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Author(s): S. Ashbrook Harvey

Source: *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Dec., 1988), pp. 376-394

Published by: BRILL

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1584285>

Accessed: 29/07/2010 06:22

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**THE SENSE OF A STYLITE:
PERSPECTIVES ON SIMEON THE ELDER***

BY

S. ASHBROOK HARVEY

I

There have been few figures to emerge in Christian history so compelling and unnerving as Simeon the Elder, the first of what would prove to be a long tradition of pillar saints.¹ Just as Antony of Egypt has provided the model by which the emergence of the Christian monastic movement has traditionally been approached, Simeon has been seen to represent both the archetypal holy man of late antiquity and the idiosyncratic extremes to which the ascetic movement could go in its early centuries.

Born into a prosperous Christian family in northern Syria around 386, Simeon tended his father's sheep until a sudden religious conversion turned him to an ascetic career. He passed through two monasteries, at Tel'ada and Telneshe, but his propensity for severe and eccentric practice led him into conflict with the developing Syrian monastic structure. Eventually, Simeon went his own way, first as a recluse and then as a stylite (from the Greek *stylos*, meaning "pillar") mounting the first of three successive pillars, each higher than the one before. On the pillar he took up his *stasis*, his stance of continual prayer.² The final pillar, on which he spent roughly the last forty years of his life, was about forty cubits high (sixty feet?) with a platform on top about six feet square. Exposed on a mountain with no shelter of any kind, Simeon stood on his pillar midway between heaven and earth until his death in 459 at the age of more than seventy years. His career as holy man had been spectacular: his fame had spread from Britain to Persia; the pilgrims who flocked to see him crossed the spectrum of late antique society from peasant to emperor, bringing him problems as mundane as cucumber crops and as complex as foreign policy.³

Two monuments raised in honor of Simeon deserve particular attention. The first is physical: the magnificent building complex of Qal'at Sim'an, the church and monastic structure erected on Simeon's mountain to house the relic of his pillar. The complex remains something of a mystery. We possess no literary data on its construction, and thus nothing of who built it or what ideas were in mind. The church itself is a cruciform martyrion with an octagonal center at the heart of which stood the pillar. Built between 476 and 490, Qal'at Sim'an is perhaps the greatest architectural achievement of the Christian east for the fifth century, a church unparalleled in Syria for size, beauty, and workmanship, and whose ruins continue to dazzle the modern visitor.⁴ As a major site of pilgrimage in the generations following Simeon's death, it significantly influenced not only the religious and artistic culture of late antiquity, but the economy of Syria as well.⁵

The second monument is perhaps more thought-provoking. The legacy of Simeon's vocation was taken up after his death by others who chose to imitate his practice, and it spread throughout the Byzantine realm. In greater and lesser numbers as the centuries went by, stylites continued this same prayer practice up through the mid-nineteenth century.⁶ What Simeon started was no passing fad.

Modern scholarship has dealt with Simeon in three contexts. First, the literary texts have been analyzed with the intention of finding the 'historical Simeon'—who he was and what happened—and ascertaining the relations between the separate traditions.⁷ Second, considerable effort has gone, more recently, on the examination of Simeon's cult both in Syria and abroad, with primary attention to the non-literary evidence.⁸ Third, scholars have sought to place Simeon within the tradition of Syrian asceticism in particular, and the monastic movement of late antiquity in general.⁹ Lacking any written sources from Simeon's own hand,¹⁰ we have tried to establish the historicity of the information available to us. In our concern for the historical, for what happened, we have neglected to consider the significant divergences in how Simeon's own contemporaries made sense of him—their varied perspectives on the why.

We possess three major hagiographical sources for Simeon: Theodoret of Cyrros' *Historia Religiosa*, chapter 26, written during the saint's lifetime;¹¹ the Syriac *vita* by Simeon's disciples, written shortly after the saint's death;¹² and the Greek *vita* by Antonios, allegedly another disciple, whose account seems also to contain material from Simeon's monastic community.¹³

Historians have tended to prefer Theodoret's account to the other two, not least because like themselves Theodoret was also an historian. Most of the time he distinguished between what he himself saw and what he learned from other sources. Nonetheless, Theodoret's version presents real problems. The text of this particular chapter of the *Historia Religiosa* has been handled a fair bit in transmission, with the interpolation not only of Simeon's death, but also several incidents of miracles.¹⁴ Even apart from the textual abnormalities, other considerations affect how we ought to read this chapter. Theodoret himself treated it with marked difference to the others in his collection: he is here at his most hagiographical. His style is more inflated, his rhetoric more stylized, his use of hagiographical *topoi* more pronounced.¹⁵ The overall tone is that of panegyric. Perhaps he intended this chapter to be used separately, as it may well have been.¹⁶

However, apart from information on what Simeon may or may not actually have done, the measure of historicity will not greatly help us understand this saint—to whose own mind we have no access, and whose ascetic motivation remains elusive. Leaving aside the issues of Simeon himself, then, I would like to consider these hagiographical sources for their own purpose: how does one make sense of a stylite? For what we have are different perspectives on Simeon's meaning and impact, the more useful for representing two distinct (though overlapping) spiritual traditions: that of Greek culture, and that of the Syrian Orient. Simeon's vocation emerged out of one and took root in both. The spirituality of each writer's tradition bears significantly on the presentation of the saint and his vocation.

II

At the time when Theodoret wrote (c. 444) Simeon had spent twenty-eight years on his pillar; his fame was in full glory.¹⁷ Theodoret brings to his account (and to the *Historia Religiosa* as a whole) an agenda that creates an immediate tension between his content and his form. His subject is Syrian asceticism, and in its most autonomous mold. Not only in the case of Simeon must he write about the excessive, often singularly bizarre practices of his saints. His audience, however, and thus his chosen literary form, is that of the hellenized world. The motifs, themes, and imagery throughout the *Historia Religiosa* are overtly drawn from classical tradition, albeit in a Christianized form.¹⁸ While

other motives are also at work, it is clear that in Theodoret's hagiography a cultural translation is being made: articulating the spirituality of one culture in terms that make sense in another.¹⁹ Although a native Syrian, here Theodoret looks at Syrian behavior with classical Greek eyes. His most striking assumption is that body and soul are at odds with one another, in a battle of wills that forms the central focus for Simeon's career in this text.

