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SIMEON OF BĒT ARSHAM, 'LETTER' ON BAR SAWMA AND THE HERESY OF THE NESTORIANS'

Abstract

Simeon of Beth Arsham was a defender of miaphysite Christology during roughly the first half of the sixth century. He is one of the theologians and church leaders who played a role in the eventual development of a distinct miaphysite church in the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon (451). Simeon was actively involved in Christological disputes with members of the Eastern Church, who had adopted the Dyophysite Christological doctrine since the 80s of the 5th century.

It was in this context that Simeon's 'Letter' On Bar Sawma and the Heresy of the Nestorians' was written. It recounts the history of the formation and spread of 'Nestorianism.' Simeon's Letter is an important source both on the formation of 'Nestorianism' and its spread in the Sasanian Empire, as well as on the Christology of the Iberian Church.

The 'Letter' is a well-known source in Georgian historiography, and its fragment, which concerns the Iberian Church, was actively used by Georgian historians. A detailed study of the source convinced us that its fragmentary understanding in Georgian historiography led to inaccuracies.

The article discusses the religious situation in the Sasanian Empire at the end of the fifth and beginning of the sixth centuries. The article publishes for the first time a full Georgian translation of Simeon of Beth Arsham's 'Letter' with relevant research.

Keywords: *Simeon of Beth Arsham, Miaphysitism, Nestorianism, Sasanian Iran, Church of the East*

Simeon of Beth Arsham, who is known as the "Persian Debater" (*dorušo parsoyo*), was a defender of miaphysite Christology during roughly the first half of the sixth century. He is one of the theologians and church leaders, along with Philoxenos of Mabbug (d. 523), Severus of Antioch (d. 538), John of Tella (d. 538), and Jacob Burd'oyo (d. 578), who played a role in the eventual development of a distinct miaphysite church in the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon (451).

Simeon's life is described by his student, John of Ephesus, in his *Lives of the Eastern Saints*. Simeon was known as an eloquent and passionate disputant, and devoted to his Orthodox faith. He used to argue with Nestorians, Manicheans, Eutychians, and the

doctrines of Marcion of Sinope and Bardaisan, in which he earned the title 'The Persian Disputant.'

An alliance broke out between the Nestorian Church and the Persian monarchy, the Nestorians presented themselves as the national Christian church and denounced their opponents as a "fifth column" of the Byzantine Empire. John claims that the bishops of the Church of the East accused the Miaphysites of treason against the Persian shah on account of their ties to Constantinople. "In our time, the Nestorian bishops of well-known cities came together. They told the Persian emperor about all the Miaphysite bishops there. Thus they said, 'These are the traitors of your empire! How can you teach your religion and mysteries with these Romans?' That Magi believed them. He ordered that persecution begin against the orthodox in his empire." Simeon of Beth Arsham rose to defend the Miaphysites. John tells us that Simeon organized an embassy to the faithful emperor Anastasius to help the Miaphysites: 'Blessed Simeon with the acuteness of his zeal brought this to the attention of the believing emperor of the Romans, Anastasius, that [Anastasius] might show favor to the church of the believers in the region of the Persians. He said, 'Who will be able to appeal to the believing king about these things if I do not? Thus he left to ask the believing king for peace for the faithful in the region of the Persians.' He reached the emperor Anastasius swiftly and made these things known to him. That emperor and friend of God, since he is faithful and a friend towards the faithful, did not delay in doing his request. There was an exchange of gifts between the Roman emperor and the Persian shah, and the Miaphysites in Persia benefited from the peace that Simeon brokered between the rulers. John thus shows Simeon's diplomacy among rulers as key in combating his Christian rivals. The way to battle Dyophysite Christianity was not only through doctrinal quarrels, but also through winning the favor of the Persian shah with the help of Byzantine imperial gifts.

At a time when Simeon was staying in al-Hira, the Catholicos Nestorian Babai wrote to five monophysite bishops inviting them to a conference. The latter sent for Simeon, the celebrated debater, and the Nestorians were in great distress when they saw him arriving with the bishops. This symposium, which occupies an important place in the text of John of Ephesus, apparently held in Arzun near Siirt in the Province of Nisibis (Arbayistan), at least in the presence of the Marzban, the provincial governor of the Persian frontier, who was to serve as an arbiter. According to the Monophysite writer, the debate ended, of course, with Simeon's undisputed triumph, which was "on this occasion" promoted to be the Bishop of Beth Arsham to the dissident church located on the Tigris near Seleucia-Ctesiphon shortly before 503.

Simeon nevertheless pursued his itinerant preaching in the Persian kingdom. But sometime later, at the urging of the Nestorian hierarchy by John of Ephesus, King Kavadh first ordered the arrest of all the bishops and archimandrites Monophysites and was imprisoned in Nisibis for seven years, from where they were released at the request of the Ethiopian king.

After a time, much accusation was again made against them before the king by the Nestorian bishops, who said: 'Our people hold the faith among all Christians and in all

kingdoms'. When Simeon learned these things, he came to the king's court, and strenuously contended in the refutation of this falsehood. But the Magians, being much worried by them, since they did not know how to judge and decide between them, issued an order in these terms: 'Whoever of you wishes it, permission is given to him to go out and go round among the kings of the Christian peoples, and among the chief bishops and authorities, and bring us their faith and their seals, that we may know which party among you speaks well and shows great correctness.'

According to Bar Hebraeus, Simeon went to the King and won his permission to visit the whole country of Sen'ar and Persia to encourage the Orthodox to gather freely in their assemblies and repel the attacks of the Nestorians. He set out on his visitation, and wherever he went, he took a written statement from the Greeks, Armenians, and Syrians that they had no share in the dogma of Nestorius'. Simeon 'then took the statements to the King, who confirmed them with his royal Seal. These Books of the Confession, as they are called, are kept in Tagrit, the only city to escape the corruption of Barsawma'.

It may have been after this journey that Simeon's "Letter" was written. Simeon's letter is extant in one manuscript, Ms Vatican Syriac 135. The text was first published with a Latin translation by Joseph Simeon Assemani (1687-1768) in his *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*.

It is difficult to date this text precisely, although scholars have generally placed it in the very early sixth century. It contains a reference to Anastasius (491-518 CE), which may point to a date before 518, but this depends on how we interpret the relevant passage. Simeon's failure to refer to Justin and Justinian may be simply an attempt to avoid the uncomfortable fact of the new anti-miaphysite regimes of these emperors, who would oversee the reassertion of Chalcedonian orthodoxy from 518 onward. References to the East-Syrian Catholicos, Babai, and to Philoxenus of Mabbug, if they are taken to be deceased – again a matter of interpretation – suggest that it was composed after 502/3 and 523 respectively. Some scholars have speculated that it could be from the time of the Armenian council of Dvin (505/6), to which the document makes reference.

It is in fact not even clear whether this text was originally a letter. The title itself is questionable. It is labeled as a letter in its single attestation, Vatican Syriac 135, an undated manuscript probably from the seventh or eighth century. The text itself seems to begin in medias res and lacks any references to an addressee nor does it have an epistolary closing.

This document can be taken as a textbook example of the creative flair of heresiological literature, which its harsh polemic and slippery argument by association. One noteworthy feature of Simeon's text is its use of a genealogical tree to demonstrate how contemporary 'heretics' are the ideological descendants of a long line of errant, evil thinkers extending back to Jesus' day.

This document is also of great importance for the history of the Iberian Church, which is why I present its full translation into Georgian in this article.