THE URMIAN EDITION OF THE PESHITTA: THE STORY BEHIND THE TEXT

Piet Dirksen

In 1852 the so-called Urmiian edition of the Peshitta Old Testament appeared.² It had been prepared by Justin Perkins, a missionary under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Boston, Mass. Perkins arrived in Urmiia, Persia, on 24 October 1834 to establish and head the mission post there, which had as its aim to raise the spiritual and cultural level of the Nestorians in the Urmiia region. The 1852 edition of the Peshitta text accompanied a translation of the Hebrew Bible into modern Syriac as it was spoken among the Nestorians in the Urmiia valley, as different from the “Mountain Nestorians.”³

The question has often been asked what the background of the text of this edition is: did Perkins base his edition on Nestorian manuscripts which he had at his disposal, possibly also making use of the edition prepared by Samuel Lee under the auspices of the British and Foreign Bible Society and published in 1823,

¹I am very grateful to Professor W. L. Holladay, Andover Newton Theological School, for suggesting a sizeable number of corrections in the English of this article. The abbreviations used are: ABCFM: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission; BFBS: British and Foreign Bible Society; MH: Missionary Herald; Residence: A Residence of Eight Years in Persia (see note 3).

²Vetus Testamentum Syriacum et Neo-Syriacum (Urmiia 1852).

or, conversely, did he mainly make use of Lee’s edition, while possibly also using one or more Nestorian manuscripts? The first possibility is accepted, among others, by A. Rahlfs, B. Albrekston, and A. G. Kallarakal;\(^4\) G. H. Gwilliam quotes I. H. Hall as writing in a personal communication that “It is absolutely certain that [the Editors] made the MSS they found in the region the controlling element in settling the text.” Gwilliam himself says that the Urmia edition “may occupy in our apparatus criticus the place of a good Nestorian codex.”\(^5\) The second possibility is proposed, among others, by W. E. Barnes for Chronicles.\(^6\) In between stands J. A. Emerton, who maintains for Song of Songs that “Perkins thus appears to have used a Nestorian manuscript or manuscripts...But he probably also made use of a source containing Western readings, and that source may have been L.”\(^7\)

The problem in finding an answer to this question is that nothing of the Urmia mission post has survived. In the wake of ethnic strife, which caused untold human suffering, it was completely destroyed in 1919 and all papers which might have shed light on the textual background of the edition and the whole library with whatever manuscripts it contained were lost. This left as the only possible source for information concerning this edition the archives of the ABCFM. During a week in November 1993 I had the opportunity to go through these archives. The following is the story behind the Urmia edition as far as it can be gleaned from this material.

Let me first offer a survey of the material:

Letters to the ABCFM and some other material are preserved in the Houghton Library of Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.\(^8\) The letters are directed to Rufus Anderson, the secretary of the Prudential Committee, which was the decision-


\(^6\) W. E. Barnes, An Apparatus Criticus to Chronicles in the Peshitta Version (Cambridge 1897) XV.


\(^8\) This material has been microfilmed and is marketed by Research Publications International, Reading, England.
making body within the ABCFM, at least as far as mission policy was concerned. The documents are bound together in a number of volumes, which besides their present shelf numbers have each a number on their spine, presumably a former shelf number. It will be given below between parentheses and for easy reference will also be used where references to this material are made.

The following volumes contain material referred to in this article:


The minutes of the Prudential Committee are kept in the Congregational Library, Boston, Mass. They record only the official resolutions and other decisions, without mentioning the arguments or the discussions which led to their adoption. In the following, literal quotations are either in indented paragraphs, or within quotation marks. The rest is put in my own words.

One of Perkins’s major concerns was to make the Bible available to the people and help them in the understanding of it. After a printing press had arrived and had been installed in November 1840, an edition of the Psalms was the first work to be produced (1841).