The key to Theodoret's view lies in his use of two words at the very beginning of chapter 26, by which he characterizes Simeon's vocation: *philoponia* and *philosophia*; literally, love of labor and love of wisdom.²⁰ *Philoponia* is a word with sharp connotations; it carries the sense of hard, painful effort, by this point in time tied to spiritual or ascetic struggles. Sometimes translated "penitence", for Theodoret the word connotes everything that constitutes asceticism.²¹ Fittingly, Theodoret tells us that Simeon converted to Christianity upon hearing the Beatitude, "Blessed are those who mourn and weep."²² And so it goes. Simeon's vocation is hard and grueling, though gloriously so. It is Theodoret who tells us that Simeon ascended his pillar because he found the crowds of admirers too exhausting.²³ It was the "unbearable toil", the "fatigue" from the weight of the world that sent him apart, up on the pillar; a pragmatic solution, and one that intensified the saint's *philoponia*.

Theodoret has his purpose. In Simeon we are presented with a life of true philosophy by means of physical discipline, in pursuit of the higher virtue of the soul.²⁴ *Philosophia* is used in this chapter to describe both that which Simeon must seek,²⁵ and the monastic life in its institutional sense.²⁶ The "savagery" of his asceticism (as one monk called it here²⁷), was the means by which he enabled his soul to ascend ever upward in its quest for God. When Simeon chooses to ascend his pillar, he does so because he desires "to fly heavenward and to leave the earthly life".²⁸ When he preaches his exhortations to the crowds of pilgrims below, he urges them to detach themselves from the world and "fly heavenward"—explicating the symbolism he both embodies and enacts.²⁹ So perfect is Simeon's exercise of discipline, Theodoret tells us, that he has surpassed human nature.³⁰ He lives the angelic life.

For Theodoret, the body is not in itself evil, nor is it the source of evil. But left to its own desires it is that which hinders the soul and thus severs humanity from its right relationship with God—a situation engendering the state of sin. The philosophical life is the means to the

rightful harmony of body and soul, an alignment of purpose and desire. Theodoret consciously uses the language of both Plato and Aristotle.³¹ As a result, his chapter on Simeon shows a marked literary strain: Simeon's vocation does not slide easily into such an intellectual mold. Yet it is this literary strain that enables Theodoret to render a profound theological statement. Simeon's real achievement in Theodoret's eyes is to have perfectly disciplined his body according to his soul's desire. The body itself—the locus of human weakness—has become the place where God's grace is revealed.³²

Thus Theodoret emphasizes the physical suffering of disease, and especially the ulcers and festering wounds Simeon endured, as proof that Simeon's body was in fact human, and in fact conquered. He tells the story of the man who asked Simeon outright whether he was human or not.³³ Herein lies the sense behind Theodoret's comment on Simeon's capacity to perform miracles, especially healing miracles, in imitation of Christ. "Let no one call this imitation the effort to usurp power", he writes, and citing John 14:12 reminds his readers that those who believed would do what Jesus had done and more.³⁴ Theodoret is not simply admonishing us that the miracles are God's work and not Simeon's. He stresses Simeon's humanity because here is a man whose own person has become a miracle, and solely because of the life he pursues. Having surpassed human nature, Simeon has reached his true nature: a true humanity, or personhood. Theodoret's classical frame is ultimately saturated with the same vision that marks his theological works. Scholars have traditionally seen the *Historia Religiosa* as one place where Theodoret is not arguing from his position as primary spokesman for Antiochene Christology, in the debates leading up to the Council of Chalcedon.³⁵ But surely his Simeon represents a mirrored image of his Christological position. Salvation for him is an achievement of union between humanity and God in which the integrity of each nature, human and divine, remains intact but truly full.³⁶

For all their differences, Theodoret's Life of Simeon represents a harmonious tradition with the fourth century Life of Antony of Egypt,³⁷ and indeed with Eusebius of Caesarea's philosopher martyrs.³⁸ It is Simeon's acquired dispassion that Theodoret is celebrating. Like Antony,³⁹ Simeon had first to gain that self-control before achieving the spiritual strength necessary to perform God's work, whether miracles, judgements, or teaching. The capacity to perform such works accrued to him only gradually as his career and his discipline progressed. Grace

itself cannot be an achieved state. But Theodoret intimates that if one could achieve grace through sheer effort alone, then Simeon would have: the fruits of his *philoponia*. Grace is a gift, but here it is also a gift well-earned. Above all, Theodoret admires Simeon's manner of prayer, for this displays Simeon's power in both earthly and heavenly terms.⁴⁰ In the exertion of his prayer practice (those countless prostrations), Simeon manifests his control over his human nature and thus regains true human nature, made in the image of God. In turn, it is the spectacle of the saint at prayer that moves his observers to take account of themselves and shake off their "indifference", as Theodoret calls it.⁴¹

Theodoret and the Syriac *vita* both provide an *apologia* on behalf of Simeon's vocation, apparently based on a document stemming from the saint's own monastic community.⁴² In using this source, Theodoret, like the writers of the Syriac *vita*, summons the examples of Old Testament prophets whose behavior was at times dramatic and peculiar, but always for the purpose of enabling God's word to be heard and heeded. Elsewhere in the *Historia Religiosa* he also makes use of Old Testament models, particularly of Moses. But the emphasis of chapter 26 lies on Simeon's achieved penitence in the disciplined pursuit of the soul's higher calling.

