

Some Problems in Determining the *Vorlage* of Early Syriac Versions of the NT*

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Three translation issues in the Syriac NT are considered: the translation of καρπός, of πάντα ταῦτα or ταῦτα πάντα, and of διάβολος. In each case the *Novum Testamentum Graece* uses Syriac authorities to witness to a variant, but an examination of those authorities demonstrates that while they may support the readings for which they are cited they also could have arrived at their translation due to preferences peculiar to Syriac.

At present serious study of the level of certainty or uncertainty there is in determining the *Vorlage* of the early Syriac versions of the NT is still in its infancy. The Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th edition; hereafter *NTG*), by virtue of its wide distribution, tends to make itself the consensus opinion of how such versional evidence should be used. This work is a monumental achievement and an indispensable tool by which many scholars achieve their main access to the early versions. However, while the edition in many ways represents an improvement over previous editions of the Greek NT in its references to Syriac evidence,¹ it still leaves a lot to be desired in its representation of the earlier Syriac versions. The stated policy of the edition is that the versions only appear in the apparatus when ‘their underlying Greek text can be determined with confidence’ (*NTG*, Introduction, p. *63).² This policy is not here disputed. However, the method used to deduce the *Vorlage* of the Syriac versions is still not rigorous. For a high degree of certainty to be achieved in the citation of evidence it is necessary for concor-

* I am most grateful to Dr P. M. Head for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

1 Even Baethgen, who was confident enough to publish a reconstruction of the Greek text behind the Curetonian Syriac (albeit with caveats), criticised the overconfidence of editors of the Greek NT contemporary with himself in reconstructing Greek originals behind variants in Syriac: ‘Jedenfalls sind in dem Apparat bei Tregelles und Tischendorf eine Menge angegeblicher Varianten des Sc [= C] zu streichen.’ F. Baethgen, *Evangelienfragmente. Der griechische Text des cureton’schen Syriers* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1885) 32.

2 Contrast the statement of the International Greek New Testament Project: ‘It is not to be presumed that all versional evidence given is deemed to bear upon the Greek original’ (*The Gospel according to St. Luke: Part One, Chapters 1–12* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1984] viii).

dance checks of Syriac to be performed to ensure that variations in Syriac are not due to natural preferences in that language. Now that a concordance of the NT of the Peshitta (P) is available³ and also an analytical key to the gospels,⁴ although further tools are still desiderata (for instance, a concordance of the Old Syriac gospels), it is obvious that *NTG*'s references to Syriac evidence need to be revised. This will be illustrated with several examples below.

The degree of care that needs to be taken with an apparatus can be appreciated by reference to variants related to the word καρπός, 'fruit'. While in the text of *NTG* there are 50 occurrences of καρπός in the singular, the plural occurs a mere 16 times. On the other hand, the Syriac word ܩܝܪܐ, the standard equivalent of καρπός whether singular or plural, occurs 77 times in P,⁵ all but 3 of these in the plural. There is thus an overwhelming idiomatic tendency for Syriac to have the plural where Greek uses the singular. The three singular occurrences in Syriac are (1) the expression 'fruit of the womb' in Luke 1.42, referring to the unborn Jesus, evidently singular, and (2) the botanical phenomenon mentioned in Mark 4.28 and 29. Despite P's evident preference for the plural, *NTG* cites P as witness for the plural when Greek witnesses show variants on four occasions (Luke 3.9; 6.43 twice; Phil 1.11). It also cites Old Syriac witnesses S (Sinaitic) and C (Curetonian) in Luke 3.9 and S in Luke 6.43. To use the Old Syriac, however, is just as precarious as to use P, since it like P shows an overwhelming preference for the plural of the word 'fruit'. The situation is more complex in the Old Syriac since not all plurals receive the plural marker *seyame*. Without suffixes or syntactic markers the singular and plural forms of ܩܝܪܐ are indistinguishable at a consonantal level. However, the absence of *seyame* in S on forms morphologically marked as plural (e.g. Luke 6.44; John 15.16), along with the frequent absence of *seyame* throughout S, suggests that it is possible to read all the forms in the Old Syriac as plural with the exception of Luke 1.42. Thus that in S ܩܝܪܐܐ ܩܝܪܐܐ in John 15.5 with *seyame* occurs so close to the same phrase in v. 2 without *seyame* suggests that the occurrence in v. 2 is also plural, and means 'many fruits' not 'much fruit'. Whether or not visually ambiguous cases in the Old Syriac are plural, the Old Syriac's tendency to pluralise can be unambiguously observed when all nine of the singular examples of καρπός in Matthew are, as shown by *seyame* or their context, read by C and S whenever they are extant as plural (S is not preserved for Matt 7.19; 21.19). The con-

