

THE  
SYRIAC NEW TESTAMENT  
TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH  
FROM THE  
SYRIAC PESHITTO VERSION.

WITH  
A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION  
AND A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE TRANSLATOR,  
BY HORACE L. HASTINGS,  
*Editor of THE CHRISTIAN, Boston, Mass.*

AND  
A NEW FOREWORD ON THE SYRIAC NEW TESTAMENT  
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## Foreword

### The Syriac New Testament

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Within the first six centuries of the Christian Era, the Syriac Church Fathers produced no less than six versions of the New Testament in their mother tongue, Syriac, an Aramaic dialect akin to the Aramaic spoken by Jesus Christ and His Disciples. Three revisions that have come down to us, in one form or another, preceded the Peshitto, while at least two others appeared after it. Yet, it was the Peshitto that won over all its rivals and held itself as the unchallenged ‘official’ translation amongst the various Syriac-speaking Churches till this day.

The name ‘Peshitto,’ which means ‘simple,’ only appears in the ninth century. It was used to differentiate this particular version from later versions that were not as ‘simple’ from an idiomatic point of view as will we shall shortly see.



The Peshitto New Testament is the result of a long process of New Testament translation activities in the Syriac-speaking world. These activities were the labors of many people over a period of three centuries or so. While the earliest form of the New Testament that was in use in the early Syriac Church is under much debate, the earliest form that we are certain of is the Diatessaron, a harmony of the four Gospels woven into one story. The author of the Diatessaron is Tatian, a native Syriac speaker, who compiled his work around A.D. 170. The original language of the work is still under much debate with some scholars favoring Syriac, others opting for Greek. The dissemination of the Diatessaron is only second to the Bible. It spread from East to West, from China to England.

The Diatessaron was called in the Syriac-speaking Church *Evangelion da-Mehallate* (ܐܘܢܓܝܠܝܘܢ ܕܐܡܠܬܝܬܐ ‘Gospel of the Mixed’). It was disseminated throughout Syria and Mesopotamia, especially in and around Edessa, and became the authoritative form of the Gospels until the fifth century when it was suppressed in favor of the Peshitto. When St. Ephrem (ca. 306 - d. 373) wrote a commentary on the Gospels, it was on the Diatessaron, not the separate Gospels.

The Syriac Diatessaron is now lost. Even St. Ephrem's *Commentary*, from which one can hope to extract Diatessaronic quotations, was presumed lost in the original Syriac and only existed in an Armenian translation. It was not until 1956 when fragments of St. Ephrem's *Commentary* turned up mysteriously in the antique black markets of Paris. Subsequently, other sets of fragments appeared in 1984 and 1986, belonging to the same manuscript of the first fragments. All sets of fragments, apart from one folio which is now in Barcelona, were secured by the Chester Beatty Library (MS 709). The manuscript probably came originally from Deir al-Suryan in Egypt.



Between the late second century and the early fourth century, the separate Gospels (and perhaps the Book of Acts and the Epistles) were translated from Greek into Syriac through a number of revisions. To differentiate this version from the Diatessaron, it was called in Syriac *Evangelion da-Mepparreshe* (ܐܘܢܓܠܝܘܢ ܕܐܡܝܢܐܝܬܐ 'Gospel of the Separated'). The continuous revision aimed at bringing the Syriac more in line with the Greek text. This process ended in the fifth century, culminating in the Peshitto. Two pre-Peshitto revisions of the four separate Gospels have survived. These we now call the 'Old Syriac' Gospels. The Old Syriac is of crucial importance to biblical scholars as its roots predate any other version including the Old Latin, and hence is one of the earliest witnesses to the Greek New Testament.

Four characteristics of the Old Syriac are noteworthy. The first is its free translation style. The translators had the reader in mind and rendered the text in a free form, sometimes paraphrasing. The second is the use of the Old Testament Peshitto (which existed at the time) in Old Testament quotations, rather than translating the quotations from the Greek New Testament anew. The third is its archaic language, both in vocabulary and grammar, reflecting earlier stages of the Syriac language. Finally, the order of the Gospel books is not strict; in one of the two manuscripts that have survived, the order is: Matthew, Mark, John, and Luke (with Luke following John on the same folio).