III

In contrast to Theodoret's classicized re-framing of Simeon's career, the Syriac *vita* may well represent the official or "authorized" story of Simeon, written as it was by Simeon's own disciples. It is a majestic, at times elegant work of hagiography. To be sure, it spares us none of the harshness of Simeon's chosen vocation. But from the first page, we are presented with Simeon as one for whom body and soul are united in a life of utter devotion to God. We are given no sense of separation. Worship is here an action in which the whole of oneself is given: faith is an activity. The writers stress repeatedly that Simeon had committed himself utterly into God's hands. In an early vision he is told, "The Lord will not let go of you, for lo, his grace keeps you and his right hand supports you."⁴³ In turn, Simeon "did not care about anything except how he might please his Lord".⁴⁴ The intimate and loving relationship between Simeon and the Lord is there from the start. Thus Simeon begins to work miracles as soon as he leaves to pursue his religious vocation, long before the grueling regime of his asceticism is set.⁴⁵

In the gradual development of the stylite's vocation, we are given a subtler (if grander) view of how the pillar was chosen and understood. A series of visions leads Simeon to the revelation that this is God's desire. The models put before him are first Moses—he is told, “Just as I was with Moses, so also I will be with you”⁴⁶—and then Elijah, who gives the culminating directive that Simeon climb the pillar.⁴⁷ Simeon is called to re-order God's world: to be a new Moses, dispensing from his new Mount Sinai the new Law for God's people. Like a new Elijah, he is to take his stand steadfastly before kings and judges, openly rebuking the mighty in his championship of the poor and oppressed. Indeed, Simeon's endeavors as holy man fulfill this call, affecting matters of civil and religious jurisdiction; the redistribution of water, food, land, financial obligations, and so forth. This is the very stuff of the prophet's vocation, and it is as prophet, directly in the line of descent from Moses and Elijah, that we are told to understand Simeon's practice.

But the Syriac life takes this model further. In the Old Testament, the prophets do not merely proclaim God's word: they act it out, whether literally in acts of service or healing or patronage, or symbolically in behavior that disturbs and jolts their society. The text reminds us that Isaiah walked naked; Jeremiah wore yoke and thongs; Ezekiel imitated the insane; Hosea married a harlot.⁴⁸ Moreover, the prophets received God's word themselves by going apart to commune with God. And they went apart, invariably, to high places: to mountains, above and apart from the people below.

Simeon's first response to this mighty calling is typically Syrian: what are the biblical models of behavior? “For as he thought about those two men ... Moses and Elijah, he said, ‘Who will teach me and show me by what way of life these two men attained all of this greatness and virtuous glory? By faith? by charity? by humility? by chastity? by zeal?’ ... he continually asked those who were experts in scripture, that he might learn from them about their way of life. ... And when he had learned ... about their practices, he began to establish them in himself, fasting without measure, standing day and night, continuous prayer, persistent supplication, godly zeal which burned in him like a fire, chastity of body with purity of his members.”⁴⁹

Simeon became a stylite, then, not in penitence, not to deny his body nor to discipline it, but because through it he could fulfill God's purpose. By the public witness of his actions—the prophecy of behavior—

he could efficaciously proclaim God's word. The long interludes of miracle stories that fill out the frame of this text represent the enacted images of the prophets at work: Simeon *doing* the images. Thus the Syriac life does not simply include the official *apologia* for Simeon's behavior, as Theodoret had done. Here the defense, with its catalogue of Old Testament models, is incorporated structurally into the *vita*.⁵⁰

Again in the manner of Old Testament prophecy, Simeon is the mouthpiece of God. As such, he performs his works from the pillar by the "power of his word"—a frequent motif in the Syriac *vita*. The Syriac offers no qualifications on Simeon's capacity to perform miracles: it does not share Theodoret's defensive tone. In assimilating Simeon to the prophetic model, the Syriac *vita* makes it clear that it is God's word through Simeon that is at work. Fittingly, the power of Simeon's word is the focus of dispute between Simeon and an angelic vision when Simeon at one point goes on strike, frustrated by the obstinacy of the populace he seeks to guide—their apparent inability to lead a religious life.⁵¹ For three months he refuses to perform any actions of patronage or any miracles. When a vision is sent to chastise him, the angels threaten that he will lose the keys to heaven. More than this, he will be forced "to be silent". When Simeon relents, one of the angels tells him flatly, "Your purpose is to speak up".⁵²

However, the pillar's meaning as sign of Simeon's prophetic vocation points to a greater identification. The pillar is the image of the high places, the mountains, in which the prophets received God's word and God's law. So, too, did Christ do his work in high places. On a mountain he gave the new law, the Sermon on the Mount. On a mountain he fed the hungry at the feeding of the five thousand. And on a mountain in the wilderness, Satan had tempted him.

It is here, in the battle against Satan, that Simeon's imitation of Christ is stated explicitly, and in terms that explain how we are to understand the unity of body and soul in Simeon's chosen practice. When the writers of this *vita* turn to the model of Christ, they state categorically that in Christ, God worked his purpose through the very instrument of the human body he took on as his own: it was this body, through asceticism, that defeated the powers of Satan.⁵³ In a dramatic Christological statement, we are told that Christ defeated desire, weakness, and need with that very body he took on as his own; it was with the body that he conquered human suffering; it was with the body that he defeated death, Satan's greatest power, in the act of the resurrection. It

was the body as well as the soul that God required for his purpose. Since the time of Christ and even before him, our good disciples tell us, no one had ever fulfilled God's will so fully in this the greatest of all tasks as the stylite himself. "For he honored God with perfect heart", they wrote, "and he was honored by God with all these blessings. He loved his Lord with all his heart, more than himself and more than his life; for he gave himself up and placed himself in the hands of his Lord."⁵⁴ Through the instrument of Simeon, and literally through the use of his body, God's purpose is worked. Simeon's endurance on the pillar is always described in the Syriac life as part of this cosmic situation: it is his participation in God's battle against Satan. It is not self-mortification. The body is a weapon for a battle outside himself. Hence we find recurring images of the suffering of Job—suffering which is not redemptive (as the crucifixion) but a test from Satan to "slander" the holy one.⁵⁵

But the presence of Moses and Elijah, and the identification of the pillar as the high place where God's will is made known bring us to the ultimate image of Christ that rests behind this portrait of Simeon. It was on a high mountain apart, in the presence of Moses and Elijah, that Christ was transfigured before his disciples. Time and again Simeon's disciples climb his ladder to find him radiant, shining, light-filled. The moments at which they see him thus are those following severe testing of the saint by Satan—whether through the suffering of disease (as in the case of his ulcerated foot), or by temptation of his will.⁵⁶ They are instances in which the brutality of Simeon's vocation is at the forefront. Yet the disciples each time see a sight of surpassing beauty: his reality has been transfigured from the squalor of his suffering to his perfection as God's beloved.

