

Rays From The Rose Cross Magazine

Book Reviews

The Peshitta: A New Look at an Old Book

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The Christian Bible has been used as the alibi and authority for virtually every conceivable course of human action-from waging war, to promoting vegetarianism, to condoning polygamy, to proving the vanity of all effort. Part of the problem in citing Scripture is due to the proliferation of texts all purporting to be the Bible.

While the King James version is the most popular rendition in the English language, it was produced by forty-seven translators, only three of whom, as Max Heindel states, knew Hebrew. And two of them died before the Psalms was translated. Even at that, the Hebrew text used as their source, the Talmud, had not

been compiled before 500 A.D., at it came from a variety of sources. Only several centuries later was a Masoretic text composed in which vowels were inserted to open up the exclusively consonantal form in which the earlier version was written.

Moreover, the Greek Septuagint, on which most Bible versions have been based, already was derivative and fraught with interpretations and distortions of Hebrew words and idioms. Written by seventy-two Palestinian scholars in seventy days (it is alleged) for cosmopolitan Alexandrian Jews, the Septuagint served as the basis for a retranslation into Hebrew, since the original Hebrew Old Testament texts had been lost.

Martin Luther's German Bible was a translation of St. Jerome's Latin Bible, itself based on the Greek. When words are so wrought and wrenched through various linguistic filters, one can but marvel that Christian Scripture has survived as intact as it appears to be.

Some of the confusion and ambiguity arising from the plethora of derivative texts has been obviated with George Lamsa's translation of the Peshitta (Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1968) from the Aramaic. Completely unknown to the West before Great Britain's military and political ascendancy in India and the East

in the nineteenth century, the complete Peshitta was not translated until 1933.

The term peshitta means straight, simple, sincere, and true; that is, original. It was so named to distinguish it from other Bible revisions and translations. It contains the Apocrypha, which "a few wiseacres" delegated to "the literary scrap heap" (Heindel).

One of the world's most ancient languages, Aramaic was the language of the Semitic culture, the Hebrew prophets, and the lingua franca of the Fertile Crescent from the seventh century B.C. to about the sixth century A.D. Jesus and his disciples spoke the Galilean dialect of Aramaic. Mark tells us (14:70) that Peter was exposed when in Caiphas' house by speaking this tongue.

On his journeys Paul preached the Christian Gospel written in Aramaic. He always spoke in Jewish synagogues and his first converts were Hebrews. His epistles were originally written in Aramaic (though this is disputed by some western scholars, often protecting vested interests) to small Christian congregations comprised mostly of Jews of the dispersion. Paul emphasized Hebrew law, Jewish ordinances, and temple rituals, matters of no interest to non-Jews.

Josephus, writing in the middle of the first century A.D., states that even though "there have been many [Jews] who have done their endeavors, with great patience, to obtain this Greek learning, there have yet hardly been two or three who have succeeded herein." Indeed, the teaching of Greek was forbidden by Jewish rabbis. It was said that it was better for a man to give his child meat of swine, taboo pork, than to teach him the language of the Greeks.

It is instructive for us to remember that the Bible was written as an Eastern book primarily for the Israelites, and only subsequently was it made accessible to the gentile world. Paul's letters, for instance, were translated into Greek for the use of converts who spoke Greek. As Luke writes in Acts 22:2, Paul defended himself in his own tongue.

The foregoing establishes Aramaic as the Bible language. The oldest dated (464 A.D.) biblical manuscript in the world, written in Aramaic, is that of the four Books of Moses, preserved in the British Museum. Aramaic, whose literary form was called Syriac, was the language of the church that spread eastward almost from the beginning of Christianity in Antioch (in present-day Syria), where the term Christian was first used to denominate the followers of

Christ Jesus. Aramaic differed from the Hebrew language of Palestine as American English differs from British English.

Lamsa, in his introductory remarks to the Peshitta translation says that one would no more talk of translations between the sister languages of Aramaic and Hebrew than one would speak of translating Higher to Lower German. The term Hebrew itself is derived from the Aramaic Abar or Habar, meaning to cross over, referring to those Hebrew people who, following Abraham from Ur in Chaldea, crossed over the Euphrates River westward and went to Palestine, The Hebrews were "the people across the river."

While Easterners still adhere to God's commandment not to add to or omit a word from the Scriptures (Deut. 4:2, 12:32; Prov. 30:6; Rev. 22:19), translations from Semitic languages into Greek and Latin were subject to constant revision. Learned men who copied them introduced changes, trying to simplify obscurities and ambiguities which were due to the work of the first translators.

The foregoing observations give grounds for regarding the Peshitta as quite possibly the text least altered and most faithful to the original Biblical texts. From an occult point of view, we can find confirmation for this

claim in the text itself. Aramaic may be the richest and most expressive language of the Semitic group, but it has a small vocabulary compared to Latin and Greek. This limitation was compensated for by assigning many shades of meaning to the same word and by the use of dots.

Max Heindel regards this use of semiotics and nonvowel text as evidence of "the transcendental wisdom of the wonderful Intelligences Who inspired the Torah," for it conceals and protects even as it enriches meaning by allowing for variant readings and multiple perspectives. "Had the vowels been inserted and a division made into words, there would have been only one way of reading it and these grand and sublime mysteries could not have been hidden therein." For the Old Testament was not written as an "open" book of God but was intended for the initiated (Cosmo, 322).

Consider, however, the effect produced by confusing the reference of dots to their intended words. The only difference between the Aramaic words "learned man" and "stupid man" is a dot over or under the same word, respectively. And these dots could result inadvertently by the pressing together of manuscripts in humid climate or by the accumulation of extrinsic marks and spots. Frequently the same words will have different

meanings according to the context. Also, some of the most significant mistranslations were due to the confusion of nearly identical letters and words. For instance, the bizarre comparison in which it is said (Matt. 19:24) that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven is due to the translator's failure to identify the other relevant meaning of the Aramaic word *gamla*, rope!

Many Aramaic idioms were translated into Greek and other languages literally, losing the sense of the passage or even obscuring it altogether. The clause in the Lord's Prayer conventionally rendered "and lead us not into temptation" has been restored to its original meaning with "and do not let us enter into temptation." The thought that God would and does lead his children into temptation is inadmissible, and Bible exegetes have gone to great lengths in trying to justify the mistranslation.

The passage in Luke (9:59) in which the young man insists on "burying" his father before he follows Christ ignores the idiom that should read "take care of until death." How much more demanding is Christ's call in terms of this rendering, since the father is still alive

and exerts much more legitimate claim on his son's ministrations.

A passage that has caused considerable difficulty is resolved by the Peshitta Bible. Christ Jesus on the cross (Mark 15:34) does not say "My God, why hast thou forsaken me," but "this was my destiny." How much better does this translation accord with what we would expect the archangelic Regent of the Sun to say, even under such dire conditions. For that pivotal moment in Earth's history had been prepared for over millennia.

Again, confirming Heindel's own reading of problematic words of the crucified Jesus to the thief on His right, "I say to thee today, thou shalt be with me in Paradise." The Greek language did not employ punctuation and the translator(s) elected, erroneously, to place the comma before, rather than after, today, contradicting our knowledge that Christ descended into the earth before he ascended into heaven.

The Aramaic idiom translated in standard English versions as turning the other cheek actually means "do not start a quarrel or a fight." In other words, one need not be quite as supinely accepting of violence inflicted upon one's person as the traditional translation suggests. Other examples of clarified translations

include "in my Father's house are many rooms" (John 14:2) and "I will not leave you bereaved" (John 14:18).

Our last illustration is particularly illuminating: "No man has even seen God; but the first-born of God, who is in the bosom of his Father, he has declared him" (John 1:18). "First-born" (also used in John 1:14—"first-born of the Father") more conforms with Paul's description of Christ as our "elder brother" and the "first fruits," thus promising an immeasurably magnified destiny for man in terms of his cognate origin in the Father, his current status as sharing brotherhood in and with Christ, and his future prospect as a Son of the Father.

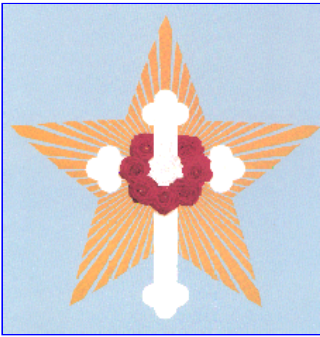
The Peshitta offers many similar flashes of clarity and intrinsic confirmations of authenticity. This reviewer would not propose that it replace all other translations of the Bible, for the King James edition in particular is an inspired text, compensating by diction and rhythm—its poetic vision—what it occasionally lacks in fidelity to the original sense. The judicious use of several versions of Scriptures will enhance our understanding of the sacred Word—until such time as we may read it directly and infallibly from the memory of nature.

—C.W.

—Rays from the Rose Cross Magazine, March/April, 1996

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