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0521017467 - The Syriac Version of the Old Testament: An Introduction  
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## The Syriac Version of the Old Testament

### *An Introduction*

While the Syriac version of the Old Testament, known as the Peshitta, was translated from a Hebrew text, it was preserved by the eastern churches alone. In his book, M. P. Weitzman argues that the translation was put together in around 200 CE by a small Jewish community estranged from the Rabbinic majority. This community eventually embraced Christianity and brought the Peshitta with them. This remarkable theory is the prelude to a comprehensive analysis of the Peshitta itself, which covers all the books of the Bible, surveys the existing scholarship and explores the relationship between the translation and the original Hebrew text. Apart from the philological detail, the book also examines the translations' historical links with Judaism and early Christianity. As a wide-ranging introduction to the subject, the book will appeal to biblical scholars and religious studies students as well as to philologists and historical linguists.

M. P. WEITZMAN was Reader in Hebrew and Jewish Studies at University College London.

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## FOREWORD

Robert P. Gordon

### **Michael Perry Weitzman**

It has been some consolation to the family and the colleagues of Michael Weitzman that this, the first of his projected two volumes on the Syriac Version of the Old Testament (otherwise known as the Peshitta), was already at proof stage at the time of his lamented death, at the age of fifty-one, on 21 March 1998. A number of ground-breaking essays on the subject had already given promise of what we now have in our possession – a landmark study of the Peshitta version of the Old Testament.

Michael Weitzman came up to Cambridge in 1963 to read Hebrew and Aramaic for the Oriental Studies Tripos. In the entrance scholarship examination at St John's College he was awarded an Open Scholarship in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. This was just the beginning of a brilliant undergraduate career in which he achieved first class honours in both parts of the Tripos (1965 and 1967), while simultaneously studying for an external degree in mathematics from London University, where he obtained a first class in 1968. During his time in Cambridge he won several college and university prizes, crowning these successes in 1971 when he returned to sit the examination for the rarely awarded Tyrwhitt's Hebrew Scholarship and Mason Prize for Biblical Hebrew.

In his undergraduate days Michael happily indulged his fascination with Hebrew and the Semitic languages generally, and was soon developing a complementary interest in the ancient versions of the Hebrew Bible. His work on his Hebrew set texts filled a succession of little notebooks with comments on philology and the renderings of the major ancient versions. These, with characteristic generosity, were afterwards passed on to contemporaries who might have a use for them in succeeding years. If a modern language became desirable for study purposes a sufficient familiarity with it would soon be acquired. And yet, alongside the gifted intellect and the erudition there was a gentleness of attitude toward other people and their limitations, and a sense of humour that delighted in finding simple things amusing, while it could just as easily erupt in a trilingual pun.

Michael's linguistic and mathematical interests combined in the doctoral dissertation that he wrote at University College, London, and for which he was awarded his Ph.D. in 1974. It was entitled *A Statistical Approach to Textual Criticism, with Special Reference to the Peshitta Version of the Old Testament*, ran to two volumes, and required the appointment of both a statistician and a Semitist as examiners. Here he applied himself to the study of text-critical methodology, and in particular to the

analysis of manuscript relationships, developing statistical models and applying distributional criteria to the mapping of manuscripts whose genealogical relationships are no longer recoverable. The dissertation itself was never published, but some idea of its focus and method can be gleaned from several published articles, including one which takes as its starting-point the complex manuscript situation affecting Cyprian's *De Unitate*. Later work on the Peshitta Psalter also had its genesis at the dissertation stage.

This interest in the Peshitta version extended, however, to all its principal aspects. Since he believed the Peshitta to be a more cohesive translation than was apparent from previous studies of individual books, Michael set out to produce a comprehensive account of the version. Prominent among his publications over a twenty-year period were a number that addressed fundamental Peshitta questions such as the version's community background and date of origin, literary style, relation with the Hebrew textual tradition and the other ancient versions, and the characteristics of its manuscript groupings. In this regard, special mention may be made of the essay entitled, 'The Interpretative Character of the Syriac Old Testament', contributed to volume 1 of *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, edited by M. Saebo (Göttingen, 1996, pp. 587–611).

These studies, whether published in journals or as chapters in edited volumes, were invariably substantial and significant. In them he argued for the originality of readings in the ninth-century Or Ms 58 of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence (Leiden siglum 9a1), found evidence of two translation hands in the Peshitta of Samuel (a refinement more characteristic of the more advanced type of research associated with the Septuagint, the Peshitta's elder sibling), and propounded the theory that it was the poor state of the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the Syriac books of Chronicles that was responsible for the waywardness of a translation whose peculiarities have sometimes seen it classed as some kind of Syriac Targum. In one of his last studies, which has now appeared posthumously in *Targum Studies II* (ed. P. V. M. Flesher, 1998, pp. 159–93) – a volume is dedicated to his memory – this question of the status of Peshitta Chronicles is addressed and the conclusion reached that only if the term 'Targum' is seriously redefined could it embrace Peshitta Chronicles. The influence of Jewish liturgy and rabbinical thought on the Peshitta, and notably of the Qaddish prayer within the Peshitta of Chronicles, became a subject of special interest in recent years.

By a happy coincidence Michael was engaging in his research at the same time as the volumes of the Leiden Peshitta Edition were being published. He did not join the Leiden team as a collaborator but was regularly in correspondence with the editors, visited the Peshitta Institute from time to time, and had access to all draft materials held there. The present volume was written in association with the Peshitta Institute and the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions, and in particular their 'The Hebrew Bible and Its Ancient Versions' programme. In addition, Michael was an official collaborator on the Concordance to the Old Testament in Syriac project, was one of the editors working on the new Annotated English Translation of the Peshitta, and had accepted an invitation to be an external supervisor of a Peshitta Institute/Free University of Amsterdam project dealing with the computer-assisted linguistic analysis of the Peshitta.