In fact, the Syriac account is surrounded by an image of transformation: the story of Simeon's career begins and ends with incense.⁵⁷ When Simeon was a young shepherd, prior to his conversion, we are told that, "he had this oddity, that with great diligence he would collect storax while tending the flocks. And he would kindle a fire and burn the storax as incense, though he did not understand why he offered it."⁵⁸ After his conversion in the church, he returned to his flocks. We are told, "from that day on he was increasingly diligent. and he would gather storax, and also buy that which the other sheperds gathered, so that with discernment he offered it to our Lord saying, 'Let the sweet fragrance go up to God who is in heaven.'" ⁵⁹ Soon, an angel teaches

Simeon to build an altar of stone, just as later he will be taught to build his pillar of stone. After placing the stones as instructed, Simeon asks the angel what he has built. The angel replied, “ ‘This is an altar of that God whom you worship, and to whom you offer incense, and whose word you have heard.’ ”⁶⁰

Unwittingly, Simeon had been performing a worship of adoration. The angel teaches him the meaning of his action by defining its appropriate context, on the altar. Incense was traditionally offered to God as an offering of beauty—the fragrance was seen as a fitting gift for the divine. Further, incense tangibly ascended heavenward, rising up as one’s prayer before God.⁶¹ But the fundamental event here is one of transformation. The ordinary resin is transformed through its burning into pure substance: the sweet savor that is the true essence of the whole burnt offering. In its purity, it ascends to God.

Halfway through the Syriac life, another image of transformation appears briefly. The pillar in the sun is likened to a crucible in which Simeon like gold is purified by the fiery heat.⁶² The simile picks up on another image evoked by Moses and Elijah, that of fire which burns and reveals but does not consume. Moses met God at the burning bush; on Sinai after speaking with God his face was utterly radiant.⁶³ More pointedly, the Syriac life tells us that Elijah always appeared to Simeon in his chariot of fire; and it was from the flaming chariot that he delivered the command to climb the pillar.⁶⁴

We return to incense towards the end of the vita. Before the account of the saint’s death, his career is summarized. The story is told, for the second time, how Simeon learned from an angel to pray by prostration. This time we are told that the vision came to Simeon while he was living in the enclosure, before he had taken to pillars. “Simeon had a window in the enclosure, and a stone was placed in front of it which was three cubits high, and upon it was set incense and a censer.”⁶⁵ The angel appeared here, and standing upon the stone altar performed the prostrations, looked at Simeon and stood with hands uplifted, gazing heavenward. Thus Simeon understood that this was the Lord’s will. He took his place upon the stone altar, and from that moment his career as stylite was begun.

But what did the action mean? Simeon took the place of incense on the altar of stone, as he would later take its place on higher altars when the pillars of successive height were built. We have been told that the pillar is also a crucible that purifies gold through fire, as storax through

fire is purified from resin to incense: a fire which burns but does not consume, a fire that reveals. On the pillar—on the altar—Simeon is transformed. In his true essence, he is God's chosen vessel: transfigured, as Christ himself was once transfigured on top of the high mountain in the presence of Moses and Elijah.

It is here that we can appreciate the elaborate, and elaborately ritualized presentation in this text of Simeon's death, the events leading up to and following after it.⁶⁶ In the Syriac life, we are told that Simeon died after suffering a high fever for several days. It was the height of summer, and the heat was so intense that all the land was scorched. But on the third day of Simeon's fever, a sweet and cooling breeze settled around his pillar: "and neither choice herbs nor sweet fragrances in the world are able to compare to that fragrance."⁶⁷ In the enclosure, people did not perceive it because of the incense they were burning in supplication for the saint. But the disciples understood what it meant. The sweet savor increased in intensity until Simeon finally died. Having become the fulfillment of prayer ascending, Simeon's presence filtered throughout the world that knew him. Roads and towns and city filled with the processions in honor of his death, the crowds carrying lighted candles and burning sweet-smelling incense in homage to their saint.⁶⁸

IV

In the Greek *vita* by Antonios, we find a mood that contrasts to both Theodoret's lofty encomium and the Syriac celebration of Simeon. It is a disjointed and awkward text, not least because of the confusion of its manuscript tradition. But it is also a markedly humbler work by intent: stark in presentation, simplistic in design, its purpose is overtly moralistic rather than adulatory. In places the writer has used Theodoret; elsewhere he seems to have followed an independent tradition, perhaps from the saint's own community nonetheless—the oral tradition about Simeon was a fluid thing even during the saint's life.⁶⁹ In any event, the writer has pulled together his material in his own distinct manner. What is most apparent in this text is the heavy burden of sin, and the need to atone for that burden through severe, mortifying penance.

