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THE SYRIAC VERSIONS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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1. Introduction

Since the end of the second century, Syriac-speaking Christians have had their own translation of the Old Testament, made on the basis of the Hebrew original. This translation, called 'Peshitta', has been in use up to the present day and there are no plans to revise or replace it. Of course, members of the Syriac churches use versions in other languages and in neo-Aramaic as well, but this does not alter the fact that the Peshitta is accepted by all and is indeed 'widespread', as a possible rendering of the name Peshitta indicates. The Peshitta has even been used as the basis for new translations in other languages². However, the position of the Peshitta has not always been unchallenged. Syriac exegetes knew that there were other versions of the Scriptures, and some tried to replace the Peshitta as a whole, or certain of its readings, by these. This essay discusses the Peshitta itself, but also provides some information on the later Syriac versions of the Old Testament. Pride of place among these is taken by the Syro-Hexapla, the version made by Paul of Tella on the basis of the Septuagint column of Origen's *Hexapla*, a Bible containing

¹ The author's research is supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).

² Cf. S.P. BROCK, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, (SEERI Correspondence Course on Christian Heritage 1; Kottayam, [1989]), p. 55, and P.B. DIRKSEN, *La Peshitta dell'Antico Testamento*, (Studi Biblici 103; Brescia, 1993), p. 19.

The syriac versions of the Old Testament

the Hebrew text as well as a number of Greek versions in six parallel columns.

2. The Name 'Peshitta'

It is only in the ninth century that we find the first attestation of the name 'Peshitta'. Moses bar Kepha (d. 903) uses the name in his *Hexaemeron*³ and his *Introduction to the Psalter*⁴. He explains that he knew of two translations in Syriac: the Peshitta, based on the Hebrew text, and Paul of Tella's translation from the Greek text of the Septuagint. Earlier references, in Syriac as well as in Greek sources, simply refer to 'the Syrian'.

The word *Peshitta* is the feminine passive participle of the verb *ܦܫܬܐ*, 'to stretch out, to extend'⁵. It presupposes the word *mappaqta*, 'translation'. The precise sense of this participle is no longer clear. In other contexts, it often means 'simple'. It is possible that this is also the sense when the word is applied to the Syriac Bible. Barhebraeus clearly assumed this, as he says: '...their translation, called Peshitta because it abstains from eloquent language in its translation, agrees with the text of

³ *Der Hexaemeronkommentar des Moses bar Kepha*, transl. L. Schlimme (Göttinger Orientforschungen [GOF] I. Syriaca 14.1; Wiesbaden, 1977), pp. 167-73. The Syriac text has not yet been edited.

⁴ *Eine jakobitische Einleitung in den Psalter in Verbindung mit zwei Homilien aus dem grossen Psalmenkommentar des Daniel von Salah zum ersten Male herausgegeben, übersetzt und bearbeitet*, ed. and transl. G. Dietrich, (BZAW 5; Giessen, 1901), pp. 106-16. For the attribution to Moses bar Kepha, see J.-M. VOSTÉ, 'L'introduction de Mose bar Kepha aux Psaumes de David', *Revue Biblique* 38 (1929), pp. 214-28.

⁵ For a survey of the different opinions on the translation of the name 'Peshitta', see P.B. DIRKSEN, 'The Old Testament Peshitta', in: M.J. Mulder (ed.), *Mikra. Text, Translation, Reading, and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 2. The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud 1 (Assen/Maastricht-Philadelphia, 1988), p. 256.

the Jews'⁶. Modern scholars, however, have suggested two other options. On the basis of the sense of the verb, L. Bertholdt and E. Nestle thought the participle should be interpreted as 'widespread', in the sense of 'in common use', just like the Latin word *vulgata*. The Syriac Bible based on the Hebrew was indeed in common use, in contrast to the versions made on the basis of the Greek Septuagint, which never became very popular. F. Field, on the other hand, accepted the usual sense of the participle, but interpreted it as 'single' rather than as 'abstaining from eloquent language'. This also assumes that the name was intended to contrast the version with the Syro-Hexapla, the word *Hexapla* meaning 'six-fold'.