The Old Syriac version was unknown to scholarship and to James Murdock when he first produced this English translation of the Peshitto. In fact, it was not until the sixth edition of Murdock's translation, which was published posthumously, that mention of the Old Syriac appears (see p. xlviii). In 1842, William Cureton, then assistant

keeper of the manuscripts at the British Museum, stumbled on a manuscript containing the text of the Gospels. Soon he realized that the text was more archaic than that of the well-known Peshitto. Cureton published the text, and hastened in concluding that he had discovered “the identical terms and expressions which the Apostle himself employed” — which, as F. C. Burkitt later puts it, “attracted a good deal of attention, but gained few converts”. In 1892, two Scottish ladies, Agnes Lewis and her twin sister Margaret Gibson, discovered in St. Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai, another manuscript containing the text of the Old Syriac version. Hence, we are fortunate to possess now two manuscripts of this ancient translation, both incomplete, representing two stages of the ongoing revisions, the Sinai manuscript being more ancient than the Curetonian one.



As mentioned earlier, translators kept on revising the Old Syriac version, bringing it closer and closer to the Greek text, resulting in what we now call the Peshitto version. The Peshitto contains all the books of the New Testament with the exception of: Luke 22:17-18, John 7:53-8:11, Acts 8:37, 15:34 & 28:29, the Minor Catholic Epistles, and Apocalypse. These were never part of the Peshitto Canon. Soon after, the Peshitto became the standard authoritative text, it replaced the Old Syriac and the Diatessaron.

Hundreds of Peshitto manuscripts came down to us, with very little variation between them, some dating back to the fifth century. The one single manuscript with much fame is the Rabbula Codex, dated A.D. 586 and containing a beautiful set of illustrations. Its name derives from the name of its scribe, not to be confused with his namesake, the famous bishop of Edessa.

The order of the books in the Peshitto is of interest. While the Gospels precede Acts in the usual manner, the Catholic Epistles (James, 1 Peter, and 1 John) come between Acts and the Pauline Epistles.

The excitement of Western scholars over the Peshitto began with the publication of the *editio princeps* of the Peshitto in 1555 by Widmanstadius, who was assisted by the Syrian Orthodox priest Mushe of Mardin. Widmanstadius put a claim similar to that of Cureton that indeed he was publishing the original version as expressed by the Evan-

gelists. Similar claims of the antiquity of the Peshitto, sometimes over the Greek New Testament, were put forward over the years, the most popular one may be that of George Lamsa, a native of Syriac who translated the Peshitto Bible into English. These claims do not withstand modern scholarly scrutiny. This does not diminish the importance of the Peshitto as it remains one of the most ancient versions, the only one written in an Aramaic dialect, and is of continuous use till this day.



The Peshitto did not mark the end of New Testament translation activities. At least two other translations were produced after it, albeit the purpose was not the dissemination of the Bible, but theological and philological endeavours.

Following the Christological controversies of the fifth century, Philoxenos of Mabbug, one of the foremost defenders of the miaphysite position, commissioned his chorepiscopus Polycarp to translate the New Testament from anew. Philoxenos thought that the Peshitto translators “made mistakes in many things, whether intentionally or through ignorance,” and wanted a more accurate translation from the Greek. Polycarp completed the translation in 508. This ‘Philoxenian’ version was used for theological debates, but hardly any trace of it survives. It does not seem to have won favour, and we possess not a single copy of it. It is possible, however, that the surviving texts of the Minor Catholic Epistles and Apocalypse, absent from the Peshitto Canon, belong to this version.

