THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE RECENTLY DISCOVERED LETTER ATTRIBUTED TO CYRIL OF JERUSALEM

BY

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In 1976, S. P. Brock published a description of a Syriac manuscript which appeared to be a previously unknown letter of Cyril of Jerusalem. The following year saw the publication of the complete text contained in the ms, together with an English translation. Brock concluded that the document was not a genuine letter of Cyril, but a forgery made a generation or so after Cyril's death. Brock's opinion has been widely accepted, and some of the objections to the document's authenticity have been stressed by others. Its status as a forgery now seems unquestioned, and the letter's author has begun to be referred to as pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem. The purpose of this article is to challenge what appears to be rapidly becoming a received opinion.

The document in question is in the form of a letter written by Cyril shortly after the earthquake which allegedly brought to a halt the attempt made during the reign of the Emperor Julian to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem. The purpose of the letter seems to be to assure its readers that the Jerusalem Christians are safe, and it gives a brief account of the events that took place in Jerusalem immediately following the earthquake. The ms is dated as recently as 1899, but Brock found several reasons for concluding that it had an early original, and this was confirmed when he discovered another copy of the first half of the letter in a 6th century ms, also Syriac, in the British Library. There are some differences between the texts of the two mss, although they are not such as to suggest that one is closer to the original than the other; nevertheless, in quoting from the document I shall follow the 6th century ms as far as Brock's paragraph 7, where its text ends, and the 19th century ms thereafter. The validity of the arguments that follow is not affected by this choice.
The arguments against authenticity seem to be as follows.

i) "The letter claims to be an eye-witness account, written in the midst of all the turmoil, yet at the end we find that the news of Julian's death, over a month later, had evidently arrived". 

ii) "If the letter were genuine, it is very hard to see why such an important eye-witness account, circulated to 'bishops, priests and deacons of the Church of Christ in every district', should have been completely ignored by all the fourth and fifth century writers who describe the episode". 

iii) G. Bowersock is more convinced by the "topographical errors, which make Cyril speak of a non-existent Church of the Confessors, a non-existent statue of Herod, and a non-existent grave of Jeremiah".

In addition to these objections, Brock offers a motive for forgery. The attempt to rebuild the Temple, and the abrupt end to which it came, was widely discussed by contemporaries, and offered by Christians as a striking confirmation of Christ's prophecy in Matt. 24:2. Brock suggests that "people were concerned to fit Cyril into the picture... in connexion with this key passage from the gospels. I would suggest, then, that the same motivation that led Rufinus and Socrates to introduce Cyril and his reference to Matt. 24:2 also led someone else, who had a fair amount of local knowledge, to compose our letter in Cyril's name".

All these points may be challenged, however.

i) It is not clear that the reference to Julian's death is actually part of the letter. It has been assumed that all of the document as we have it is from the letter, but there is evidence to suggest that almost all of paragraphs 11 and 12 (the reference to Julian's death is in paragraph 12) are from some other source. Firstly, nowhere in the text is there an ending to the letter, but paragraph 10, which begins "thus we felt compelled to write to you the truth of these matters," has the tone of a concluding sentence, and goes on to complete the reference to Matt. 24:2 with which the letter opened. In addition, paragraph 11, which is a rambling list of cities, at odds with the conciseness of the preceding paragraphs, contains the line "and fire came forth and consumed the teachers of the Jews", which repeats one item already mentioned in some detail in paragraph 7, and adds a reference to Rabbis being killed which would certainly have been mentioned in paragraph 7 had it been in the writer's mind. Thirdly, paragraph 12 seems to be an extract from a chronicle. Brock cites the heading of the 19th century ms, which reads "On how