The preparation of an edition of the whole Bible in Syriac began with the translation of the New Testament into modern Syriac together with an edition of the ancient Syriac text in parallel columns. Perkins apparently started to translate the New Testament before a formal decision as to its publication had been made by the Prudential Committee. He writes that he began the work of translation “today,” i.e. on 15 February 1836, and continues:

The entire Scriptures now exist in ancient Syriac, though in the Jacobite character. But this ancient language is not understood by the people, and the Jacobite character is detested, and but very imperfectly understood by the ecclesiastics, who readily read the ancient Syriac in their own character. A translation of the Bible into the modern

Quotations from the material listed are by permission from the Houghton Library, Harvard University, and from the United Church Board for World Ministries, Cleveland, OH. I am indebted to the librarians of both the Houghton Library and the Congregational Library for making this material available for my research, and to Professor W. L. Holladay for his assistance in locating the minutes and for introducing me to the librarian of the second-named Library.
language therefore and an edition of the ancient Syriac Scriptures in the Nestorian character are both in the highest degree desirable. (*MH 33* [1837] 35).

Only in a letter of 12 February 1845 (176, item 233) does Perkins ask if the Bible Society or the ABFM can make provisions for the printing of a translation of the New Testament. In this letter he writes that this work of translation was difficult because the spoken Syriac had not yet been reduced to writing. He writes, moreover, that he had translated from the Peshitta text without adaptations to the Greek in view of Nestorian sensitivities. This point, however, was an issue of intense debate, both among the missionaries and between the mission and the Prudential Committee. In a letter to Anderson of 7 March 1843 (120, item 54) E. Breath writes that within the mission staff there was no unanimity on this subject. He lists the arguments for translating from the ancient Syriac and those for translating from the original languages.

The arguments for the first are:

1. The ancient version is a good one.
2. It has an acknowledged authority.
3. It meets with less prejudice, and therefore a translation from it will find a better acceptance.
4. If we translate from the original language “we may be accused of making an indirect attack upon the ecclesiastical organization of the Nestorian church.”
5. The Greek text contains readings which “seem to the Nestorians to contain abominable errors.”
6. It is arrogant not to use the ancient translation because it differs from our translation.
7. The LXX also contains mistakes and yet it was used by our Lord.
8. A translation from the original languages may not be considered to have any authority.
9. A translation which differs from what one is accustomed to may hamper its acceptance and circulation.

The arguments for a translation from the original languages, especially as concerns the Hebrew Bible, are:

1. A translation from a translation will “double the chance of error, in the result, that there is in making it from the original.”
2. It is a “bad precedent” if we translate from a copy which for all its excellence does contain errors, “the extent of which is not known by them.”
3. If we, the missionaries, prepare our sermons, we should not be burdened by differences between the text as it is familiar to us in our English translation and the Syriac version in passages we are going to quote.

4. There are errors in the ancient Syriac. A number of examples are given, as Gen 2:8 (“from the first”; KJV: “eastward”) and 1 Tim 3:1,2 (“where bishop is rendered by priest”).

A committee, Breath continues, has been appointed to study this issue, and has now presented a list of the arguments for the two possibilities. These concur in general with those listed above, but are nevertheless listed by Breath. A new argument for translating from the ancient Syriac was that “it could be speedily made and supply an immediate demand, whereas one made from the Hebrew and Greek would require much time.” In case of substantial differences between the ancient Syriac and the Hebrew these could be given in the margin. Then “all truth is preserved and all prejudices to its reception removed.”

This letter was discussed by the Prudential Committee in its weekly meeting of 26 May 1843. The minutes say:

A letter from the Nestorian Mission dated March 7th. 1843, on the subject of translation, being laid before the Committee, it was resolved as the opinion of the Committee, that the translation of the scriptures for the Nestorians should be made from the original language.