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While his own major Peshitta enterprise was developing, Michael was publishing in other, strictly unrelated, areas, applying his statistical and linguistic skills to such matters as verb frequency and source criticism in the Hebrew Bible, statistical patterns in Hebrew and Arabic roots, the distribution and pronunciation of Hebrew root consonants, Hebrew lexicography, and the retroversion of the Greek minor versions from the Syro-Hexaplar. With the late Chaim Bermant he co-authored *Ebla: An Archaeological Enigma* (London and New York, 1979), a work of *haute vulgarisation* – he enjoyed the term! – which offered to a wider public some insight into the significance of this ancient city and its archive at a quite early stage in Ebla studies. The book was translated into five other languages between 1979 and 1986. While all this researching and publishing was going on, he was carrying a full teaching load at University College, London, where he was appointed a Lecturer in 1972 and a Reader in 1997. A good number of other institutions and examining boards, operating at both the secondary and tertiary level, benefited from his selfless interest in the promotion of Hebrew and related studies.

Hebrew and Aramaic Studies at Cambridge has produced a number of Semitists who have distinguished themselves in academic and public life during the twentieth century. None was more brilliant or more truly a scholar than Michael Weitzman, and we can but congratulate ourselves on our good fortune in having this volume by which to remember him, even if it also reminds us that we have been denied so much by his passing.

## PREFACE

The Syriac version investigated here has been known, at least since the ninth century, as the Peshitta. It is not the only translation of the Old Testament into Syriac, but the others – which are in part revisions of it and in part daughter-versions made from the Greek Bible – cannot challenge the status of the Peshitta as *the* Syriac version.

The new edition of the text, under the general editorship of the Peshitta Institute in Leiden, has finally set research into the Peshitta on a sound textual basis, and has already inspired a number of important studies of individual biblical books. At the same time, however, it is important to keep sight of the impressive degree of cohesion between the different books in this biblical version. Hence the present study, which – at least in principle – is concerned with the biblical books as a whole.

The use in the book title of the Christian term ‘Old Testament’ for the Hebrew scriptures calls for some explanation. Whether the translators were Jewish or Christian is a matter for debate, and indeed one of the principal issues in this book. What is undeniable, however, is that the Syriac version of these biblical books has been handed down exclusively by the eastern churches, which view them as the Old Testament. I have preferred to start out from this fact, and in this concur with the Leiden editors.

The word ‘introduction’ also deserves remark. Elsewhere, it suggests an elementary treatment confined to areas of consensus; but in biblical studies it is traditional for an ‘introduction’ to enter into detail and also to expound the author’s own views, whether widely accepted or not. It is in that sense that the present work aims to serve as an introduction.

Perhaps more than any other student of the Peshitta, I am indebted to each and every member of the international team of scholars whose contributions – in particular the painstaking collations – make up the new edition. I am especially grateful to Dr Piet Dirksen, Dr Konrad Jenner, former and current heads of the Peshitta Institute, who have answered my many queries and made me very welcome. In Leiden I have been much stimulated by discussions with three generations of scholars, who also include Dr Marinus Koster, Professor Arie van der Kooij and Professor Luc van Rompay, and Dr Bas ter Haar Romeny. As for Professor P. A. H. de Boer and Professor Martin Mulder, it is only to their memory that I can pay tribute.

I have also greatly benefited from discussions and correspondence with other colleagues, notably Dr Sebastian Brock, Dr Anthony Gelston, Professor Jan Joosten, Professor Robert Gordon, the Reverend David Lane and Professor J. B. Segal. Their comments on draft chapters have been especially valuable. From my students I have

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learnt at least as much, especially from Matthew Morgenstern and from Dr Gillian Greenberg, who has generously read through the whole text. I am grateful to them all.

To enable me to complete this work, Professor John Klier arranged for me to be relieved of undergraduate teaching duties during the academic year 1995–6. As departmental head he has been unprecedentedly supportive, and deserves my heartfelt thanks.

Constant use has been made of Dr Williams's Library, the libraries of the University of London and its schools, and the holdings of the Peshitta Institute in Leiden. The help that I have received is gratefully acknowledged.

This book is dedicated to my children Gail and Alexander, who have had to compete with the Peshitta for my attention for as long they can remember. I can only hope to have struck the right balance.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AJSL</i>	American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature
<i>BO</i>	Bibliotheca Orientalis
<i>BZAW</i>	Beihefte, Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CSCO</i>	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
<i>DJD</i>	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
<i>JBL</i>	Journal of Biblical Literature
<i>JJS</i>	Journal of Jewish Studies
<i>JSS</i>	Journal of Semitic Studies
<i>JTS</i>	Journal of Theological Studies
<i>MGWJ</i>	Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums
<i>MPI</i>	Monographs of the Peshitta Institute, Leiden
<i>OCA</i>	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
<i>OCP</i>	Orientalia Christiana Periodica
<i>OrChr</i>	Oriens Christianus
<i>OTS</i>	Oudtestamentische Studien
<i>PG</i>	Patrologia Graeca
<i>PIC</i>	Peshitta Institute Communications
<i>PL</i>	Patrologia Latina
<i>PO</i>	Patrologia Orientalis
<i>REJ</i>	Revue de études juives
<i>RSO</i>	Rivista degli Studi Orientali
<i>SBL</i>	Society for Biblical Literature
<i>SJOT</i>	Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament
<i>SVT</i>	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
<i>TB</i>	Talmud Bavli
<i>VT</i>	Vetus Testamentum
<i>ZAW</i>	Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>ZDMG</i>	Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft