Letters

Simeon Stylites (c. AD 390–459)

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The Letters of Simeon the Stylite. — By Charles C. Torrey, Professor in Andover Theological Seminary, Andover, Mass.

Saint Simeon of the Pillar has always been one of the extremely interesting figures in the history of the Oriental church, as he is certainly one of the most characteristic. We are fortunate, too, in possessing considerable detailed information as to his life and work, derived for the most part from contemporary sources. This information is not always, nor even generally, trustworthy, to be sure; but the portion which we can use with confidence is sufficient to give ns a satisfactory idea of the course of his life, while even the portion which is least reliable as biography has its value for the church historian. As is well known, our chief sources for Simeon's biography are, first, the old Syriac Life, written in the year 473 A.D. by Simeon, son of Apollonius, and Bar Hattar, son of 'Udan, and published by S. E. Assemani in his Acta Sanctorum Martyrum, ii. 268 ff., and by Bedjan in his Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum, iv. 507 ff.; and, second, the account of Simeon given by his contemporary, Theodoret of Cyrrhus (died 457), in his Religious History. The main facts of his life are these: He was born in Sis, a small town in the neighborhood of Nicopolis, in northern Syria, probably between the years 385 and 390. When about sixteen years of age, he entered a monastery near Antioch. Nine or ten years later, he repaired to Telnesse, some fifty miles northeast of Antioch, where he remained, the most renowned ascetic in the East, until his death in the year 459. The last thirty-seven years of his life were spent on the top of pillars of increasing height; the one occupied by him during the last thirty years being more than sixty feet high. After his death, his body was carried with great pomp to Antioch, and buried there; though Constantinople coveted the honor, and the Emperor Leo himself had planned to have the body brought to that city.

Of the few writings attributed to Simeon, only the Letters can lay any claim to genuineness. These---some of them very well known and often referred to---are found in different places; and, with a single exception, are concerned with the theological controversies which rent the Eastern church asunder in the middle of the fifth century. Three of these letters, found only in certain ancient manuscripts of the British Museum, have never been published, though attention has often been called to them, e. g., by Wright, Syrian Literature, p. 55, and by Noldeke, Orientalische Skizzen, p. 239. It is the principal purpose of this article to edit and examine these three, with especial reference to the question of their genuineness;

though as this purpose necessarily involves at least a partial comparison of the other letters, I have thought it best to bring them all together here. One of the most celebrated of the letters which Simeon is said to have written is the one concerning the Jewish synagogues, addressed to the Emperor Theodosius II. (408-450 A.D.). At the time when Simeon was beginning to be famous, Jews and Christians were in bitter strife; and the latter having the power in their hands, the former were in danger of losing their rights as well as their property. Many synagogues, especially, were either burned, or seized and made to serve as Christian churches; and the efforts of the emperor to secure to the Jews their rights as citizens, and partially to restore the property stolen from them, were very displeasing to many of the warmer partisans of the church. The text of the letter is given in the Life. I reproduce it here from Assemani, Bibliotheca Orientalis, i. 254, and add the variant readings of Bedjan's manuscript (Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum, iv. 637, line 11 ff.).

[Syriac omitted] "Because in the pride of your heart you have forgotten the Lord your God, who gave you the crown of majesty and the royal throne, and have become a friend and comrade and abettor of the unbelieving Jews; know that of a sudden the righteous judgment of God will overtake you and all those 'who are of one mind with you in this matter. Then you will lift up your hands to heaven, and say in your distress, Of a truth because I dealt falsely with the Lord God this punishment has come upon me." The story of this letter, according to the Life, was the following. The emperor's prefect, Asclepiodotus by name, issued an order commanding the Christians in this region to restore to the Jews all the synagogues which had been taken from them by violence. This order produced great consternation among the Christians, while the Jews were in high feather. A number of bishops came to Simeon and told him what was being done; whereupon he wrote this letter. The emperor, upon receiving it, revoked the obnoxious edict, dismissed Asclepiodotus from his office, and sent a humble reply to Simeon.