3 G. A. Kiraz, *A Computer-Generated Concordance to the Syriac New Testament* (6 vols; Leiden: Brill, 1993).

4 At least for about half the alphabet; see T. C. Falla, *A Key to the Peshitta Gospels, Volume One: Ālaph–Dālath* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), *Volume Two: Hē–Yōdh* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

5 There are also four occurrences in the Philoxenian version for 2 Pet 1.8; Jude 12; Rev 22.2 (twice), for the last of which the Philoxenian is cited in *NTG* as supporting a plural. The higher number of occurrences of ܩܝܪܐ in P against καρπός in the Greek is caused *inter alia* by ܩܝܪܐ also being used in the representation of words like ἄκαρπος and καρποφορέω.

sistent Syriac idiom makes it questionable whether one can adduce the Syriac versions in the way *NTG* does. It might be objected that in Luke 3.9 and 6.43 the Syriac witnesses show agreement with ‘Western’ textual witnesses and that this confirms the retroversion in *NTG*’s apparatus. However, the consistent Syriac idiom undermines the certainty which the Introduction of *NTG* supposedly requires for versional authorities to be quoted in the apparatus.⁶ It is entirely possible that a Greek plural underlies these occurrences in Syriac of the plural of ܠܝܘܢܐ. However, there is simply no way of knowing whether or not this is the case. Further confirmation that a Syriac translator of the NT might well have translated a singular in his *Vorlage* by a plural is found in the Syriac OT. Whereas Hebrew ֵרֵב, ‘fruit’, is invariably singular, its cognate ܠܝܘܢܐ in Syriac is almost invariably plural.⁷

The problem is not that *NTG*’s apparatus informs readers that here is yet another agreement between Syriac witnesses and ‘Western’ ones. This is indeed useful to know. The problem is the statement in the Introduction of the purpose of citation of versional witnesses in the apparatus as giving the ‘underlying Greek text’. Various hypotheses can be raised to explain common elements between ‘Western’ witnesses and Syriac versions, one of which is naturally that Syriac witnesses were translated from a text with a plural as in the ‘Western’ text. However, this is merely one hypothesis. One can as readily posit that ‘Western’ witnesses have been influenced by Syriac or that the Syriac plural derives from the Diatessaron (which in turn could have had a singular or plural as its *Vorlage*), or that the Syriac and ‘Western’ witnesses agree by independent convergence, the latter being assimilated to a parallel passage (as Luke 6.43 D may have been assimilated to Matt 7.17–18). Yet none of these other possibilities would justify recording the Syriac in the apparatus according to the stated intention of *NTG*.

Another example of an idiom where Syriac witnesses need to be treated with greater care is that of the phrase ‘all these things’, πάντα ταῦτα or ταῦτα πάντα (by which is meant the neuter plural ‘near’ demonstrative pronoun in any case, not modifying a noun, but modified by πᾶς). The order of these two words varies considerably and thus we find that *NTG* marks a variation of word order in its textual

6 Given the general failure of the editors of *NTG* to recognise that a Greek singular καρπός could be represented by a Syriac plural ܠܝܘܢܐ, one might be surprised that in the apparatus to Luke 8.8 they have retroverted C’s plural by the singular καρπόν. However, here they have been influenced by the occurrence of the Greek singular in that verse translating C’s other plural. C’s variant here seems like a dittography.

