THE GENUINENESS OF 'AT-ṬABARI'S ARABIC "APOLOGY," AND OF THE SYRIAC DOCUMENT ON THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN CENTRAL ASIA IN THE JOHN RYLANDS LIBRARY.

By THE EDITOR.

In a recent issue of Byzantion is published a review of an article which appeared in the pages of this Bulletin as long ago as 1925, from the pen of Dr. Mingana, on "The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East," which is based upon a hitherto unpublished Syriac document in the John Rylands Library, an English translation of which, with the Syriac text of that portion of the manuscript which deals with the conversion of some ancient Turks to Christianity, is printed as an appendix.

The reviewer, who is Father P. Peeters, S.J., questions the genuineness of the document and appears to suggest that it is a fabrication on the part of the writer of the article.

This unwarranted piece of criticism cannot be allowed to pass unchallenged, for in the same article Father Peeters renews the attack which he made upon Dr. Mingana in the Analecta Bollandiana (41 (1924), pp. 200-202) in the course of a review of 'At-Ṭabari's "The Book of Religion and Empire: a semi-official defence and exposition of Islam written by order at the court and with the assistance of the Caliph Mutawakkil (A.D. 874-861)," which Dr. Mingana had edited and translated from a thirteenth century Arabic manuscript in the possession of this library, and which, down to 1901, when it was acquired as part of the Crawford collection of MSS., and as far back as 1843 had been in the possession of the Earls of Crawford and Balcarres. Of the earlier history of the manuscript we have no record beyond what the volume itself contains.

In the case of 'At Ṭabari's "Apology," Father Peeters, without troubling to examine the manuscript, declares that it is, "parmi les
supercheries littéraires." It is true that he does not actually suggest that this "supercherie" was fabricated at Manchester, but another member of the same society seems to be less scrupulous in the matter.

Father Maurice Bouyges, S.J., of Beyrouth follows up the review which appeared in the *Analeicta*, and in two open printed letters addressed to the writer as Director of the John Rylands Library in 1924-25, the first of which runs to sixteen pages, has given his considered opinion upon the matter in the following passage: "Bien que votre manuscrit Crawford 631 porte la date 616 H (= 1229), je me crois autorisé à penser que l'apologie musulmane anti-chrétienne qu'il contient a été écrite par un Pseudo-Tabarimoderne, au XXme siècle." In other words, it is a forgery, by implication fabricated at Manchester, and would appear to suggest that I, as Director, am a party to the forgery.

I should not trouble to rebut this charge but for the fact that the printed letters have been widely circulated and I feel that it is my duty to clear Dr. Mingana from such a baseless charge.

It should be pointed out in the first place that Father Bouyges' support of the view of Father Peeters was most unscientific, for he failed to respond to my invitation to come to Manchester and to examine the manuscript for himself before putting into circulation his second open letter. It is true that he did ultimately visit Manchester, but not until 1928, during the time that the Oriental Congress was meeting at Oxford, when he was received with every courtesy, and given access to the manuscript.

Notwithstanding the proofs of antiquity, in the matter of paper and ink which the manuscript itself offers, and of the evidence that I was able to produce as to its presence in the Crawford collection as long ago as 1843, Father Bouyges still persisted in the attitude he had assumed, and deliberately refused to recede from it.

Some little time after the publication of the "Apology" the Shaikh 'Abd al-Karim-Murād, of Fez came to Manchester from Morocco for the express purpose of satisfying himself as to the genuineness of the manuscript, and after a very thorough examination of it, which occupied the best part of two days, he expressed himself as completely satisfied as to its authenticity.

To those who have any acquaintance with early manuscripts it needs but a careful scrutiny of the paper or other material upon which
they are written, and of the other distinctive features which they possess, to satisfy themselves without the shadow of a doubt, that two such documents could not have been written in the nineteenth or twentieth century, but in the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively.

It is difficult upon the face of the matter to understand the attitude of these two scholars, and it is only to those who are able to read between the lines that the subtlety of their attack becomes apparent.

We cannot refrain from remarking that our critics have overlooked one very striking result of their conclusions in that they have unconsciously paid a very high tribute to Dr. Mingana’s scholarship, by attributing to him the ability to produce so remarkable a piece of writing as that of ‘At-Tabari, and of framing that and the other document, to which exception has been taken, in the classic Arabic and Syriac in which they are written, and which has called forth the admiration and gratitude of such oriental scholars as Dr. Noldeke, Professor Snouck Hurgronje and Professor A. J. Wensinck of Leiden, Professor Fischer of Leipzig, Professor Margoliouth of Oxford, Professor Nicholson of Cambridge, and others.

In the following remarks Dr. Mingana speaks for himself.

REMARKS ON THE EARLY SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN CENTRAL ASIA.

In 1925 I published in the Bulletin of the John Rylands Library a study on the spread of Christianity in Central Asia. At the end of that study I added as an appendix a new Syriac document purporting to give fresh details on the conversion of some ancient Turks to Christianity. In a review of my study in Byzantium (1929, 569-574) a Belgian Jesuit, P. Peeters by name, attempts in a covert manner to attribute to me the paternity of the document, or in plain English he endeavours to insinuate that it was I who had forged it.

In a previous review written by him in connection with another publication of mine, the Book of Religion and Empire, which contains an apology of Islam by the famous physician ‘Ali ibn Rabban
at-Ṭabari, he also, in conjunction with another Jesuit called M. Bouyges, gave it as his opinion that this work was “by an ‘Ali Ṭabari of the twentieth century,” a subtle sentence which in plain English referred to myself as the forger of this Arabic book.

There is no need to repeat here that in an earlier issue of this Bulletin I showed conclusively that the manuscript containing ‘Ali Ṭabari’s apology of Islam was acquired by the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres before A.D. 1843, so I could not possibly have forged it. I also asserted—and my assertion is absolutely unchallengeable—that the general condition of the manuscript, the paper on which it is written, the mode of writing used in it and all the other palaeographical peculiarities that it exhibits, stamp it as authentic in every respect without a shadow of doubt. Any one with an expert knowledge would recognise it as a thirteenth century manuscript.

So far as the document dealing with the conversion of the Turks is concerned, in addition to the Rylands MS. which I have utilised for my edition, I discovered its text two years ago in another manuscript acquired by me in Persia, which forms part of my own collection and is numbered Mingana Syr. 71. This manuscript on palaeographic grounds cannot be later than A.D. 1600-1650, and the place which the document occupies in it, i.e., ff. 40a-47a precludes the possibility of forgery. Indeed both manuscripts are of mixed contents and deal with a large variety of subjects.

When my attention was first drawn to the unworthy nonsense of the above two writers I naturally thought that the best way to deal with it was for obvious reasons to ignore it, but on the advice of many friends I have deemed it advisable to write the present note as a general explanation to all thoughtful scholars whose only aim is the advancement of science and the attainment of truth without any personal bias. Intellígenti pauca.

1 1927, p. 99. See also ibid., 1925, pp. 236-240.