Noldeke pronounces this version of the matter scarcely credible, and with good reason. Still, there is, perhaps, no sufficient ground for denying the genuineness of the letter. Theodoret, an independent witness, writing some time before Simeon's death, plainly refers to this rebuke of the Emperor Theodosius in his Religious History, near the end of his biography of the Stylite. Speaking of Simeon's boldness and zeal for the church, he says (Opera, ed. Noesselt, vol. iii. p. 1282): {Greek omitted}

where the connection of the clause "sending letters to the emperor about these things" with the preceding, "breaking down the presumption of the Jews," is beyond question, in view of the other narrative. We can hardly doubt, therefore, that some such written communication was sent to Theodosius by the Stylite. Of the letter which we have, this at least may be said, that it is what we should expect a man like Simeon to write under such circumstances. As for the specific occasion, it is true, as Noldeke points out, that the story told here of the order to restore the synagogues seems to be discredited by the witness of a document which has come down to us from that very controversy; namely, an edict of Theodosius addressed to Asclepiodotus, dated in the year 423, commanding that no more synagogues

be seized or destroyed, and that restitution be made for those of them which have already been consecrated to Christian use; the implication being that such could no longer be given back to their former owners. But there is abundant evidence that the emperor and his officers had no small difficulty with this matter of the synagogues, and that it had been the subject of lively dispute. See the Codex Theodosianus, xvi. 8, 9. 12. 20. 21; and notice that in this same year 423, between February and June, three successive edicts relating to the matter were promulgated (ibid., 25. 26. 27).

It is not unlikely that the monks and the local civil authorities were on opposite sides here (as, for example, Graetz, Geschichte der Juden, vol. iv. p. 455, takes for granted); and it may be that what called out Simeon's letter was some proceeding on the part of Syrian officials based on the former less definite laws. In that case, the emperor's order to Asclepiodotus, referred to above, might well have been hailed by the monks as a victory for their party. Or, again, it is quite possible that when synagogues were seized after the promulgation of this edict of 423, and in violation of it, the attempt was made to punish the offenders by making them restore the buildings and pay damages, as narrated in our history. Of course the part played by Simeon in this matter was far less important than the popular report made it. The emperor's new edict was called forth by the same disturbances which stirred up the monk to write his letter; and it is not at all likely that the prefect Asclepiodotus was dismissed in the way narrated by Simeon's biographers.

It is intrinsically probable that at this time and in this part of the world a letter to the emperor dictated by such a well known saint as Simeon already was (even if we datethe letter as early as 422 or 423) would have been copied and preserved long enough to have been used by biographers who wrote only a short time after his death. There is nothing, therefore, to decide against the supposition that we have before us the letter actually sent in Simeon's name to Theodosius; though the character of the source in which it stands, and our knowledge of the freedom with which even the best of early historians invented such documents to adorn their narrative, make skepticism justifiable. The remaining letters ascribed to the Stylite are all concerned with the theological controversies of the fifth century.

The best known among these is the letter approving the council of Chalcedon, quoted in part by Evagrius (Eccl. Hist., ii. 10), and afterward cited by other historians. The circumstances under which it was written are narrated as follows by Evagrius. The emperor Leo (I.) Thrax (reigned 457-474) sent out, soon after his accession to the throne, a circular letter to the bishops of the empire and to a few of the most celebrated monks, requesting their judgment upon the council of Chalcedon. Simeon Stylites, who was the most noted of the monks addressed, wrote to the emperor in reply, approving the council; and at the same time sent a letter of similar tenor to Basil, bishop of Antioch, who, it seems, had also written to ask for his judgment, perhaps with the added purpose of influencing him to send a favorable reply to the emperor. This letter to Basil is the one quoted by Evagrius, who hints that he had also at his disposal the letter of Simeon to Leo, and would have included it in his history if it had not been too long. The letter ran thus (in the translation of the Bohn Library):