7 Since the edition of the Syriac OT undertaken under the auspices of the Leiden Peshitta Institute is not quite complete, full details are hard to give. However, in the Pentateuch all 38 occurrences of ܠܝܘܢܐ are plural, in contrast to the 38 singular occurrences of ֵרֵב in Hebrew. An occasional singular in Syriac must receive an individual explanation. Thus, for instance, the singular in Cant 2.3 might be explained by the erotic sense of ‘fruit’.

notes for nine locations (Matt 6.32; 19.20; 23.36; 24.8, 33, 34; Mark 13.30; Luke 24.9; Acts 7.50; there is a further variant in Luke 16.14, but not about word order). In its main text the order ταῦτα πάντα predominates (20 occurrences versus 12). In its apparatus for 6 of the variants *NTG* cites Syriac versions as part of the evidence for or against a variant (Matt 6.32; 24.8, 33, 34; Mark 13.30; Luke 24.9; see also Luke 16.14). In the first of these C is quoted as supporting the order ταῦτα γὰρ πάντα as opposed to the text's πάντα γὰρ ταῦτα, the witnesses for which are not cited. In 3 cases in Matt 24 (vv. 8, 33, 34) where the main text reads πάντα (. . .) ταῦτα, P is quoted as supporting the opposite order, and alongside it in the first and third occurrences S is quoted. The order ταῦτα (. . .) πάντα is printed in the text in Mark 13.30 (with the support of SP), and in Luke 24.9 (with P). The point to note here is that in fact on every occasion where the Syriac is quoted as a witness to the text, whether on behalf of what is printed by *NTG* or against it, it supports the order ταῦτα (. . .) πάντα. This in itself should give us serious pause about the use of Syriac witnesses at this point. Scepticism about this use of witnesses only increases when the readings of the Syriac versions are considered in all the cases of ταῦτα with πάντα in the NT. In fact, in all cases where the Old Syriac witnesses have an equivalent of both πάντα and ταῦτα they have the order with the demonstrative preceding 'all' (at least one of the Old Syriac witnesses does not have a direct correspondence with the Greek words in Matt 4.9; Mark 7.23; 10.20; 13.4; Luke 18.21; 21.36; 24.9). In the NT of P, when the demonstrative ܐܠܗܐ 'these' does not qualify a noun, ܡܠܝܟܐ ('all') follows the demonstrative 34 times, whereas the reverse order occurs a mere 6 times.⁸ It seems then that there was a strong preference for the idiom with 'all' following the demonstrative, and that therefore the Syriac translators may have inverted the elements of their Greek *Vorlage* in translation.

Further confirmation of the possibility that a Syriac translator might invert the order of 'all' and the demonstrative for reasons of idiom is found in the Syriac translation of the OT. In the OT the phrase ܡܠܝܟܐ-ܐܠܗܐ, 'all these' (not an exclusively neuter phrase), has a fixed order and occurs 53 times in the MT. However, on the majority of occasions where this phrase is translated into Syriac the demonstrative precedes the word 'all'. The inversion occurs in 25 cases as opposed to 18 which retain the Hebrew order. The 10 other examples do not display a direct enough correspondence between the Hebrew and the Syriac to be used in this discussion. When both elements, the demonstrative and 'all', are represented, there are some interesting word order patterns in Syriac, which suggest that it cannot be used as a direct witness to the word order of its *Vorlage*. In general 'all' follows the demonstrative in the Syriac OT when it is the object, or follows a preposition.⁹

8 Given this tendency it should hardly cause surprise that 'all' follows the demonstrative in P of Matt 6.32b, where the Greek reads τούτων πάντων.

9 Outside the book of Chronicles, which was probably not composed alongside the other books of P, when ܡܠܝܟܐ-ܐܠܗܐ is translated in P, and both elements are represented, the order is

