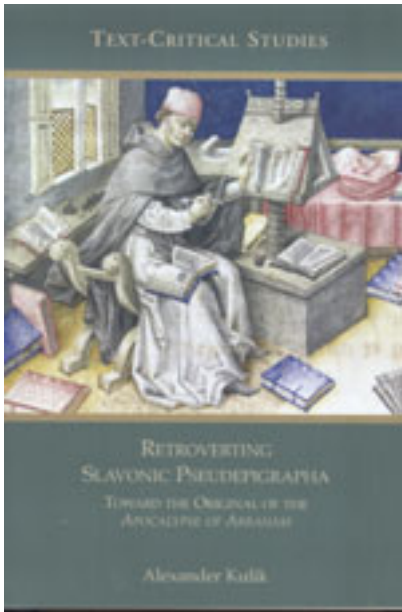


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Kulik, Alexander

Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha: Toward the Original of the Apocalypse of Abraham

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Alexander Kulik's *Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha: Toward the Original of the Apocalypse of Abraham* is a textual analysis of the *Apocalypse of Abraham* (hereafter *ApAb*), an early Jewish pseudepigraphon that survived solely in its Slavonic translation. Scholars have long recognized that *ApAb* is a crucial text for understanding the early roots and development of Jewish mysticism. In the beginning of the book Kulik suggests that *ApAb* may represent one of the earliest examples of Jewish mystical thought and thus may provide important clues for understanding the transition between early apocalyptic and medieval *hekhalot* traditions. One of the earliest molds of *merkabah* mysticism, *ApAb* contains rich esoteric imagery imperceptible to uninitiated eyes. According to a Jewish mystical text, *Sefer ha-Bahir*, everyone who approaches mystical writings "must inevitably fail"—"It is therefore written, 'Let this heap of ruins be under your hand.' This refers to things that a person can not understand, unless he fails in them." *ApAb* is not immune to this warning; its imagery confounds the minds of many a reader. Failure of comprehension looms even larger for interpreters able to read only translations of *merkabah* documents. The intended meaning of mystical imagery becomes covered with an additional veil of literalist renderings unfamiliar with cultural and ideological milieus. Kulik highlights this interpretive predicament by noting that in its long transmission in Greek and Slavonic environments *ApAb* has suffered greatly from the hands of translators

who, unfamiliar with the text's culture and theology, often opted for a literal rendition. Is unearthing the intended meaning a real possibility now? Kulik suggests that "the only way to improve our understanding of the text is to revert fragments of its Greek *Vorlage*, and, sometimes, even of the Semitic original" (4). Although the author defines the primary goal of his work as an attempt "to improve our understanding of the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, an extremely obscure text whose meaning can be explained only on the level of its Greek *Vorlage* and even its distant original" (91), the value of the work extends far beyond the boundaries of a single Slavonic text. Another, perhaps even more important, goal of this book is the development of a textual methodology that includes the elaboration of general principles and tools useful to the retroversion of other important pseudepigraphical documents circulating in Slavic cultures. Kulik's attempt at the retroversion of *ApAb* thus serves as a methodological experiment for the retroversion of other early Jewish mystical texts that survived solely in their Slavonic translation, including 2 *Enoch* and the *Ladder of Jacob*.

The practical, pragmatic thrust of Kulik's research is strong and very engaging. He believes that the development of the methodological principles of retroversion of Slavonic texts must go hand in hand with the practical application of these principles to a wide range of texts and build on accumulation of successful solutions. The author sees his book as the first stage in this methodological development that seeks to solve separate problems of interpretation through retroversion. The structure of the book corresponds to these tasks of retroversion. The study is organized around discussions of separate problematic segments of the text, classified according to the types of the retroverted phenomena. The analytical part of the book is prefaced by the author's translation of the entire text of *ApAb*, which provides a helpful context for the new interpretations suggested by author. The translation also functions as a basis for cross-references. Although the author occasionally supplies Slavonic readings in the footnotes to his English translation, the book does not include the entire Slavonic text of *ApAb*, which makes the task of a reader a little bit difficult since, in order to follow the author's arguments pertaining to the Slavonic text, the reader must have at hand the previously published editions of the Slavonic text.

The analytical part of the book is organized into four chapters. The first chapter deals with problems of the retroversion of the Greek *Vorlage*. The author provides textual illustrations of five examples of the Greek retroversion: (1) graphic misinterpretations; (2) morphological calques; (3) semantic calques; (4) syntactic Hellenisms; and (5) phraseological Hellenisms. Kulik's illustrations have lasting methodological value not only for the text of *ApAb* but for other Slavonic materials translated from Greek. The second chapter deals with the reconstruction of the Semitic original. Kulik argues for the Semitic origin of *ApAb*, noting that "the existence of the Semitic original of the text may

be considered proven beyond any doubt, since ... the literal renderings of Hebrew or Aramaic are attested on different linguistic levels" (61). He also notes that, while the Semitic origin of the document might be considered proven, the problem of choice between Hebrew or Aramaic cannot be solved unequivocally. Kulik's research demonstrates that the only obvious Aramaic forms found in *ApAb* are those connected with Aramaic proper names. He analyzes several of these forms, including names Marumaf, Varisat, and Nakhon. In this section of his analysis Kulik also addresses the question of the possibility of retroverting the Semitic original omitting the Greek stage. Usually scholars must first reconstruct the Greek *Vorlage* and then, where possible, its Semitic original. Kulik points to two kind of cases where Semitic retroversion may be more reliable than Greek. These include situations where the Slavonic version faithfully reproduces obvious Semitisms that were not found in any extant Greek texts and where Slavonic texts contain citations or parallels to the sources preserved only in Hebrew or Aramaic. The author further provides four textual illustrations of Semitic retroversion: (1) Hebrew-Greek transliterations reflected in the Slavonic text but not attested in Greek; (2) semantic and (3) syntactic calques integrated into biblical citations/allusions in *ApAb* that conform to the readings of the Hebrew Bible or Aramaic Targums rather than to the preserved Greek versions; and (4) phraseological calques of rabbinic Hebrew.

The third chapter examines cases where retroversion is interlaced with text-critical problems. Finally, the fourth chapter deals with intertextual verification, which Kulik recognizes as one of the most important tools of retroversion. It is apparent that retroversion of mystical texts cannot be accomplished solely on the linguistic level and presupposes knowledge of esoteric traditions that stand behind the text. Recognizing the importance of intertextual verification, the author provides in this section of his study a wide range of intertextual allusions drawn from the Second Temple and rabbinic materials. The chapter demonstrates Kulik's broad knowledge of Jewish texts and traditions and offers a number of illuminating insights.

On the whole, Kulik's study can be seen as a remarkable collection of interpretive solutions that have lasting methodological value not only for the study of *ApAb* but also for research on other early Jewish texts that either survived solely in their Slavonic translation, such as *2 Enoch* and the *Ladder of Jacob*, or represent Slavonic versions of compositions preserved also in Greek, such as *3 Baruch*, *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the *Testament of Abraham*, and the *Life of Adam and Eve*. The methodological significance of the book lies in the experimental and heuristic nature of its approach, which is not confined to a single theoretical solution but rather incorporates a variety of interpretive practices and methods.