3. Manuscripts and Other Sources

The present editions of the Peshitta are based on manuscripts: codices written on parchment or paper by hand. The oldest manuscripts date from the fifth century. One of these is the oldest dated biblical manuscript in any language: British Library Add 14512 (5ph1 according to the system of the Peshitta Institute, in which the first digit refers to the century) from the year 771 'according to the Greeks', that is, AD 459/60. This means that there is a gap of almost three hundred years between the years in which the Peshitta was translated and the oldest manuscript known to us. Several generations of copying separate the original translation and the copies we have. In the course of this period, the text may of course have been changed or corrupted. To make things worse, the oldest manuscripts do not contain the Peshitta as a whole. 5ph1 contains fragments of Isaiah and Ezekiel. 5b1, dated to 463/64, contains the Pentateuch, but the early date only applies to the first two books: Genesis and Exodus.

The oldest complete Syriac Old Testament known to us is the so-called Codex Ambrosianus, from the Ambrosian Library in Milan (MS B. 21 Inf.). As the name 7a1 in the Leiden edition indicates, this manuscript

⁶ This comes from Barhebraeus' *Compendious History of Dynasties*, written in Arabic. The text is quoted in N. WISEMAN, *Horae Syriacae, seu commentationes et anecdota res vel litteras Syriacas spectantia* (Rome, 1828), pp. 92-94.

The syriac versions of the Old Testament

may have been written in the seventh century. As it is not dated, this is just an educated guess; some have opted for the sixth century. There are only a few of such complete Bibles or *pandects*. We may assume that their text is of a composite nature: the copyist probably had to use biblical manuscripts containing smaller groups of books as his model. This is also reflected in the order and choice of books, which appears not to have been seen as being completely fixed. Some features are shared by several pandects, such as the fact that Job follows immediately after the Pentateuch (perhaps he was associated with the patriarchal era, as he was identified with Jobab of Gen. 10:29) and that all books on women were grouped together (Ruth, Susanna, Esther, and Judith). The first feature has been reproduced in Lee's edition. The pandects also contain a number of books that are considered apocryphal or deuterocanonical by western churches, and some works that are not even part of this category, such as IV Ezra and the Apocalypse of Baruch.

In light of the distance between the original translation and the oldest manuscripts, it is very important to use all additional sources we can find. The Peshitta is already quoted in the *Diatessaron*, it would seem⁷. This Gospel harmony from the second century, or at least the Syriac version of it, may have taken quotations from the Old Testament from the Peshitta rather than from the Greek text of the Gospels. Unfortunately, full copies of the Syriac text of the *Diatessaron* itself have not come down to us; it has to be reconstructed on the basis of quotations. A very important source of direct quotations from the Old Testament Peshitta is formed by the quotations of the fourth-century Syriac father Ephrem the Syrian⁸. His *Commentary on Genesis and Exodus* in particular contains many literal translations, which show that he had a copy of the biblical text at hand. Aphrahat's quotations, from the same century, are less reliable. He

⁷ Sebastian P. BROCK, 'Limitations of Syriac in Representing Greek', in Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations*, (Oxford, 1977), pp. 83-98, especially 97-98. This position is strongly advocated by Jan JOOSTEN, 'The Old Testament Quotations in the Old Syriac and Peshitta Gospels: A Contribution to the Study of the *Diatessaron*', *Textus* 15 (1990), pp. 55-76.