A final example where the *Vorlage* of a Syriac version is less obvious than appears at first is in the name of Satan, or the devil.¹⁰ In a single variant in Luke 4.2, *NTG* quotes S alongside D *pc e* as supporting τοῦ σατανᾶ instead of the text's τοῦ διαβόλου. This is problematic since, although Syriac versions often use the form ܐܘܨܝܢܐܘܪܐ, 'accuser', to represent the Greek διάβολος, ܐܘܨܝܢܐܘܪܐ is far from a uniform equivalent. The Peshitta represents διάβολος by ܫܬܢܐ, 'Satan', in Matt 13.39; John 6.70; 13.2; 1 Tim 3.6, 7; 2 Tim 2.26; Heb 2.14; Jas 4.7; 1 Pet 5.8; 1 John 3.8 (three times), 10, and perhaps also in Luke 4.5 where διάβολος is omitted in the text of *NTG*. When we consider the picture in the Old Syriac gospels it is even more striking. For the 15 occurrences of διάβολος in the gospels the Old Syriac witnesses (where extant) show similar numbers of occurrences of ܐܘܨܝܢܐܘܪܐ and ܫܬܢܐ, 4 and 5 respectively, with the witnesses split in a further 2 cases: Matt 4.1, with C reading ܫܬܢܐ and S ܐܘܨܝܢܐܘܪܐ,¹¹ and Matt 4.8, with the witnesses reading the reverse. In Matt 13.39 and John 8.44 ܫܬܢܐ, 'evil one', is used,¹² and in Luke 8.12 ܥܘܠܡܝܬܐ, 'enemy'. Given the variety of Syriac phrases used where there are no widely attested Greek textual variants it seems unwise to take a single occurrence of a Syriac phrase as representing a textual variant. It seems that there was no fixed equivalent of διάβολος in the earliest Syriac, or even at a later stage when P was made. This stands in contrast to σατανᾶς which is rendered ܫܬܢܐ in P and the Old Syriac whenever extant with the exception of Luke 13.16 C (see below). Not all variety can be explained, and the reason for greater consistency with σατανᾶς may be that the close equivalent ܫܬܢܐ suggested itself so readily. However, an explanation for the variety of correspondences in Syriac may be along the following lines. Syriac has no definite article and partially compensates for this by representing definiteness by an intricate system of anticipatory suffixes, object

always following the Hebrew when the phrase is the subject, and inverting the order when it is the object or following a preposition. This rule even holds in Judg 20.44, where the phrase is an object in Hebrew, but has been made the subject in Syriac. This word order tendency in Syriac may be partly explained on the ground that the demonstrative is the nucleus of the phrase to which prepositions are therefore attached.

- 10 This has already been discussed by S. P. Brock, 'Limitations of Syriac in Representing Greek', in B. M. Metzger, ed., *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) 88–9, who helpfully discusses other aspects of Syriac translation of titles for the devil.
- 11 The agreement between parallel passages with Matt 4.1 C and Luke 4.2 S reading ܫܬܢܐ raises the possibility of Diatessaronic influence.
- 12 Adalbert Merx, *Die vier kanonischen Evangelien nach ihrem ältesten bekannten Texte* (3 vols; Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1902–11) discusses this and several other passages under consideration. Here, as elsewhere in his commentary on the Gospels based on S, Merx is more ready to see in S a *Vorlage* not attested in Greek witnesses (ὁμιεῖς ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ ἐστὲ) than to allow for the possibility that a translator might have paraphrased (see especially 3.214). This tendency renders much of his extensive work of only limited usefulness.

markers, demonstratives, and so forth.¹³ Sometimes these are not available and a literal translation of the Greek would create an ambiguous text. This is the case with ܐܘܨܝܢܐܘܬܐ, ‘The Accuser’, or equally ‘an accuser’. The title ܡܘܨܝܢܐ is less ambiguous than ܐܘܨܝܢܐܘܬܐ. Sometimes the diabolic character of a figure mentioned is contextually obvious (as in Matt 25.41) and so ܐܘܨܝܢܐܘܬܐ can occur. When the identity of the accuser is obvious ܐܘܨܝܢܐܘܬܐ can even occur as an equivalent of ὁ σατανᾶς (Luke 13.16 C). But apart from these examples the Old Syriac has no examples of ܐܘܨܝܢܐܘܬܐ used when the devil has not already been introduced as a character, except in Matt 4.1, where as noted above the witnesses of the Old Syriac are split. The ambiguity that would be created in some situations is only too obvious if we consider how Syriac might translate John 6.70 (καὶ ἐξ ὑμῶν εἷς διάβολός ἐστιν). How could a translator who used ܐܘܨܝܢܐܘܬܐ in this context avoid the possible understanding of what he had written as ‘and one of you is an accuser’? The solution was simple: to use ܡܘܨܝܢܐ.¹⁴ The same tendency to avoid ambiguity seems to be present in P, which also uses ܡܘܨܝܢܐ as an equivalent of βελιάρ in 2 Cor 6.15, and to avoid saying ‘resist an accuser and he will flee from you’ (there being no clear contextual indication that the devil was meant) explicitly mentions Satan in Jas 4.7.¹⁵