"To my lord, the most religious and holy servant of God, the archbishop Basil, the sinful and humble Simeon wishes health in the Lord. Well, may we now say, my lord, Blessed be God, who has not rejected our prayer, nor withdrawn his mercy from us sinners. For, on the receipt of the letters of your worthiness, I admired the zeal and piety of our sovereign, beloved of God, which he manifested and still manifests towards the holy fathers and their unshaken faith. And this gift is not from ourselves, as says the holy apostle, but from God, who through your prayers bestowed on him this readiness of mind." .... "On this account I also, though mean and worthless, the refuse of the monks, have conveyed to his majesty my judgment respecting the creed of the 630 holy fathers assembled at Chalcedon, firmly resolving to abide by the faith there revealed by the Holy Spirit; for if, in the midst of two or three who are gathered together in his name, the Saviour is present, how could it be otherwise than that the Holy Spirit should be throughout in the midst of so many and so distinguished holy fathers?" . . . . "Wherefore be stout and courageous in the cause of true piety, as was also Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, in behalf of the Children of Israel. I beg you to salute from me all the reverend clergy who are under your holiness, and the blessed and most faithful laity."

The evidence for the genuineness of this letter is in general much like that appealed to in the case of the preceding, but is considerably stronger. Evagrius has an excellent reputation for trustworthiness as a historian, and wrote in Antioch, where a letter dictated by this saint at the pinnacle of his fame (not more than two years before his death) would certainly have been preserved. There seems to be no reason to doubt that Leo wrote to Simeon on this occasion, as attested by Evagrius, the Codex Encyclius, and many subsequent historians, and denied by none. And the testimony is uniform that all of those addressed by the emperor returned answers favorable to the council of Chalcedon, excepting only Timotheus of Alexandria and Amphilochius of Side. Note especially the testimony of the Monophysite historian Zacharias of Mytilene (Land, Anecdota Syriaca, vol. iii. p. 142). The letter to Basil of Antioch has, therefore, strong indirect support; and it is yet more deserving of confidence because of its contents. It is a very uninteresting production, made up largely of commonplace phrases, which are drawn out at considerable length. The only plausible reason for inventing such a letter would have been the purpose to show that Simeon approved the council of Chalcedon; but it is sufficiently obvious that this colorless, almost indifferent utterance could never have been forged as a Chalcedonian party document. There is another letter, said to have been written by Simeon at about this time, in which his adherence to the 'emperor's party' is attested.

This is the letter from Simeon to Eudocia, the widow of Theodosius II., quoted by Cyril of Scythopolis (middle of the sixth century), in his Vita Euthymii (Cotelerius, Ecclesiae Graecae Monumenta, tom. ii. p. 271), and by Nicephorus Callistus, Eccl. Hist., xv. 13. The latter tells the story as follows. The empress Pulcheria, having become reconciled to her beautiful sister-in-law (now removed to a safe distance), wished to see her become orthodox, and employed every possible influence to this end. Eudocia, half persuaded by the letters and entreaties she received, finally wrote to Simeon Stylites, asking his guidance

and promising to follow it. The letter was sent by the chorepiscopus Anastasius. Simeon replied:

"Know, my child, that the devil, seeing the wealth of your virtues, sought to sift you as wheat; moreover, that corrupter Theodosius, having become the receptacle and instrument of the evil one, both darkened and disturbed your God-beloved soul. But be of good courage, for your faith has not left you. I wonder, however, exceedingly at this, that having the fountain close at hand you do not recognize it, but hasten to draw the water from afar. You have near by the inspired Euthymius; follow his counsels and admonitions, and it will be well with you." Eudocia followed this advice, and was directed by Euthymius to hold to the doctrine of the four councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon. Regarding this letter there is little to be said. It may well be genuine, though there is, of course, room for doubt. Even if it is a forgery for the glory of Euthymius, as is possible, it shows, at least, what views the Stylite was commonly believed to hold.