As appears from a letter by A. L. Holladay of 31 January 1845 (176, item 166) this decision was accepted by the Mission, though less than wholeheartedly (“we acquiesced in, or rather submitted to, the decision of the Committee...”). However, the decision met with “universal dislike” with the Nestorian clergy:

“Why,” said they, “do you give the greater prominence to the Greek, and only an inferior place to the translation of our scriptures? Translate from our version and put the Greek in the margin if you do not wish to abolish our scriptures.” Must we give the Scriptures to the Nestorians in that form in which they are desirous to receive them or endeavour, regardless of their feelings, to force upon them a version, the publication of which not only the Papists, but also the Nestorians themselves will point at as the first step in attacking their religion?"

Holladay then goes on to plead for a translation of the Bible from the ancient Syriac. If the Committee is not ready to accept this for the whole Bible, it is hoped that permission will be given with respect to the New Testament, “in which the Syriac agrees with the Greek text more nearly than the Syriac of the Old Testament does with the Hebrew text.” Referring to Holladay’s letter, Perkins, in a letter of 28
February 1845 (176, item 168), repeats this request, without adding new arguments, stating "I believe our Mission have never had clearer or stronger convictions of what is best on any subject."

The Prudential Committee discussed the issue in its meeting of 29 April 1845 and again on 24 June 1845 and now permission is given to go ahead. From the minutes it appears that the American Bible Society had been approached for funding of the enterprise but that this Society had declined. The minutes of 24 June 1845 read:

A letter having been read from the Secretary of the American Bible Society adverse to publishing a translation of the New Testament from the ancient Syriac version at the expense of that Society, it appeared that the Committee were for encouraging the missionaries at Oroomiah to print such a translation at the expense of the Board, provided the variations from the Greek were printed in the margin and in case the Mission were decidedly in favor of such a measure.

From the minutes of 13 January 1846 it appears, though, that the Bible Society had changed its mind:

Also a letter from Dr Brigham of the American Bible Society signifying the willingness of that Society to bear the expense of printing the Peshito version of the New Testament modernized to correspond to the Syriac as now spoken by the Nestorians; provided a translation of the variations from the original Greek shall be placed in the margin.

The Prudential Committee's permission is gratefully acknowledged by Perkins in his letter of 14 November 1845 (176, item 177). He writes that they are "thankful that the views of the Committee accord so entirely with our own on the subject of our translating...from that version," and adds that on 14 October 1845 the Mission "Resolved that in translating the New Testament from the Ancient Syriac as authorized by the Prudential Committee, we furnish on the margin 'all the variations from the Greek' as proposed by Dr. Anderson in his letter of June 28th 1845, by which we understand him to mean, wherever the sense is at all affected."

Perkins adds that the Mission plans to add to the translation an edition of the ancient Syriac text on the grounds that it will make the translation more acceptable. Moreover it will aid in the study of it: during the church services when the ancient Syriac is read, the people can read the modern translation instead of the ancient text “being senselessly muttered only in a dead language.” Finally, the ancient text will serve as a “literary standard gradually to harmonize the conflicting dialects.” There are no indications that this latter plan met with opposition from the Prudential Committee. In a letter by Perkins of 29 April 1846 (176, item 181) it appears that the
edition would number 1200 copies, at an estimated cost of $1700.

Plans for a translation of the Old Testament and an edition of the ancient Syriac text are first mentioned in Perkins's letter of 21 January 1846 (176, item 179). He brings two points to the attention of the Prudential Committee. The first is that the Mission has adopted the following resolution on January 20:

Resolved, that we deem it expedient that the Old Testament be translated from the Hebrew into the Modern Syriac, after the printing of the New Testament is completed, in case the Prudential Committee will authorize it.

The reason to translate from the Hebrew, and not from the ancient Syriac, is that there are more differences between the Hebrew and the Syriac than between the Greek and the Syriac. The second point is that the Mission plans to print the ancient Syriac text in a parallel column. The reasons for this are the following:

1. "In the infancy and paucity of the vernacular language of the Nestorians they ought for years to come if not for generations to be able to enrich and mature it by the study of the noble, venerable and polished ancient Syriac as a classical language," for which the "the oracles of God" are best suited.