In Antonios' *vita*, Simeon is converted in church specifically to the ascetic life, through a conversation with an old man on the need for continence and chastity of soul to gain salvation, enlightenment, and access to the heavenly kingdom. When Simeon asks to be instructed in these

matters, the old man exhorts him to a life of ascetic discipline and suffering, explicitly self-mortifying to the extreme, in order to gain spiritual comfort.⁷⁰ Simeon departs at once for a monastery. In the community he joins, he takes up his vocation with a violence that frightens the brethren, and indeed his abbot.⁷¹ He pleads that his practices are necessary for him, that he has been condemned to this punishment, because of the greatness of his sins. The abbot asks how he could possibly have committed such grave sins at such a young age. Simeon replies by quoting from the Psalms, "In iniquity was I conceived, and in sin did my mother bring me forth." (Ps. 51:5; Ps. 50:7).⁷² And so it continues throughout this account. Indeed, Antonios tells us that he writes both for edification and compunction. It is an anguished text.

Like the Syriac *vita* though from an entirely different view, Theodoret had seen Simeon as a victorious ascetic, one who had mastered his lower nature and set his sights on high. With Antonios, there is no real victory despite the saint's capacity to work miracles. There is only repentance, through ceaseless abasement and punishment. More than the other two lives by far, this one presents the ugliness of the saint's practice as exactly that. It is not the angelic life, nor is it transcendent.

Antonios tends to moralize more than the other sources on Simeon; he carries his didacticism as prominently as possible. A number of the miracle stories are presented as simple allegories. One in particular brings us curiously close to the Syriac *vita*, even while portraying the essential tone of Antonios' Simeon. Once the king of the Saracens came to Simeon for a prayer. As he approached the saint's column, a worm fell from the saint's thigh. Without knowing what it was, the king ran forward; and catching it up in his hand, touched it over his eyes and his heart. Simeon called to him to throw it back, lest he force the stylite deeper into sin. "It is a stinking worm, fallen from stinking flesh," he called. "Why dirty your hands?" But the king replied, "This worm shall be mine for a blessing (*eulogia*) and the remission of sins." And opening his hand, he found therein not a worm but a precious pearl. "That which you have called a worm is a pearl without price," he marvelled, praising God. And so Simeon granted his blessing.⁷³

V

Antonios gives us the worm and the pearl; the Syriac *vita* the prophet transfigured in the incense on the altar; Theodoret offers the achieved

penitence of the philosopher. For each, the saint's actual vocation, practice, and activities are the same. At issue is the nature of devotion, its meaning and pursuit.

Absent from all of this is the image of the crucifix: the suffering death by which Christ's victory was won. Even the apparently related images of Simeon's cruciform prayer—or the cruciform plan of Qal'at Sim'an church—are presented otherwise, and above all as images of glory.⁷⁴ Despite their traditional views, then, Theodoret and Antonios point forward in history, to what the stylite will come to mean in Byzantine culture and thought. It will take nearly two centuries before the image of the stylites as a living crucifix is finally put forth in hagiography; it appears first as a focused image in the mid-seventh century *Life of Simeon's namesake Simeon the Younger*, whose pillar stood outside of Antioch.⁷⁵ The change in imagery points to a definitive change in sense: the vocation continued, honed and clarified, as the stylite stood crucified to the world, bearing its sins, and redeeming its nature. Yet even here we are shown the crucifix in its transformative image, for Simeon the Younger is also, and perhaps above all in this hagiography, the incense offered in the suppliant's prayer: the image of prayer ascending.⁷⁶

By contrast, the Syriac *vita* points back to the spiritual roots underlying this vocation. Syrian Christianity emerged from its inception as an ascetic religion, one that stressed the united effort of body and soul in the task of devotion. Sometimes this view emerged as a response to a dualistic view of human life in the created world.⁷⁷ But sometimes it was an element of early Syriac Christianity because it allowed the believer the intention of total self-giving to God—thus Ephrem's statement. "The soul is Your bride, the body Your bridal chamber."⁷⁸

Our three texts offer us a cogency not in historicity, but in the texts as literary works, through images and themes. I have dealt here with a primary consideration of their differences. But there may be a correspondence at a deeper level. The key to such an analysis would probably lie in Theodoret's ambiguous Christian identity: his Syrian roots and his adopted classical view. But such a consideration exceeds the bounds of this study.

At its most basic level, hagiography is about the intersection of the human and the divine. The hagiographer's understanding of the saint as holy is dependent on how he understands that intersection to take place. Though it portrays a theology of activity through the form of the

saint's story, hagiography is neither theology nor biography. But it is about seeing the holy as a real and efficacious presence in human life. We cannot know why Simeon climbed his pillar. But we can see how his actions appeared in the context of different spiritual traditions, and therein begin to ask what Simeon meant for the world that witnessed his choice.

NOTES

* I am indebted to the National Endowment for the Humanities for support in the preparation of this study.

¹ Simeon Stylites the Elder: F. Halkin, *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*, 3rd ed., Subsidia Hagiographica 8a (Bruxelles 1957) 1678-1688; P. Peeters, *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis*, Subsidia Hagiographica 10 (Bruxelles 1910; repr. 1954), 1121-1126. The major documents on Simeon were collected and discussed by H. Lietzmann, *Das Leben des Heiligen Symeon Stylites*, TU 32.4 (Leipzig 1908). The monumental work of H. Delehaye, *Les Saints Stylites*, Subsidia Hagiographica 14 (Bruxelles 1923) remains unsurpassed. Simeon's feast day is Sept. 1, though western calendars sometimes list it as Jan. 5, having confused this saint with the Simeon to whom Christ was presented in the temple (Lk. 2:25-32); see the discussion in Delehaye, *op. cit.*, p. XXI.

² On the physical details of stylitism, see Delehaye, *op. cit.*, CXLIV-CLXXVI; and A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, CSCO 197/Sub. 17 (Louvain 1958) 208-23.

³ Clearly we deal with an organized pilgrimage situation even by the time of Theodoret's visit. See A.-J. Festugière, *Antioche païenne et chrétienne. Libanius, Chrysostome et les moines de Syrie* (Paris 1959) 352f.