But the question as to Simeon's theological position during the last years of his life---that is, at the time when the above-mentioned letters to Leo, Basil, and Eudocia, are supposed to have been written---is raised anew by the three hitherto unpublished letters of which, mention has already been made. All three are decidedly controversial, and in them the Stylite speaks as a bitter opponent of the Chalcedonense. The letters are found in two ancient Syriac manuscripts of the British Museum, One of these, Add, 12154 (no. DCCCLX. in Wright's Catalogue), dated by Wright at the end of the 8th or beginning of the 9th century, is a manuscript of miscellaneous contents, of which the first section is a collection of Monophysite party documents (fol. 1-18). The thirty-third section contains the three letters (Catalogue, vol. ii., p. 986), extending from fol. 1995 to fol. 201a. The first of them is addressed to the Emperor Leo (I.); the second, to the abbot Jacob of Kaphra Rhima; the third, to John, bishop of Antioch (died 442).

The second manuscript, Add. 12155 (no. DCCCLVI1. in the Catalogue), is a large and beautifully written codex of the 8th century. It is a Monophysite compilation; and contains as its twenty-ninth section (fol. 229a; Catalogue, vol. ii. p. 951) the first of the three letters just mentioned, namely the one addressed to the Emperor Leo. There is prefixed to it a superscription occupying several lines; otherwise, the text corresponds closely to that of the other manuscript. I give here the text of Add. 12154 (A), adding in the case of the letter to Leo the variant readings of Add. 12155 (B). [Syriac] TRANSLATION. The Letters of the Holy Mar Simeon the Stylite which testify concerning him that he did not accept the Council of Chalcedon. First Letter: To the Emperor Leo, who reigned after Marcian.

When I received the letters of your Royal Highness, I at first expected to rejoice with great joy; because I hoped for the rectifying and annulling of those things which were done not long ago in the accursed council of Chalcedon, so impudently and wickedly, contrary to the word of truth; when the church of God was disturbed by the innovation and false teaching of accursed and perverse heretics. But when some time elapsed, and that which I was hoping for did not come to pass, pains even more grievous than the former came upon my feeble old

age, as I saw what things these are, which are perpetrated and done amongst the leaders of the church. But I believe him who said, "In the latter days I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and they shall know me, from the least, of them to the greatest; and no one shall say to his fellow, Know the Lord." To this hope, therefore, I hold fast, as to an anchor, guarding and keeping it unto the end; and all the world cannot move me from it. And I in my weakness beseech your Royal Highness, for the faith of those holy fathers who met at Nicaea, that you preserve it spotless and unimpaired for the holy church of God unto the end.

Second Letter: To Mar Jacob of Kaphra Rhima. To our Spiritual Brother in Christ; adorned with graces illustrious and divine; zealous for the orthodox faith of the fathers, which we have learned from prophets, apostles, and saints; the Archimandrite, Mar Jacob of Kaphra Rhima; from the mean and weak sinner, Simeon, who stands upon the pillar near the village Telnesi; great and exceeding peace in the Lord. First of all, I beseech you to offer prayers to God for me, that He may give me strength and patience, on this stone upon which I stand; and I also make supplication to God for my sins.

As for the rest: Since your Reverence has sent to me by Mar Thomas, your pupil, requesting that the anathema which I once uttered upon the council of Chalceclon be put in writing by me and sent to your Reverence; to be used for the consolation and confirmation of the orthodox everywhere, and for the stopping of the mouth of perverse heretics: This I say to you, my Beloved.; that I have hope and confidence in God, whom I serve and worship; and I confess Him and believe in Him, whose truth you and I will keep unto the end. I have not approved, and will not approve, that council of perverse heretics which was convened at Chalcedon; nor the evil which was perpetrated by it, and the sinful and wicked deed which they did to the holy martyr Dioscurus. But I have cursed, and will curse, that wicked council which was convened at Chalcedon; and every one who has approved or shall approve it, or who has been, or shall be, like minded with those who composed it; unless he has repented or shall repent. Moreover, a writing, signed by these calumniators, bears witness for me that I did not approve them, nor did I write anything to that effect; nor can they prove that 1 ever gave them countenance in any way; nor will any one; assert that I did, unless he wishes to destroy his soul by lying and slander.