⁸ A.G.P. JANSON, *De Abrahamcyclus in de Genesiscommentaar van Efreem de Syriër*, (doctoral dissertation Leiden; Zoetermeer, 1998).

appears to have cited from memory in a loose manner⁹. A special category of Peshitta quotations is formed by the readings of ‘the Syrian’ (Σύρος) in Greek exegetes. Eusebius of Emesa, a contemporary of Ephrem, born in Edessa and bilingual, wrote commentaries in Greek on the Septuagint. At some instances he translated the reading of the Peshitta for his Greek public, as an alternative to a difficult Septuagint reading. Most of the Greek Peshitta quotations in other authors derive from him; Theodoret of Cyrrhus (d. c.458) seems to have been the only other Greek exegete who had independent access to a Syriac Bible¹⁰. Together with Ephrem and Aphrahat, Eusebius and Theodoret are the main witnesses to the Peshitta text before the earliest surviving biblical manuscript.

4. Text Editions

The first printed edition of part of the Syriac Bible was the edition of the Psalms that was published in Quzhaya, Lebanon, in 1610—in fact the first work printed in this country. It was followed in 1625 by two more editions of the Psalms: that of the Maronite Gabriel Sionita, published in Paris, and that of Thomas van Erpe (Erpenius), a famous professor of Arabic, printed in Leiden, the Netherlands. The latter edition is still important for some of its conjectures.

The first printed edition of the Peshitta as a whole is found in the Paris Polyglot. A Polyglot prints the biblical text in several languages for comparison. The Syriac text, edited by Gabriel Sionita, appeared in 1645. It was based, unfortunately, on a rather poor manuscript: 17a5 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Syr. 6). In its turn, the Paris Polyglot became the basis of the London Polyglot published by Brian Walton in 1657. This edition adds a number of variant readings from manuscripts present in

⁹ Robert J. OWENS, Jr., *The Genesis and Exodus Citations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage*, (MPIL 3; Leiden, 1983).

¹⁰ R.B. ter Haar ROMENY, *A Syrian in Greek Dress. The Use of Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac Biblical Texts in Eusebius of Emesa's Commentary on Genesis*, (*Traditio Exegetica Graeca* 6; Leuven, 1997), pp. 71-86.



The syriac versions of the Old Testament

English libraries, but otherwise just reproduces the Paris text. The text most widely available today goes back to that of Walton, and thus eventually to the Paris manuscript 17a5: in 1823 Samuel Lee published his edition of the Peshitta under the auspices of the British and Foreign Bible Society, adopting the text of the London Polyglot while making some use of the so-called Buchanan Bible (manuscript 12a1, brought from India to Cambridge by the missionary Claude Buchanan). This edition was intended originally for the Syriac churches on the Malabar coast in India, but it received a much wider circulation. The United Bible Societies have been publishing reprints of Lee's edition up to this day.

Whereas Lee's edition was printed in the West Syrian *serto* script, the same century also saw two editions in East Syrian type: the so-called Urmia and Mosul Bibles. In 1852 the former appeared. It had been prepared by Justin Perkins, a Methodist missionary sent to Urmia in Persia in 1834 by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions of Boston, Massachusetts. The purpose of this mission was, as they expressed it, to raise the spiritual and cultural level of the 'Nestorians'. In parallel columns, it gives the text of the Peshitta based on Lee's edition, corrected in some instances on the basis of a number of manuscripts that were available locally, and a new translation of the Hebrew text into neo-Aramaic¹¹. It is assumed that the text of the Mosul edition, in its turn, goes back to the Urmia edition¹². The Dominicans who published this edition in Mosul in 1887 for the Chaldaeans probably also introduced changes on the basis of local manuscripts, and added the text of the apocryphal or deuterocanonical books. J.M. Vosté prepared a reprint of this edition with some corrections, which was published in 1952 in Beirut. Another version of the Urmia edition was printed in 1913 by the Trinitarian Bible Society in London.

A nineteenth-century edition of a completely different nature was A.M. Ceriani's facsimile publication of the manuscript 7a1, the oldest codex containing the complete text of the Peshitta, from the Ambrosian

¹¹ P.B. DIRKSEN, 'The Urmia Edition of the Peshitta: The Story behind the Text', *Textus* 18 (1995), pp. 157-67.

