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Scribal Intent

Sociocultural Appropriation of the Testament of Abraham in Eighteenth-Century Romanian Lands

Nicolae Roddy
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Introduction

[1] The Testament of Abraham (TAbr), most likely a first-century, Alexandrine Jewish text, <1> was translated from Greek to Romanian sometime during the early eighteenth century and circulated widely throughout the Romanian lands of Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania <2> until the middle of the last century. With some two dozen surviving manuscripts of widespread provenance catalogued among the holdings of Biblioteca Academiei Române (Library of the Romanian Academy) in Bucharest, it seems likely this apocryphon was preserved for reasons other than mere slavish monastic reproduction, an assumption reinforced by the wealth of creative textual variations among extant manuscripts. Textual analysis carried out with an eye towards eighteenth-century Romanian social history reveals a high degree of interaction taking place between TAbr's narrative and social worlds. <3> The present study will show how this ancient apocryphon was appropriated by Orthodox monks, who transformed its narrative world to reflect contemporary Romanian society and changed Abraham the "hospitable, biblical Near Eastern patriarch" into Abraham the "charitable, contemporary Romanian nobleman (*boier*)."
<4> This thoroughly "romanianized" narrative was then placed into circulation outside the monastery, serving as a vehicle for conveying the monks' moral and spiritual social concerns during a very severe period in Romanian history. Before focusing on the text itself, brief descriptions of the period in question and the context for apocryphal literature are necessary.

The Romanian Lands in the Eighteenth Century <5>

[2] Within decades of the establishment of the Romanian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia in the mid-fourteenth century, ruling princes were occupied with resisting Ottoman expansion south of the Danube. Through artful negotiation with the Turkish imperial government (the "Porte"), enhanced by payment of very large amounts of tribute, the principalities fell into vassalage without ever actually becoming *pashaliks*. <6> From the first surrender of tribute, however, the economic situation in the Romanian lands grew steadily worse as the Porte began brutally exploiting the principalities in order to fuel its military machine. Romanian princes were expected to make exorbitant contributions to the Ottoman treasury in order to support the Porte's extensive military campaigns, and to provide soldiers, laborers, and supplies to Constantinople as well. As a result, internal instability erupted as wealthy and powerful *boiers* struggled for political control. This led to increased interference on the part of the sultan, who began removing and installing princes at will. Between 1612 and 1711, the average reign for a Moldavian prince was about two and a half years; in Wallachia, four and a half.

[3] From 1711 to 1821, the principalities were ruled by a rapid-fire series of wealthy princes recruited by the Porte from elite families of the "lighthouse" (*fana/r*) district of Constantinople, charged with the task of administering imperial interests among the Porte's Romanian vassals. Regarded by historians as "one of

the most oppressive stages of Ottoman domination" (Oțetea: 268). Phanariot rule was a system of absolute authority administered through a twelve-member supreme council (*divan*), its members appointed yearly by the ruling prince. With Phanariot princes occupying the thrones, the Porte now had the means for exercising even greater interference in the domestic affairs of its Romanian vassals. Although a few of these princes aspired to Enlightenment ideals, William Wilkinson, international trade merchant and British consul in Bucharest during the latter years of the Phanariot regime, observed that a number of these princes "marked their administration by the most violent acts of extortion and an invariable system of spoliation" (Wilkinson: 44-45). Ottoman demands upon their Phanariot appointees for exploiting the Romanian lands led to plundering the populace by these foreign princes, eager to appease their overlords and maintain their position on the throne. The political instability of this period is evidenced by the fact that between 1714 and 1821, Wallachia witnessed forty-one appointments to the throne; Moldavia during roughly the same period saw thirty-six. The economic consequences for Romanian feudal society was the onerous cost paid by the peasant class (*țărani*) on behalf of the *boiers*, who in turn were expected to assist the non-native Phanariot princes in satisfying the extraordinary and inexhaustible demands of the Porte. It was also roughly during this time that the Romanian principalities witnessed no less than seven Austro-Russo-Turkish wars, occasionally serving as the main arena for Europe's battles against the Ottoman Empire (see Platon).