For verily I, the weak and sinful, am a partner with all those holy and saintly fathers, three hundred and eighteen in number, who assembled at Nicaea; and with the hundred and fifty who met at Constantinople; and with the two hundred and twenty who assembled together with the holy Cyril at Ephesus, and cursed and cast out the wicked Nestorius. Moreover, I have been and am a partner with the holy martyr Mar Dioscurus, Patriarch of the metropolis Alexandria; him who was unjustly and wickedly driven into exile, as though he were an evil doer, by perverse heretics, enemies of the truth; those who are like minded with the wicked Nestorius, and with Leo of Rome, and with the unrighteous Emperor Marcian.

As I have already said, the truth which I have learned from apostles and from holy fathers and saints, in this I abide unto the very end of my life; nor will I basely deny that work of grace which was wrought through the coming of God our Saviour in human nature; who

came down and was incarnated of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was born of her in her virginity, and endured all that came upon him in order that he might redeem the life of all mankind. If then, my Lord, there is any one who is of doubting mind, let him be confirmed in the faith of the holy fathers, and in these things which we have written. And do you be in good health, and rejoicing in spirit and body. Pray for me that I may be one of God's elect. Third Letter, also written by Simeon himself: To John of Antioch, concerning Nestorius.

To the holy and God-loving Mar John, Bishop of Antioch, from Simeon the feeble in the Lord, greeting. Having heard, my Lord, from faithful men that you have been summoned by the most pious emperor to attend the holy council, for which, on account of Nestorius and his blasphemies, he is striving to assemble the holy bishops at Ephesus; and that your Holiness, as is reported, does not wish to join their assembly: I in my insignificance urge your Holiness, not to delay to go up to the holy council of Ephesus, and to become an ally of our holy father Cyril, and a participant in the holy synod which is with him, in cursing the misguided Nestorius---if so be that he come not to repentance. If this shall not be done by you, I know well that there will be no peace in the churches of the East; but that, on the contrary, great disturbances will arise. Nay, surely it is for you to do this, which will please God, rejoice the king, and establish peace in the churches of the East.

As was remarked above, the manuscript Add. 12155, which contains only the letter to the Emperor Leo, prefixes to it a superscription several lines in length. This superscription, which is rubricated, reads as follows : [Syriac omitted] "The Letter which Mar Simeon the Stylite wrote to the Emperor Leo, who reigned after Marcian; which was called forth by the conduct of Theodoret of Cyrrhus, the heretic; who approached the blessed Mar Simeon, hoping to lead him astray with the heresy of the Diophysites, and sowed words of blasphemy in the ears of the blessed Mar Simeon. Wherefore he clothed himself with zeal for the faith, and wrote this letter to the Emperor Leo, in distress and anguish of spirit."

In this superscription, the fact appears once more "which has been sufficiently evident throughout these Syriac documents; namely, that whether Simeon Stylites wrote the three letters or not, they are the work of a vehement partisan, and were circulated to serve as Monophysite party weapons. The general superscription found in manuscript A, for example ("Letters of Simeon, which testify that he did not accept the council of Chalcedon"), plainly implies the existence of a more or less widespread belief (held and proclaimed by "impudent and wicked heretics") that Simeon did accept the council of Chalcedon. We know, in fact, that this saint, whose dictum was of such great importance, was claimed not only by Monophysites and Chalcedonians, but also by Nestorians. In at least one of the three letters, moreover, the writer's main purpose is, professedly, to silence his calumniators. The letter addressed to the abbot Jacob of Kaphra Rhlma was intended (to use its own words) "to be used for the consolation and confirmation of the orthodox everywhere, and for the stopping of the mouth of perverse heretics." And a little further on, the writer implies that his Chalcedonian enemies have produced documents (which he brands as forgeries) in sup-

port of their assertion. "I did not approve [the council]," he says, "nor did I write anything to that effect, nor can they prove that I ever gave them countenance in any way; nor will any one assert that I did, unless he wishes to destroy his soul by lying and slander." That is, it is not a question of Simeon's conversion from Melkite to Monophysite views; he says here (or is made to say) most distinctly that he never at any time gave the hated 'synod' his support. If, then, this letter to Jacob is genuine, it follows that the letters above quoted or alluded to, preserved by Evagrius, Cyrillus Scythopolitanus, and the rest, are all forgeries.