During the early seventh century, another translation was produced by Thomas of Harkel who completed his work in 616. The Harklean is not a new translation; rather, it is a revision of the Philoxenian. Thomas’s motives were purely philological. By now, Greek literature became extremely prestigious, and translations of Greek works took a very literal tone. In fact, many earlier translations into Syriac of Greek philosophical and theological works were retranslated in this period in a more literal fashion. Thomas of Harkel applied the same translation techniques to the New Testament; before him, Paul of Tella applied similar techniques when he translated the Old Testament from the Greek, not Hebrew, between 615 and 617. These literal, “mirror translations” were done sometimes at the expense of having the Syriac text obscure. Despite its unidiomatic features, the Harklean version was for a period of time popular in the Syrian Orthodox Church and was used in lectionaries. Later, when such literal translations lost favour, its usage ceased. Despite this, quite a good number of Harklean manuscripts have survived.

It is because of these obscure literal versions that the term ‘Peshitto’, meaning ‘simple’, was adequately applied in the ninth century to denote the Peshitto version.



Despite the multiplicity of the versions that pre and post dated it, the Peshitto held its position as the unchallenged authoritative text in the Syriac-speaking Church, even transcending the Christological controversies of the fifth century. It is worth noting that the Syriac tradition is the only cultural tradition that embodies all the diverse positions following the division, from the diaphysite position of the Church of the East at one end of the spectrum, to the Chalcedonias position, to the miaphysite position of the Syrian Orthodox Church at the other end of the spectrum. The Peshitto is shared by all these traditions.

Today, the Peshitto is the official text of a multitude of Churches: the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Assyrian Church of the East and the Ancient Church of the East, the Syriac Maronite Church, the Chaldean Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and seven established Churches in India including the Syro-Malankara Church, Syro-Malabar Church, and Mar Thoma Church.



The story of publishing the Syriac Bible is well documented in the following *Historical Introduction* by H. L. Hastings. The reader should be alerted to the fact that his section titled *The Age of This Version* (pp. xxvii-xxxvii) is outdated.

## Further Reading

The following bibliography is intended for the general reader, and contains for the most part works that are in print. Further bibliographies can be found in the following works.

**The Syriac New Testament.** On the history of the Syriac versions, one can consult Chapter 1 of Metzger's *The Early Versions of the New Testament* (Oxford, 1977). For an introduction to the Syriac Bible, see Brock's *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition* (Kottayam, no date).

**The Diatessaron.** A very detailed study of the Diatessaron, with much information on the Syriac background, is given in Petersen's *Tatian's Diatessaron, Its Creation, Dissemination, Significance, & History in Scholarship* (E. J. Brill, 1994). An English translation of St. Ephrem's *Commentary* is given

by McCarthy's *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron* (Oxford, 1993). An English translation of the text of the Diatessaron, from the Arabic version, is found in Hill's *The Earliest Life of Christ: The Diatessaron of Tatian* (1910, reprinted by Gorgias Press, 2001).

**The Old Syriac Version.** The Syriac text of the Old Syriac version was reprinted in Kiraz's *Comparative Edition of the Syriac Gospels, Aligning The Sinaiticus, Curetonianus, Peshitta and Harklean Versions*, volumes 1-4 (E. J. Brill, 1996). The English translation of the Sinai and Curetonian manuscripts are out-of-print, but can be found in Lewis's *The Old Syriac Gospels* (London, 1910) and Burkitt's *Evangelion da-Mepharreshe* (Cambridge, 1904), respectively. The fascinating story of the discovery of the Sinai Codex is told in Gibson's *How the Codex Was Found* (1893, reprinted by Gorgias Press, 2001).

**The Peshitto Version.** The Syriac text of the Peshitto, taken from the 1901 edition of Pusey and Gwilliam, was republished by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1905, 1920 and subsequent editions. The same text appears in the United Bible Society's Syriac Bible from the 1988 edition onward. The first English translation was prepared by Murdock (reprinted in this volume); a subsequent translation was prepared by George Lamsa and is available from Harper and Row Publishers. A Concordance to the Peshitto was prepared by Kiraz is his *A Computer Generated Concordance to the Syriac New Testament*, volumes 1-6 (E. J. Brill, 1993).

**The Harklean Version.** The Syriac text of the Harklean was prepared by Andreas Juckel, with an introduction, and appears in Kiraz's *Comparative Edition* (see above).

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