TAbr Among the "Popular Books" <8>

[4] Despite Ottoman imperial expansion - and to a large extent because of it - monastic scriptoria within the former Byzantine orbit throughout the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries continued to serve as the threshold for an incredible array of foreign writings into christianized Eastern Europe and especially into the Romanian principalities. Orthodox Christian monks brought Slavic and Greek liturgical books, gospels, psalters, hagiographies, and moral reflections into these lands, but they also imported texts that were somewhat less than orthodox, dealing with subjects from augury to zodiac. Adam and Abraham seem to have been the most popular subjects from apocryphal literature; but in addition to narratives and moral discourses about biblical figures, the widely circulated Greek romances about Alexander the Great, the fables and practical wisdom of Aesop, and the adventurous *1001 Arabian Nights* were also popular. Other tales from the realm of "universal folklore" found their way into this region, such as the Persian *Sindipa*, the Arabic *Halima*, and the Syrian *Archirie and Anadam*. Also widely attested is the cycle of *Varlaam and Josefat*, which contained stories and moral edification originally based on the life of the Buddha. The popularity of these traditions is attested by wide dissemination as evidenced by a vast number of surviving manuscripts. The influence of these "popular books" upon Romanian culture is witnessed in the testimonies of later writers such as Ion Heliade Rădulescu, Grigore Alexandrescu, Ion Codru-Drăgușanu, Mihai Kogălniceanu, Octavian Goga, and others, all of whom claim to have been inspired by them (Micu: 84).

[5] Although these manuscripts were copied by monks, the most literate segment of Romanian society, they were not confined to monasteries but placed into circulation among the wider populace. One must exercise caution in referring to these writings as "religious" texts. Indeed, such a distinction would be utterly foreign to early eighteenth-century Romanians, who quite naturally considered biblical kings David, Solomon, and Herod as occupying the same corridor of Romanian mytho-history as Alexander, Burebista, Decebal, or Trajan.<9> This phenomenon may be observed in the "romanianization" of biblical and Greco-Roman sources; for example, one Romanian variant of the Alexander romance insists that Alexander marshaled his troops through "what is now called Transylvania, Moldavia, and Wallachia."<10> In addition, several Romanian folk charms (*farmece*), incantations (*descântece*), and reversal spells (*desfaceri*) set biblical persons, places, and events quite naturally within Romanian settings:

Pe cărarea lui Traianu,	Along Trajan's path,
La râulu lui Iordanu,	To the Jordan River,
Apă rece ca să mă ieau,	Cold water such as I may take,
Și de ură să mă lau.	To cleanse myself of someone's malice.

(Marianu: 65)

In other examples, Adam replaces Trajan on his road,<11> and even Herod's sister-in-law *cum* wife works her malevolence, albeit symbolically, within a Romanian milieu:

Numai Irodianca nu are,	Only Herodias was not there,
Numai ea singură lipsia,	Only she alone was missing,
Dară a venit și ea;	But then she, too, arrived;

Și cum a venit	And when she showed up
In cale că m'a opritu,	She stopped me in the way,
De picioare m'a âmpiedicatu,	She tripped me up,
De mână m'a luatu,	She took me by the hand,
In șantu m'a prăvălitu,	She threw me down into the ditch,
Cu spini m'a acoperitu.	And covered me with thorns.

(Marianu: 163)

[6] The process of "romanianizing" is also apparent in the Romanian version of TAb, indicating that monks were actively involved in appropriating this narrative in ways that would be particularly meaningful to a Romanian audience. When one considers these editorial reworking in light of the many features inherent within the narrative that already resonate with Romanian culture in its eastern Christian milieu, one discovers reasons for how and why TAb enjoyed cultural relevance in its new, eighteenth-century Romanian setting.

"Romanianization" of TAb

[7] One example of the way this text has been appropriated by Romanian culture is found in the relocation of the text's narrative geographical setting. Witnesses to the original text of the Romanian version almost unanimously situate Abraham's residence near "Driea [or Diea] the Black" (cea Neagră), in place of druo_j th~j Mambrh~j, the biblical "oak of Mamre." Neo-Greek pronunciation accounts for the proper name, and "the Black" derives from the adjective mau&rh. This textual alteration was intentional and widely accepted, for the translator demonstrates sufficient facility with Greek elsewhere throughout the text, and there are no apparent attempts to restore the "correct" reading in any surviving manuscripts. The designation cea neagră, "the Black," possibly remembers an earlier tradition. A Persian chronicler, recounting the great Mongol invasion of 1241-1242, describes a campaign against the "Black Vlachs" (Wallachians), near the base of the Carpathian mountains, a designation which perhaps derives from a previous name for the region, *Comania Nigra* (Black Comania; see Andreescu). A variant reading, witnessed in three manuscripts (mss. 1972 4378 5210), localizes the text further by situating Abraham's residence in a more recognizable geographical setting, "near the Black Sea" (lângă Marea Neagră), presumably in the southwestern Romanian region of Dobrogea. The monastic translator and subsequent copyists thus appear to be interested in setting this narrative within a Romanian context.

[8] Further evidence for this is found in the conscious reflection of Romanian feudal society within TAb's narrative world. First, the translator has inserted *boiers* into the list of guests Abraham receives into his home, so that the Romanian version reads, "and he received travelers, rich, poor, princes, kings, *boiers*, the sick, weak ones, and neighbors." In transforming the narrative to reflect their own social world, monastic copyists could not ignore this important estate of Romanian feudal society, who exploited the populace for labor and goods in order to satisfy obligations of tribute to their Ottoman suzerain.

[9] Relatedly, Abraham's list of guests ends with *gei/tonej*, literally, "neighbors"; but although the equivalent *vecini* conveys the sense of "neighbors" (to the extent one may speak of neighbors, or those living "nigh," in feudal society), in medieval Romanian society the term referred specifically to peasants serving corv?~"~©e to the lord of a feudal estate (see Treptow and Popa: 214). Romanians reading or hearing this narrative would be given pause to consider that *vecini* entertained by Abraham were not simply neighbors, but Romanian peasants yoked to the land and well acquainted with the hardships of earthly existence. That Romanian copyists intended this association is evidenced by the fact that some manuscripts pair *vecini* with *săraci*, the "poor," as designated beneficiaries of Abraham's estate. It makes more sense to say that Abraham disbursed his wealth to the poor and *landless*, rather than to the poor and his own neighbors, that is, as will be seen, his fellow landlords.

[10] The appropriation of the narrative is also seen in the transformation of Abraham, the once biblical Near Eastern patriarch, now decked out in the trappings of an eighteenth-century Romanian *boier*. The first step toward that end was to "re-humanize" Abraham; for the translator has 1) suppressed language that otherwise emphasizes Abraham's mythic persona, eliminating phrases such as o!sioj kai\ pani/eroj, "devout and all-holy"; 2) retained favorable human virtues present in the text, such as *drept* (di/kaioj), "righteous," and *iubitoriu de oaspeți* (filo&cenoj), "hospitable"; and 3) added language such as *cu putere*, "with power," which conveys a sense of physical vitality and serves to plant Abraham's feet more firmly on the ground.<12> This comprehensive scribal makeover transforms the picture of Abraham from an exceptional, almost heavenly sort of man, to an exemplary earthly human being - a "noble" man in the

truest sense of the word.

[11] The transformation of Abraham is not carried out at the expense of the story, however. Even as an exemplary human being, Abraham has no desire to give up his earthly life. The translator's creativity provides an accessibly human Abraham while enhancing the appeal of the narrative for popular tastes. For example, the Greek text presents a patient Archangel favorably comparing Abraham to Job (Gr. ms. A reads "Jacob") before God the Immortal King; but the Romanian translator eliminates Job from the text and presents instead an impatient Michael who, taking the title formerly reserved for the Most High, compares Abraham to an immortal king. He does so in a manner that suggests sarcasm born of frustration, in that so far Abraham has refused to yield his soul. The Greek text reads:

kai\ o(u#yistoj e\lfh pro_j to_n a!ggelon, Ei0 kai\ pa&lin ou#twj le/gei o(fi/loj mou 7
(Abraa_m o#ti Ou)k a)kolouqw~ soi; o(de\ a)rxh&ggeloj ei]pen Ku&rie pantokra&tor,
ou#twj le/gei, kai\ e0gw_ fei/domai tou~ a#yasqai au(tou~, o#ti e0c a)rxh~j fi/loj sou
tugxa&nei kai\ pa&nta ta_ a)resta_ e0nw&pio&n sou a)poi/hsen, kai\ ou)k e\lstin a!nqrwpoj
o#moioj au(tou~ e0pi\ th~j gh~j, ou) ka}n 70Iw_b o(qauma&sioj a!nqrwpoj, kai\ dia_
tou~to fei/domai tou~ a#yasqai au(tou~. ke/leuson ou}n, a)qa&nate basileu~, ti/ r(h~ma
genh&setai.

And the Most High said to the angel, Does indeed my friend Abraham again say thus: I shall not follow you? The archangel said, Lord almighty, thus he says, and I refrain from touching him because from the beginning he was your friend and did all pleasing things before you, and there is no man like him upon the earth, not even Job, the wondrous man. And for this reason I refrain from touching him. Command, therefore, immortal King, what thing shall be done.<13>

Compare this reading with the Romanian version:

Iară Archistratigul, deacă auzi așa, numaidecât să sui în ceriu și stătu înaintea lui Dumnezeu și zise, "Doamne A-tot-țietoriule, toată voie am plinit prientenului tău Avraam, ceriul și pământul și Judecata, toată âl i-ai arătat întru nor, cu carul slavii lâ'am purtat, și iară zise că nu-ți voiu pristăni. Eu âi înghiduiesc lui pentru căci au făcut multă bunătați pre pământ, cât nu iaste lui om potrivnic pre pământ, ci iaste ca un âmpărat fără de moarte. Doamne, ce vei să fac?"

When the Commander heard this, he immediately ascended into heaven and stood before God and said, "Lord, Sustainer of All, I have fulfilled all the wishes of your friend Abraham; heaven and earth and the Judgment - all these I have shown him in a cloud, in the glorious chariot I carried him, yet he says, "I will not give in to you." I have been patient with him because he has done so many good things upon the earth; but no man on earth opposes him for he is like an immortal king. Lord, what would you have me to do?"

[12] The manipulation of Abraham's character is a trend that continues throughout the variants; but although Abraham is made more recognizably human, he is not always portrayed as more noble. One variant (ms. 1972) states that Abraham, upon seeing the Archangel's tears fall into the basin and become precious stones, secretly appropriates the precious stones and hides them away in his room. This is likely not a scribal error (Turdeanu: 236); perhaps the copyist could not suppress the whim of satirizing the greed of some *boiers*.

[13] Thus, for the most part, the portrait of Abraham that emerges from the pages of the Romanian version finds analogy in the life of a wealthy and powerful, yet hospitable and compassionate *boier*. In keeping with the Greek prototype, the Romanian version affirms that the patriarch enjoys wealth, possessions, and an estate worked by no less than seven thousand servants (par. 46). In addition to possessing great wealth, Abraham, as we saw above, receives strangers from all walks of life at the crossroads near his home - rich, poor, princes, kings, *boiers*, the sick, the weak, and landless peasants. Abraham himself is neither prince nor peasant; he possesses land and cattle and servants (*feciori*) and slaves (*robi*). Early in the narrative (II.1), an omission of Abraham's companion, Masek, leaves the patriarch with all of Masek's servants; a change in setting for Abraham's encounter with the Archangel takes place from the field (*xw&ra*) to the village (*sat*); and, Abraham is separated from his association with plowing oxen as recounted in the Greek text. Thus it appears that *boiers* and their sons, generally the only members of Romanian society apart from monks who could read, were confronted by Abraham as an accessibly human model for exemplary *boier* behavior. Abraham is clearly a wealthy and powerful landowner, yet he remains righteous and hospitable, compassionate and just, interceding on behalf of others until the end of his life.