⁴ The Qal'at Sim'an complex grew to contain three monasteries during the sixth century. The ruins of the entire shrine are well-preserved. Above all, see G. Tchalenko, *Villages Antiques de la Syrie du Nord*, vol. I (Paris 1953) 227-76. Simeon's relics were first placed in the cathedral at Antioch, and then apparently moved to a martyrium (now lost) constructed there for them. They were moved, in sum or in part, to Constantinople c. 474 where another martyrium (also now lost) had been built in their honor, perhaps at the behest of Daniel the Stylite (*Vit. Dan. Sty.*, ch. 57). Imperial patronage by the Emperor Zeno is assumed because of the enormity of a project on this scale. See the discussion in Tchalenko, *op. cit.*, 229-34.

⁵ In general, see Tchalenko, *op. cit.*, *passim*. For a specific instance, cf., e.g., J.-L. Biscop and J. P. Sodini, "Qal'at Sem'an et les chevets à colonnes de Syrie du Nord," *Syria* 61 (1984) 267-330.

⁶ Delehaye, *op. cit.*, remains the best study, and to it may be added his brief note, "Les Femmes Stylites", *Anal. Boll.* 27 (1908) 391-2. The recent study by I. Peña, P. Castellana, and R. Fernandez, *Les Stylites Syriens*, Studium Biblicum Franciscanorum-Collectio Minor 16 (Milan 1975) is problematic.

⁷ The critical studies are: Lietzmann, *op. cit.*; Delehaye, *op. cit.*; P. Peeters, "Un Saint Hellénisé par Annexion: Syméon Stylite", in his collection *Orient et Byzance: Le Tréfonds Oriental de l'Hagiographie Byzantine*, Subsidia Hagiographica 26 (Bruxelles 1950) 93-136

(rev. from *Anal. Boll.* 61 (1943) 29-71) at 123-32; Festugière, *op. cit.*; and, for Theodoret, the painstaking work of Alice Leroy-Molinghen, below, notes 11 and 14.

⁸ Peña, Castellana, Fernandez, *op. cit.* But the real advances have come from the systematic work of J. Nasrallah: "Le Couvent de Saint-Siméon L'Alépin: Témoignages littéraires et jalons sur son histoire," *Parole de l'Orient* 1 (1970) 327-56; idem, "L'Orthodoxie de Siméon Stylite L'Alépin et sa survie dans l'église melchite," *Parole de l'Orient* 2 (1971) 345-64; idem, "A propos des trouvailles épigraphiques a Saint-Siméon-L'Alépin," *Syria* 48 (1971) 165-78; idem, "Couvents de la Syrie du Nord portant le nom de Siméon," *Syria* 49 (1972) 127-59; and idem, "Survie de Saint Siméon Stylite L'Alépin dans les Gaules," *Syria* 51 (1974) 171-97.

⁹ Most notably: A. Vööbus, *op. cit.*, 208-23; S. P. Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism," *Numen* 20 (1973) 1-19; P. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1982) 103-52; H. J. W. Drijvers, "Spätantike Parallelen zur altchristlichen Heiligenverehrung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Syrischen Stylitenkultus," *Göttingen Orientforschungen* 1, Reihe: Syriaca 17 (1978) 77-113.

¹⁰ The several letters ascribed to Simeon (who was illiterate but seems to have dictated correspondence) could in fact have originated from the same circle producing the Syriac *vita*. See the discussion in Delehayé, *op. cit.*, XXI-II; and for the letters, C. C. Torrey, "The Letters of Simeon the Stylite," *JAOS* 20 (1899) 253-76.

¹¹ *Théodoret de Cyr, Histoire des moines de Syrie*, ed. and tr. P. Canivet and A. Leroy-Molinghen, Sources Chrétiennes 234 and 257 (Paris 1977-9). Chapter 26: SC 257, pp. 158-215. At last there is an English translation available, with a superb introduction: Theodoret of Cyrillus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, trans. and notes by R. M. Price, Cistercian Studies 88 (Kalamazoo 1985). The additional commentary by P. Canivet, *Le Monachisme Syrien selon Théodoret de Cyr*, Théologie Historique 42 (Paris 1977) is invaluable.

¹² The Syriac *vita* survives in two recensions. The earlier (A), Vat. Syr. 117, was copied in 473 AD. It was chaotically edited and translated into Latin in J. S. Assemani, *Acta Sanctorum Martyrum Orientalium*, Pars 2 (Rome 1748), 273-394. The later (B), Brit. Mus. Add. 14484, dates to early in the sixth century. It has been well edited in P. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum* (Paris 1894) IV, 507-644. A German translation was done by H. Hilgenfeld in Lietzmann, *op. cit.*, 80-192; and an English translation by F. Lent, "The Life of St. Simeon Stylites," *JAOS* 35 (1915-7) 103-98.

While both manuscripts are remarkably intact, both have their problems. Recent finds may help the situation; cf. A. Vööbus, "Discovery of New Manuscript Sources for the Biography of Simeon the Stylite," *After Chalcedon: Studies in Theology and Church History*, Essays in Honor of A. Van Roey (Louvain 1985) 479-84. The relationship between the two recensions presents something of a puzzle. A is somewhat shorter and not chronologically ordered. B appears to be a "cleaned up" version of the earlier A: order and sequence are far superior, as well as overall structure. However, important new work on A has raised the possibility that A may have been structured thematically rather than chronologically; if so, the literary quality of A has been sorely unappreciated. See R. Doran, "Comments on the Syriac Versions of the Life of Simeon Stylites," *Anal. Boll.* 102 (1984) 35-48. Although there are numerous variant readings between the two, they represent the same text—i.e., B embellishes and tidies up but does not significantly alter A, and seems (to me at least) to maintain the same perspective throughout as that of the

text it re-edits. The two recensions are discussed well by the major studies mentioned above (notes 7 and 9). In the present study I follow B as edited by Bedjan, unless otherwise noted. For convenience, I cite the reference in Lent's translation in parentheses.

¹³ The Greek *vita* by Antonios presents a tangled manuscript tradition of hair-raising proportions. It has been edited (from nine manuscripts) in three versions (two Greek and one Latin) by Lietzmann, *op. cit.*, 19-78. There is a French translation of the primary Greek text by Festugière, *op. cit.*, 493-506, and (for chs. 28-33) 373-5. See the discussions listed above, n. 7. I follow Lietzmann's primary Greek text.

¹⁴ Interpolated passages are found in *HR* 26.13, 18, 19, and the final paragraph of 28. *SC* 257, at pp. 190-1, 198-9, 200-1, 212-5. Chapter 26 seems in fact to have had its own manuscript tradition and an independent circulation. See A. Leroy-Molinghen, "Les Manuscrits de l'*Histoire Philothée*," *Byzantion* 34 (1964) 27-47; *idem*, "A propos de la Vie de Syméon Stylite," *Byzantion* 34 (1964) 375-384; Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen, *op. cit.*, *SC* 234, 66-9 and *SC* 257, 161n. The major commentators have raised these *caveats* for Theodoret's (and the manuscript tradition's) historicity in Ch. 26. Cf. esp. Peeters, art. cit., 94-107; Delehaye, *op. cit.*, p. II; Festugière, *op. cit.*, 348n., 351.

¹⁵ Perhaps especially clear in *HR* 26.1-2, and 11. Cf. Festugière, *op. cit.*, 357; Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen, *SC* 234, 21-2.

¹⁶ Leroy-Molinghen suggests that Theodoret himself may have preached it as a sermon: *SC* 234, 22.

¹⁷ On the dating of the *HR* to the year 444 see Canivet, *op. cit.*, 31ff.

¹⁸ Canivet, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

¹⁹ A point well made by Peeters, art. cit.; but esp. in Canivet, *op. cit.*, 65-86.

²⁰ *HR* 26.1.

²¹ Canivet, *op. cit.*, 81, 283.

²² *HR* 26.2.

²³ *HR* 26.12.

²⁴ Canivet, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

²⁵ *HR* 26.2, 23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.1.

³¹ Canivet, *op. cit.*, 259-90.

³² Compare Theodoret's treatment of illness and disease in general in the *HR*: S. Ashbrook Harvey, "Physicians and Ascetics in John of Ephesus: An Expedient Alliance", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 38 (1984) 87-93, esp. at 90.

³³ *HR* 26.23.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.17.

³⁵ Peeters, art. cit., at 94-107, offers this idea in its most polemical form. Cp. Canivet, *op. cit.*, 77f.

³⁶ Canivet, *op. cit.*, 277-9; F. M. Young, *From Nicea to Chalcedon* (Philadelphia 1983) 265-89; J. L. Stewardson, "Eucharist and Christology in Theodoret of Cyrrhus," *Byzantine Studies/Etudes Byzantines* 10 (1983) 1-18.

³⁷ *Vita S. Antonii*, J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 26, cols. 837-976, *passim*. The authorship of Athanasius has been disproved on linguistic grounds by R. Draguet in his

edition of the Syriac version, *La Vie Primitive de S. Antoine*, CSCO 417/183 and 418/184 (Louvain 1980)—a position significantly bolstered by the observations of T. D. Barnes, “Angel of Light or Mystic Initiate: The Problem of the Life of Antony,” *JTS* 37 (1986) 353-68.

³⁸ In Eusebius’ *Martyrs of Palestine*, and the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bk. VIII; ed. in E. Schwartz, *Eusebius’ Werke* II, GCS 9.2 (Berlin 1908) 907-950, or G. Bardy, *Sources Chrétiennes* 55 (1958) 121-74. On the complexities of the textual history, see T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Harvard 1981) 148-63.

³⁹ *Vit. S. Ant.*, ch. 10.

⁴⁰ *HR* 26.22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 26.12, 22.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 26.2, 7, 12. See esp. the discussions in Festugière, *op. cit.*, 354ff. and Canivet, *op. cit.*, 76-7.

⁴³ Bedjan, *AMS* IV, 523 (Lent, 121).

⁴⁴ E.g., Bedjan, 519 (Lent, 118).

⁴⁵ Bedjan, 513ff. (Lent, 114ff.).

⁴⁶ Bedjan, 571 (Lent, 152).

⁴⁷ Bedjan, 572 (Lent, 152-3).

⁴⁸ Bedjan, 621f. (Lent, 183f.).

⁴⁹ Bedjan, 574 (Lent, 153f.).

⁵⁰ The miracle scenes bring to mind esp. the image of Moses as judge in Exodus 18; cp. Doran, art. cit. The *apologia* is similar to Aphrahat’s use of biblical models in his Demonstration VI, *On the Bnay and Bnath Qyama*, ed. D. I. Parisot, *Patrologia Syriaca* (Paris 1894), cols. 239-312, ET by J. Gwynn, *SLNPNF* 13 (Oxford/New York 1898) 362-75. Aphrahat here cites Moses, Joshua, the priests, Elijah, Elisha, John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul and Barnabas with reference to their ascetic practices and behavioral symbolism.

⁵¹ Bedjan, 583f. (Lent, 159f.).

⁵² Assemani, 315.

⁵³ Bedjan, 618-621 (Lent, 181-3).

⁵⁴ Bedjan, 620 (Lent, 183).

⁵⁵ Bedjan, 549, 577 (Lent, 138, 155). Cp. e.g., Basil of Caesarea, *Ep.* 2, LCL (1961) I, p. 16.

⁵⁶ E.g., Bedjan, 580, 593, 614 (Lent, 157, 166, 179).

⁵⁷ For a survey of incense and its religious meanings, see E. G. C. F. Atchley, *A History of the Use of Incense in Divine Worship* (London 1909).

⁵⁸ Bedjan, 508 (Lent, 111). On storax, see Atchley, *op. cit.*, 6 and 67.

⁵⁹ Bedjan, 509 (Lent, 112).

⁶⁰ Bedjan, 510 (Lent, 112-3).