To conclude, this brief survey of three areas of use of Syriac as a textual witness has shown weaknesses in the way the apparatus of *NTG* was compiled if citation of Syriac evidence is truly meant to reflect a high degree of confidence about its underlying Greek text rather than merely striking agreement between diverse witnesses. The work of the International Greek New Testament Project avoids such a criticism by its own caveat on the use of its apparatus, though for instance it lists S as supporting the plural καρπούς in Luke 6.43. It must be asked, however, whether even that project is not liable to give unsuspecting readers a false impression of how widespread a Greek reading may have been by failing to alert readers to the fact that a version may have a particular translation tendency. The *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* project for the OT avoids this problem by pointing out where variant wordings are likely to have arisen by the process of translation.¹⁶

13 See P. J. Williams, *Studies in the Syntax of the Peshitta of 1 Kings* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) chapters 2–4, 10.

14 This rendering may predate the Old Syriac, being found in the Diatessaron according to Ephrem, but Tatian may have been seeking to avoid the same ambiguity.

15 The explanation here, using the concept of definiteness, in no way conflicts with Brock’s observation (‘Limitations of Syriac’, 88) that early Syriac writers display a ‘lack of interest in the “accusing” activity of the Devil’. A factor contributory to such a lack of interest could well be the linguistic explanation given here.

16 I base my evaluation on the preliminary fascicle of Ruth prepared for the IOSOT Congress in August 1998 in Oslo. See A. Schenker *et al.*, *Biblia Hebraica Quinta: Fasciculus extra seriem Librum Ruth praeparavit Jan de Waard* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1998).

However, it may err too far the other way in advising readers against positing a variant *Vorlage* from MT. That said, it is easier to choose to ignore the advice of the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* than it is to become aware of translation tendencies, which are usually only known among specialists on a particular version. It is arguably therefore the task of those preparing critical editions and suggesting versional parallels more than it is the task of the general user to note such translational issues. Thus whenever a version is considered as a witness the word or construction analysed must be considered in all its occurrences in that version (or better still, in its occurrences in wider corpora). This has clearly not been done comprehensively for the Syriac witnesses in preparation of critical editions of the Greek NT to date; given the previous lack of concordances and the sheer volume of the task one can easily understand why this sort of verification was not undertaken. The production of editions like *NTG* already represents a vast amount of work, but still more needs to be done to improve on its standards. At present a widely agreed standard is that versional evidence should only very rarely be treated as evidence for a variant when there is no support from Greek authorities. Thus ܘܠܗܘܐ in S is treated as a variant in Luke 4.2 (when it is supported by D *pc*e), but not in Luke 4.5. However, even this standard fails to consider a version in its own right, and does not examine mechanisms whereby a version could arrive independently at a translation which parallels variant Greek texts. Of course a relationship between Syriac texts and the 'Western' text is undeniable, and thus the Syriac in many cases is taken to support a variant attested in Greek witnesses. However, even this small survey has shown that the origin of some such variants can be well explained as due to Syriac idiom or preferences. This in turn might give weight to the proposal that some 'Western' readings originated from Syriac.¹⁷

The conclusion that *NTG* is deficient in its representation of Syriac evidence is not in any way meant to reflect badly on those who undertook the work, but merely notes the provisional nature of their conclusions and the need for us now to move on to a better method.

¹⁷ As maintained, for instance, in F. H. Chase, *The Syro-Latin Text of the Gospels* (London: Macmillan, 1895).