[14] Additional evidence of applied monastic concern is reflected in the Romanian version. The basis for Abraham's charity, already present in the Greek TAb, is further enhanced in the Romanian version's Greek model, which relates a deathbed manumission for all of Abraham's slaves.<14> The copyists, likely reflecting socioeconomic conditions under Phanariot rule, develop these concerns still further. Manuscript 5210, for example, a Transylvanian manuscript dating from around 1800, appears to be consciously defending the impoverished and landless populace in that it: 1) altogether omits mention of the rich (bogați) from among those whom Abraham receives at his abode, substituting instead those "baptized" (botezați), offering a play on words; 2) specifically refers to Abraham as "the lover of the poor" (iubitoriu de săraci); and, 3) omits the poor from the list of people TAb says God will destroy at the end of time (par. 51). One variant reading (ms. 1158) insists that upon Abraham's deathbed, he disbursed much of his wealth to the poor and landless (și împărți multă avere la săracii și la vecinii), an act of charity one might hope would influence a *boier* to remember the impoverished wretches living on his own estate.

Conclusion

[15] In conclusion, we see that a first-century Alexandrine Jewish text, preserved for over a millennium by Byzantine Christians, made its way into the Romanian principalities of the eighteenth-century. During the process of translation, the narrative was thoroughly "romanianized" by Orthodox monks. The setting of the Romanian version of the narrative is now eighteenth-century Wallachia, complete with aspects and institutions of Romanian feudal society including *boiers* and serfs. Furthermore, with an overhaul of the portrait of its protagonist Abraham, who provides already a generous wealth of raw material for his "boierization" and marked concerns for the poor, the narrative now offers the reader a humorous but morally edifying tale of how a *boier* ought to behave under the dire circumstances of life under the Phanariot princes of the Ottoman period. Apart from monks, the only other members of this social world who could read were almost always found among *boier* families. It seems reasonable to conclude that this venerable apocryphon functioned as a vehicle for presenting a monastic social agenda aimed at this wealthy and powerful class. This perhaps also accounts for why the text was transmitted only in manuscript form and was never set in type. Printing presses belonging to Orthodox monasteries were generally used for the production of specifically religious materials like gospels, psalters, and liturgical books. It is likely the Romanian version of TAb was considered somewhat subversive in nature and, as such, would not have earned the wider ecclesiastical sanction necessary for being published, especially after the sweeping socioeconomic reforms of Alexander Cuza, the first leader of the modern state of Romania, who in the early 1860's, restructured several monasteries as parishes and schools and secularized their assets. Thus, with the resulting decline of the manuscript tradition, the Romanian version of TAb lapsed into obscurity.

[16] Finally, it should be noted that TAb did not pass away without leaving its mark on Romanian popular culture. Its motif of Death coming to Abraham's house and resorting to deception in order to proffer the "cup of Death," for example, appears variously in several Romanian funeral laments (*bocete*), of which just two are presented here:

A venit Moartea'n grădină,	Death came into the garden,
Cu un struț de flori în mână,	With a bouquet of flowers in her hand,
Cu struțul te-a amăgit,	With the bouquet she has deceived you,
Cu păharul te-a cinstit,	With her cup she bade you drink,
Până ce te-a omorât.	And then she took your life.

(Bichigean and Tomutâa)

Vine Moartea prin grădină	Death comes into the garden
Cu-n păhar de vin în mână;	With a wine cup in her hand;
Și ea mă rog că-i vin,	She claims it is wine,
Dar el e amar venin.	But it is bitter poison.

(Bernea: 100; cited in Turdeanu: 238)

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