But can Simeon have been the author of these Monophysite epistles? From all that we know of his surroundings and the influences to which he was subjected, we should expect to find him a Chalcedonian. He had passed all his life in the Antiochian district; a district in which sectional pride had been strong during the last decades of his life, while the 'Antiochian party' still held its ground and made its influence felt. It is true that as early as the middle of the fifth century the Syrian theology was losing its hold on the laity, and we know that among the monks, especially, the Monophysite doctrines were more and more decidedly gaining the upper hand in this region, as in most other parts of the East. But the great Monophysite triumphs here came after Simeon's day; while he lived, war was waged in Syria quite as bitterly between Nestorians and men who held views like those of Ibas of Edessa, as between Monophysites and their opponents. What is much more important, Simeon was not a mere monk among monks, but was hand in glove with the Syrian leaders. Theodoret, the pillar of the Antiochians, was his friend. We know that Domnus II. of Antioch (patriarch, 442-449), a steady opponent of the Monophysites from the first, was received by Simeon with especial favor on at least one occasion. See the story told in the Life (ed. Bedjan, p. 581), and repeated, in somewhat different form, by Evagrius, Eccl. Hist., i. 13 (Assemani, Bibliotheca Orientalis, i. 245 f.).

The impression of the Stylite which we gain from the Life and from our other sources is that he was in full sympathy and cooperation with those who were the acknowledged leaders of the Syrian church. The council of Chalcedon reinstated Theodoret and Ibas, who, together with Domnus and others, had been deposed at Ephesus in the council of 449. This action may well have given the bishops and clergy of this region a strong added reason for accepting the Chalcedonense, as in fact they generally did. It is natural to suppose that Simeon was of one mind with them in this.

The evidence afforded by the letters (whether genuine or not) given by Evagrius and the Vita Euthymii has already been noticed. Their testimony to Simeon's reputation as a Chalcedonian is weighty; that furnished by the story of Euthymius and the letter to Eudocia deserving, perhaps, especially to be emphasized. And there is another noteworthy bit of evidence of a somewhat similar nature. In the Edessene Chronicle, lxix., the death of Simeon Stylites is recorded, as the event distinguishing the year 771 (A.D. 459). This means, as Hallier remarks, that he is classed as a Chalcedonian. The compiler of the Chronicle, who is a Chalcedonian with an added Nestorian bias, writes with such strong party prejudice that he passes over the Monophysite saints and dignitaries in silence (Hallier, Edess. Chron.,

p. 74 f.). In view of this array of testimony, direct and indirect, the presumption against the three Monophysite "Letters of Simeon the Stylite" is very strong. The argument from silence, moreover, adds its weight. These letters, if genuine, must have been very widely known. One was addressed to the emperor himself; another to the patriarch of Antioch, about to set out on his ill-fated journey to the first council at Ephesus; the third was expressly intended to be circulated as a campaign document, being the final dogmatic utterance of the great ascetic. But they are never mentioned, either by Monophysite historians or by others; nor does anybody outside of these two Syriac manuscripts seem ever to have heard of them.

In the letters themselves, there are not wanting indications which also tend to show that they are forgeries. With regard to the chronology presupposed in the first letter, this fact is perhaps worthy of notice: Simeon speaks of himself as having waited more than a reasonable time after receiving the emperor's letter (and returning his answer?), in hope that measures would be taken to undo what had been done at Chalcedon. But being disappointed in this hope, he finally wrote the present letter. Now Leo, who came to the throne in February, 457, probably sent out his circular letters in the year 458, but possibly even later. In any case, the interval of time before Simeon's death (September, 459) would be very short---though perhaps not too short---for such a (second) reply as this from the saint. In the second letter, the self-description in the address, "Simeon, who stands upon the pillar near the village Telnesi," is suspicious. It would hardly have occurred to the saint to describe himself in just this way, especially as he was the only Simeon Stylites in the; world. But at a later day, when there had been other pillar-saints who bore the name Simeon, it would be necessary to mention the locality in order surely to identify the writer of this document.