⁶¹ Atchley, *op. cit.*, discusses the different meanings ascribed to incense in the ancient world east and west, Christian and non-Christian. For a summary of pre-Christian uses, see p. 76.

⁶² Bedjan, 577 (Lent, 155).

⁶³ Bedjan, 617-8 (Lent, 181).

⁶⁴ E.g., Bedjan, 572-3, 618 (Lent, 152-3, 181).

⁶⁵ Bedjan, 623 (Lent, 185).

⁶⁶ Bedjan, 629-44 (Lent, 189-98). There has, of course, been much dispute over the divergent accounts of Simeon’s death as recorded in the Syriac *vita* and the *vita* by

Antonios. The case in favor of Antonios on this point seems the more convincing, especially as argued in Delehayé, *op. cit.*, XI-XII and Festugière, *op. cit.*, 374f. The case in favor of the Syriac *vita* is passionately stated by P. Peeters, "Un Saint hellénisé par annexion: Syméon Stylite". In this article, Peeters did a fine job of supporting the validity of the Syriac *vita* overall, and he was the first to offer extensive treatment of this text. But his handling of the Antonios *vita* was, at the least, off the mark—as was well shown by Festugière, *op. cit.*, 362-85.

⁶⁷ Bedjan, 630 (Lent, 189).

⁶⁸ Bedjan, 640-2 (Lent, 196-7). Compare the Martyrdom of Polycarp, sec. 16: "[Polycarp] was within the [fire] not as burning flesh, but rather ... like gold and silver being purified in a smelting furnace. And from it we perceived such a delightful fragrance as though it were smoking incense...". H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, (Oxford 1972) p. 15.

Simeon's *vita* is an important source for establishing the shift in early Christianity's use of incense, from a negative attitude (because of pagan and Jewish uses) to an important part of Christian ceremonial. Incense may also be related to the idea that the saints' relics give off a sweet odor. See Atchley, *op. cit.*, 97-114.

⁶⁹ See esp. Festugière, *op. cit.*, 362, 370-85.

⁷⁰ *Ant., Vit. Sim. Sty.*, ch. 2-3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 4.

⁷² *Ibid.*, ch. 7-8.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, ch. 18.

⁷⁴ There is one passage in which Simeon's suffering could be interpreted with the model of the cross: "He did not mind severe diseases of his body, for his mind was kindled towards his Lord all the time ... For he chose affliction rather than repose, trouble rather than rest, hunger rather than satiety. For he ardently desired that he might be in affliction in this world, for Christ's sake, that with him he might possess full enjoyment in the Holy City. For he endured much suffering, that neither among the ancients nor the moderns could be found any who had suffered as he did." Trans. Lent, 154. But I do not think that this passage alone can override the rest of the *vita* in this sense. Nor do I think that Simeon's cruciform prayer is meant as an image of Christ's suffering, since the text does not allude to that image—though, as we have seen, it does not hesitate to liken the manner of Simeon's prayer to other images.

Cruciform prayer was a common practice in early Syriac Christianity, but the sense it carries seems to be either supplicatory or evoking the image of Christ's exaltation: the cross as revealing Christ's glory rather than his humiliation, again an image of transformation. This can be vividly seen in the second century *Odes of Solomon*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth, 2nd ed. (Chico 1982), where cruciform prayer is repeatedly cited, but the suffering of Christ is never mentioned. Cf., e.g., Odes 21, 37 and 42; and the fine study of B. McNeil, "The Odes of Solomon and the Suffering of Christ," *Symposium Syriacum 1976, OCA* 205 (Rome 1978) 31-8. I also see this as the case in the fifth century Syriac *Life of the Man of God*, written contemporaneously with the Syriac *Life of Simeon*; ed. and tr. by A. Amiaud, *La Légende Syriacque de S. Alexis L'Homme de Dieu* (Paris 1889). Here the Man of God prays by night in cruciform stance in the church, but the prayer is presented as transformative: revealing God's presence among the poor and destitute through the person of the saint in Christ's image. Again, the suffering of Christ is never mentioned. On this point I disagree with H. J. W. Drijvers, "Die Legende des Heiligen

Alexius und der Typus des Gottesmannes im syrischen Christentum," *Typus, Symbol, Allegorie...*, ed. M. Schmidt (Regensburg 1982) 187-217, in an otherwise superb analysis of this text.

⁷⁵ Cf. the Life of Simeon the Younger, e.g., chs. 16, 17, 25, 112. *La Vie de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune (521-592)*, ed. and tr. P. Van den Ven, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 32 (Bruxelles 1962-70) 2 Vols. Here the image is specifically of Christ's suffering.

⁷⁶ It is the image of Simeon the Younger as prayer ascending that makes such a dramatic impact iconographically. Cf. G. K. Vikan, *Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, *Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection Publications* 5 (Washington 1982), esp. at 30ff.; and idem, "Art, Medicine, and Magic in Early Byzantium," *DOP* 38 (1984) 65-86, esp. at 67ff.

⁷⁷ Cf. Vööbus' influential work, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*. For a more prudent view, see R. Murray, "The Characteristics of the Earliest Syriac Christianity," *East of Byzantium*, ed. N. Garsoïan et al. (Washington 1982), esp. 6-9.

⁷⁸ Ephrem, Hymns on Faith 14, trans. S. P. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: 18 Poems of St. Ephrem*, *SSTS* 4 (London 1983) 19. The Odes of Solomon offer a good indication of this view, encouraging a form of prayer that is physical as well as spiritual, within the same symbolic actions. See S. Ashbrook Harvey, "Mirrored Images: Poetic and Behavioral Symbolism in the Odes of Solomon" (forthcoming). Again, the Acts of the Edessan Martyrs offer explicit witness that the believer cannot separate body from soul, and certainly not in the context of devotion. F. C. Burkitt, *Euphemia and the Goth with the Acts of Martyrdom of the Confessors of Edessa* (London/Oxford 1913).

Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, 02912