2. There exists an edition of the Old Testament in western, Jacobite characters, "which the Nestorians dislike strongly."

3. The translators of the ancient version were still close to the Hebrew and many of them were Jews, who were "accustomed from their childhood to hear their rabbis explain the Scriptures," so that this version can help us in understanding the Hebrew.

4. It will make the translation more acceptable.

Perkins thinks of 1500 copies, at an estimated printing cost of $2000 for the translation only, and $4000 for a combined edition of translation and the ancient version.

This letter was discussed by the Prudential Committee in its meeting of 28 April 1846. The resolution runs as follows:

Resolved, In view of statements made in a letter from the Nestorian Mission dated January 21st, that the mission be authorised to translate the Old Testament from the Hebrew into the modern Syriac language...The Secretaries were instructed what to write to the Nestorian mission on the subject of printing the ancient Syriac version of the Old Testament in parallel columns with the new translation; a measure which did not commend itself to the judgement of the Committee.

On behalf of the Mission A. H. Wright writes in his letter of 23 October 1846 (176, item 184) that the Mission regrets the refusal of the Prudential Committee with
regard to the edition of the ancient Syriac text but that they will go ahead with the translation. The Mission adopted the following resolution:

Resolved, that as the Prudential Committee did not authorize the printing of the ancient Syriac of the Old Testament with the translation, made from the Hebrew, as recommended by a majority of the Mission, we deem it expedient that the translation be made, and printed alone, rather than that the work should not be done at all.

However, in the process the Mission found it increasingly difficult to accept the Committee’s decision. This feeling is expressed in a twelve page letter by A. H. Wright of 28 February 1848 (218, item 32). He writes that the Mission is “constrained by a deep sense of duty to bring the subject before the Committee a second time.” The following arguments for publishing the ancient text are given:

1. The “intrinsic excellence of the ancient Syriac version.” While doing the work of translation, Perkins has compared the Hebrew with the ancient version and his conclusion was: “I cannot help regarding it as a version of intrinsic and inestimable value in ascertaining the meaning of the original Hebrew.”

2. The ancient version is not faultless (what version is?), but “we have so high an opinion of its general excellence that we are surprised that the Prudential Committee should think ‘that the sooner it passes out of sight of the Nestorians the better.’” The edition of the BFBS is in use with the Nestorians and “extremely useful in our seminaries and schools.”

3. “A reasonable regard to the views of the Nestorians....” Our plan to publish a translation without the ancient version has caused among the Nestorians “a feeling of dissatisfaction, such as we cannot fully convey to you an idea of it.” The Patriarch has told us that if we follow the regulations of the Committee our work will be in vain. We are now “on the most friendly terms....” but “What a storm then, they will raise against us...when they become disaffected towards us.” It is said that it contains many mistakes, but that holds good also for the Septuagint; nevertheless “our Lord and the apostles did sanction it by often quoting from it.” Also the “English translation in common use” contains mistakes, but “it is held in the highest estimation by Christians who read that language.” A proposal to supplant it by a new translation “would be frowned upon.” This English translation is 200 years old, the ancient Syriac version however 1800 years, “and are you surprised that an oriental people who certainly have no less veneration for what is ancient than you in the West, should be loath[?] to give it up and adopt another Bible?”
4. "If the ancient version be printed it will add greatly to the usefulness of the translation." The Nestorians have many dialects. The new translation will be in the dialect of the Urmia valley. The Patriarch has told us that he sometimes needs the ancient version to understand the new translation of the New Testament. "Indeed, we apprehend that if the translation from the Hebrew be printed alone, it will be received with cold indifference if received at all, and may fall a dead letter from the Press" and then it can become an instrument in the hands of the enemies of us and our work.

5. "The Ancient Syriac ought to be printed to furnish the means for cultivating and enriching the Modern Syriac tongue."

6. "It ought to be printed to furnish the Nestorians with a classic in their venerable language; which they may study to the exclusion of works that abound among them, of a very objectionable character."