The third letter is distinctly a vaticinium ex eventu. Whether or not John of Antioch was secretly a friend of Nestorius, and purposely managed to arrive late in Ephesus, it is quite incredible that any one, even in the city of Antioch, could thus have foretold the course which events would take, and the meeting of that "holy synod" which was to be held by Cyril and his monks. It is, of course, unnecessary to argue that the superscriptions prefixed to the letters in our two manuscripts belong to a later day than that of the Stylite. As for the part played by Theodoret in provoking the epistle to Leo, the death of this friend of Simeon's took place probably before the emperor sent out his circular letter, and certainly before this epistle could have been written. Finally, most interesting evidence of the forgery is to be found in a fourth Syriac letter belonging to this same group. It is contained in both of the manuscripts, where it immediately follows the "Letter (or letters) of Simeon." I give, as before, the text of Add. 12154 with the variant readings of Add. 12150.

[Syriac text omitted] "The letter which Alexander of Mabbog and Andreas of Samosata wrote to John of Antioch and Theodoret of Cyrrhus, about the holy Mar Simeon the Stylite and Mar Jacob of Kaphra Rhima. To the Holy and Reverend, our spiritual Fathers. As for the rest: When we received the saintly letters of your God-loving selves, we were filled with great joy, rejoicing especially because of the news of your good health. But those things

distress us exceedingly which we learned from your letters concerning the things which Simeon and Jacob wrote to you. But this we urge upon your Holiness, inasmuch as they have dared to write these things contrary to the truth which we hold; that even if you see them raising the dead to life, you put no faith in them, but count them as the rest of the heretics."

It is at once clear that this curious epistle, sent "from Alexander of Hierapolis and Andreas of Samosata to John of Antioch and Theodoret of Cyrrhus, about Simeon the Stylite and Jacob of Kaphra Rhima"(!), was written to serve as a voucher for the genuineness of the other three. In particular, it is designed to show that Jacob of Kaphra Rhima, to whom Simeon's two-edged confession of faith was addressed, had been, as he still continued to be, a strong ally of Simeon's in opposition to these misguided leaders of the Syrian church. A still more important purpose of the document appears when it is brought into connection with the mysterious words of the letter to Jacob, where Simeon is made to say: "Moreover, a writing, signed by these calumniators, bears witness for me that I did not approve them." This is the "writing," beyond any question. The whole thing is very well managed. In view of the contents of our epistle number two, which, be it noted, is said to be only the reiteration of former utterances, there could be no doubt as to the nature of the "things which Simeon and Jacob wrote" to John and Theodoret. Thus there is secured the written testimony of four of the foremost anti-Monophysites of this region that Simeon Stylites spurned their doctrines, and was in turn rejected from their fellowship.

We have, then, in these four Syriac letters, an interesting example of that forgery of documents which often played such an important part in the fierce controversies of the fifth and following centuries. The temptation to this misuse of Simeon's name was especially strong; though it was a thing that could not easily be done until after his generation had passed away. He had written no books (if, indeed, he could read and write at all), and therefore a forgery in his name would be the less easily exposed. His support was no small prize to be gained, for he was looked up to as an inspired man, gifted with superhuman knowledge and power. Even the most sober-minded and best educated of those who knew him personally---such as Theodoret, for example---believed him to be a constant worker of miracles. His fame continued unabated after his death; and it is not surprising that some time after, perhaps in the following century, when the bone and sinew of Christian Syria was already Monophysite, and the strife with "Synodites" was still incredibly bitter, some less scrupulous controversialist should have dared to invent these oracles of the great saint.