¹² DIRKSEN, 'The Old Testament Peshitta', p. 257.

Library in Milan. It was published in the years 1876-83, using the technique of photolithography, which had just become available. Although the huge and expensive volumes did not gather a wide circulation, this publication was a landmark in Peshitta studies. For the first time, a text became available to a scholarly public that differed markedly from that of the Paris Polyglot. The fact that 7a1 contained variants closer to the Hebrew sparked the discussion whether these readings reflected an original translation that was closer to the Hebrew, or were the result of a revision towards the Hebrew text (see § 7 below).

The first scientific edition, containing only the Psalms, was published by W.E. Barnes in 1904. He used 7a1 as his basic text, but corrected it on the basis of a number of other manuscripts. With the help of C.W. Mitchell and J. Pinkerton, the same author also published a new edition of the Pentateuch in 1914. This edition gives a corrected version of Lee's text. In order to gain a full picture of the text history of the Peshitta, it was necessary to collect all witnesses available in libraries in Europe and the United States as well as in the Middle East. It was not until 1959, however, that the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament decided to start the Peshitta project, which was entrusted to the Leiden Peshitta Institute. The first phase of this project entailed making a list of all Peshitta manuscripts and procuring microfilms of all of them. This work, which included expeditions to the Middle East, occupied the collaborators of the Institute for more than a decade. A preliminary *List of Old Testament Peshitta Manuscripts* appeared in 1961. It was in 1972 that the first volume of the new edition appeared, under the title *The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version*.

The original idea of the Leiden edition was to print the basic text, usually 7a1, without any changes, 'except for the correction of obvious clerical errors that do not make sense', as the 1972 General Preface states¹³. All other readings would be relegated to the *critical apparatus*, the list of variant readings. After publication of fascicles 3 and 6 of part

¹³ Peshitta Institute Leiden, *The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version: General Preface*, (Leiden, 1972), p. viii.

The syriac versions of the Old Testament

IV of the edition, containing the Apocalypse of Baruch, 4 Esdras, Canticles or Odes, Prayer of Manasseh, Apocryphal Psalms, Psalms of Solomon, Tobit, and 1 (3) Esdras, it appeared that the size of the apparatus would be too large, making the undertaking impossible for financial reasons. Piet de Boer and Wim Baars, then general editors, decided to omit all variant readings occurring only in manuscripts younger than the twelfth century, and to widen the scope for emendations in the basic text. The first decision can only be defended if it can be demonstrated that the later manuscripts all go back to existing earlier manuscripts. This would indeed seem to be the case, in the sense that there is a general impression, based on full or sample collations, that these manuscripts do not carry unknown variants that cannot be explained as inner-Syriac corruptions or changes. Still, it has been decided to publish the variants of manuscripts up to and including the fifteenth century in a separate volume.

The second decision, the introduction of a larger number of emendations, was also connected with the wish to make the apparatus leaner, 'thus facilitating the use of the edition and also its printing'¹⁴. The main rule for emendations should be seen in this light¹⁵:

Emendations were made also in those cases where the reading of the manuscripts chosen as the basic text of the edition is not supported by two or more manuscripts from the material used up to and including the tenth century. The printed text in these cases is chosen on the basis of a definite majority of the manuscripts dated to the tenth century or earlier.

Thus the choice was made for something between a diplomatic edition- an edition which renders one manuscript faithfully like a diplomat- and a majority text. It was not intended as a so-called critical

¹⁴ P.A.H. de BOER, 'Towards an Edition of the Syriac Version of the Old Testament' (PIC 16), *Vetus Testamentum* 31 (1981), pp. 346-57 (356); cf. also De Boer's Preface, in Peshitta Institute Leiden, *The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version*, I.1. *Preface; Genesis-Exodus* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), p. viii.

¹⁵ De BOER, 'Preface', p. viii.

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