not Semitic, but Indian: both the Syriac form *Ḥabbān* and the Greek *Ἀββάνης* come from *Appan*,¹³ but with the addition of the ending *-ης* of the 1st declension for masculine nouns in Greek. However, it could be that neither of the two forms comes directly from the Indian name, but perhaps through Middle Persian (Pahlavi) or even through an Eastern Aramaic dialect as occurred, for instance, with the transmission of Indian medical texts.¹⁴

On the other hand, in the case of the Syriac *Ḥabbān* one possibility is that the name *Appan* could have been adapted into Aramaic with possible interference by *contaminatio* with the Arabic *ḥbn*¹⁵ thus adding the unvoiced pharyngeal fricative /ħ/ to the initial vowel /a/. But we think that a more suitable possibility is that *Appan*'s initial /a/ was adapted directly as /ħa/, as in other cases (v.gr. /ʕ/), because the unvoiced pharyngeal fricative /ħ/ has been weakened to the glotal stop /ʔ/, thus corresponding with the *spiritus lenis* in Greek. It should also be noted that in Aramaic dialects there is a strong inclination to weaken *ḥet* to *hē*.¹⁶

Resumen: La cuestión del texto original de las *Acta Thomæ* sigue siendo asunto de controversia para algunos autores. Entre los diversos argumentos esgrimidos a comienzos del siglo XX a favor de un original siriano se encuentra el de los nombres propios, entre los cuales se halla *Ḥabbān*. El objetivo de esta nota es contribuir con nueva información que ayude a resolver este ítem.

Palabras clave: *Vorlage*; *Acta Thomæ*; *Ḥabbān*; Siriano; Griego.

Abstract: The question of the original text of the *Acta Thomæ* still remains a matter of controversy for some authors. Among the various arguments put forward at the beginning of the 20th century in favor of a Syriac original is that of proper names, among which is *Ḥabbān*. The aim of this note is to contribute new information that helps resolve this item.

Key words: *Vorlage*; *Acta Thomæ*; *Ḥabbān*; Syriac; Greek.

¹³ M. S. Ramaswami Aiyar, "Apostle Thomas. Was it a Mysore Mahraja that brought him to India?", *The Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society* XX/1 (1929), p. 27.

¹⁴ R. A. Donkin, *Beyond Price: Pearls and Pearl-Fishing: Origins of the Age of Discoveries*. Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society, 224 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1998), p. 112. Cf. John J. Lowe, *Modern Linguistics in Ancient India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), p. 209.

¹⁵ R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus syriacus*, I, col. 1181; cf. Carl Brockelmann, *Lexicon syriacum* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1928, 2nd rev. ed.), p. 211.

¹⁶ Cf. Carl Brockelmann, *Grundriß der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen*. 2 vols. (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1908), I, p. 126; Johannes Friedrich – Wolfgang Röllig, *Phönizisch-punische Grammatik*. *Analecta Orientalia* 46 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1970; rev. ed.), p. 15 § 35; Max L. Margolis, *A Manual of the Aramaic Language of the Babylonian Talmud_ Grammar, Chrestomathy and Glossaries*. *Ųlaviv Linguarum Semiticarum* (München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1910), p. 8 § 4e. See also William Wright, *Lectures on the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages*, edited with a preface and additional notes by William Robertson Smith, with a new introduction by Patrick Bennet, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press (repr. of 1890), p. 47.