It is probable that we have the forged documents complete in manuscript A. They seem to be the work of a single writer, and it is hardly likely that the collection ever contained any others. The scribe of the manuscript B (or of one of its ancestors), as is evident, chose to save himself time and trouble by omitting the two longest of the letters; copying only the first, with its secondary superscription, and the fourth. Appendix. A few words regarding the principal manuscripts of the Syriac Life of Simeon may not be out of place, in view of the many conflicting statements which are current. The three best known manuscripts are

the Codex Vaticanus clx., and two codices of the British Museum, namely Add. 12174, and Add. 14484. The colophon of the Vatican codex reads as follows (I copy the text from Bedjan, Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum, iv. p. 648 f.):

[Syriac text omitted] These words have received various interpretations. Assemani, who, as is well known, believed the priest Cosmas, a contemporary of the Stylite, to have been the author of the Life, regarded the date here given (”521 of the Antiochian reckoning”=473 A.D.) as the date of the transcription of this manuscript; and supposed the two persons named, Simeon son of Apollonius and Bar Hattar son of Udan, to have been mentioned as those at whose request, or by whose aid, the biography was written. Wright, who of course rejected the (groundless) ascription of the work to Cosmas, agreed with Assemani as to the date of the manuscript (Syriac Literature, 1894, p. 50); but says of the two Syrians (l. c, note 3): ”Assemani is mistaken .... These are merely the persons who paid for the writing of this portion of Cod. Vat. clx.” But on both of these points Wright, as well as Assemani, is certainly in error. The two Syrians whose names are given were the authors of the biography, as Noldeke (Orientalische Skizzen, p. 239, note) and Bedjan (op. cit., p. xiii.) insist. The verb [rbt], as the latter remarks, is frequently used in the sense of ”compose” (a book or other writing). He might have added that the word could hardly bear any other interpretation here, inasmuch as the colophon says, after giving the names of these two, ”who took the pains to ’make’ this book”: ”for they ’made’ it by the labor of their hands and the sweat of their faces.” It follows, that 473 A.D. was the date of the completion of the original work. The scribe of the Vatican manuscript simply reproduced, as usual, the colophon of an older codex; just when he made his copy, we do not know.”

The three manuscripts named present somewhat differing recensions of the work, as is of course to be expected in the case of a popular book of this kind. No serious attempt has as yet been made to determine which of these recensions stands nearest to the original. It is generally taken for granted that the Vatican codex is the oldest, and that its version of the history, which is considerably shorter than either of the others, is to be preferred. So, for example, Noldeke, Syrische Grammatik, p. xiii.: ”der Vaticaniscke Text ist ubrigens, wie es scheint, im Ganzen ursprunglicher als der des British Museum. But both of these current opinions deserve to be challenged; and in the case of the latter, it seems possible to prove to the contrary, in one important point at least. Bedjan, who printed the text of the London manuscript Add. 14484, dated by Wright in the sixth century, gives in his preface (p. xii. f. a list of the numerous passages, some of them of considerable length, which are found in the London manuscript (or manuscripts), but are missing in the Vatican codex. An examination of these passages seems to make it plain that the longer recension, represented by the London codices, is to be preferred to the other. A single illustration will suffice. In Bedjan’s text, p. 525 f., where the story of Simeon’s first entrance into Telnesse is told, we have a smooth and consistent account, in the well-known style of this book.

But no one can read the Vatican recension here, comparing it with the other, without seeing at once that it is the result of a mere mutilation of the original. A passage a dozen lines

long has been cut out bodily; regarding this fact there is no room for doubt. That is, the Roman codex contains a ”clipped” version of the Life; in which the scribe has abridged from his original in the favorite way, by leaving out here and there passages of varying length.

It is likely that the oldest of our manuscripts stand at several removes from the original, and certain that the text of each has suffered from accidental corruption---aside from the alterations in matter and order. In view of the age of this biography, and the interest attaching to it, some further comparison of the several recensions might be worth while. [Selected footnotes renumbered and moved to the bottom]

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.