7. The experience with printing the New Testament in two columns has proved this to be the right thing to do. "It is received with the greatest avidity by the Nestorians...and it is regarded as a treasure of priceless value."

Nothing is known about the discussions within the Prudential Committee. The minutes say only that in its meeting of 2 May 1848 a committee of three members was formed to study the issue and to report at the next meeting. In the meeting of 9 May the report was presented "in favor of the measure, which report was adopted."

The translation of the Old Testament was completed on 10 January 1849 (MH 45 [1849] 197). The preparation of the edition of the ancient version must have been finished by the end of 1850 as may be gathered from a remark of Perkins in his letter of 16 February 1852 (218, item 43) that the past year had been taken up by the printing of the edition and that it was expected that the printing would be completed in the fall of 1852.

What does all this say about the textual background of Perkins’s edition? The first thing to be noted is that nowhere is any mention made of text-critical interest or work. It is inconceivable that it would not have been mentioned had the text been any of Perkins’s concerns.\(^\text{10}\) Though it is admittedly an *argumentum e silentio*,

\(^{10}\) *Pace I. H. Hall, quoted by Gwilliam (see note 5), who states that “It is easy to account for Dr. Perkins’ silence as to the particular sources of his text, as also with respect to his peculiarities. It would not have done, at that time, for a man to have given any public prominence to text critical matters ...”*
it indicates that in preparing the edition, Perkins was not occupied by textual details.

This is only the negative side of what we do know positively as to why he deemed this edition a necessity: the ancient version should be available in Nestorian script. The Jacobite script of the Lee edition was "detested"/"disliked strongly." Needed was an edition in the script which the Nestorians were familiar with and considered their own. As is plain from the letters written from Urmia, regard for the sensitivities of the Nestorians was a primary concern, if need be in opposition to the Prudential Committee ("...you in the West"; above, 218 item 32).

Along with this, there was a strong cultural motive, as is clear from the letters referred to above. In his letter of 3 May 1857 (218, item 59) Perkins writes in a retrospect of twenty years of missionary labour: "The noble Ancient Syriac must always be the classical language of the Nestorians, which is the reason of our publishing the Scriptures in that language."

There can be little doubt as to what was the main source for Perkins's text: it was Lee's edition of 1823. The only problem with this edition which necessitated its replacement was that it was written in Jacobite characters. Nowhere is there any allusion to the possibility that its text might be inferior to that of Nestorian manuscripts. On the contrary, according to Perkins the two texts are basically the same (see below, Residence, p. 15). The only other allusion to Lee's text, though that of the New Testament, is made by a Nestorian bishop, about whom Perkins in a sympathetic vein writes in one of his reports. The bishop had got as a present a copy of Lee's edition of the New Testament in 1831 and has preserved it "as a choice treasure. He and his father had read it carefully, comparing it with their manuscript Testament to ascertain if it were a true copy...They now read the printed copy, they told us, in the church on the Sabbath" (MH 31 [1835] 137).

The Mission did its best to propagate the use of the existing edition, and there was a good supply of it. Copies could be obtained from the depots of the BFBS in Constantinople and Smyrna. There are many positive references to Lee's edition, as the one quoted above (218, item 32). The most telling is that in Perkins's letter of 28 November 1838 to the BFBS (120, item 131):

...the American Bible Society has, for successive years, appropriated funds to our mission, with which we have purchased of your agent in Smyrna, Mr. Barker, large quantities of Syriac Scriptures, and distributed them gratuitously among the Nestorians and the Chaldeans (Papal Nestorians) and have kept a constant supply on hand for this purpose. The German Missionaries at Shoosha, moreover, procured them in the same way,
before our mission was commenced. And our distribution has been so extensive that they only had to apply to us, to obtain copies of the bible, in their own language.

Previous studies, as those mentioned above, have shown that besides the text of Lee, Perkins has in a number of cases made use of one or more Nestorian manuscripts. Perkins gives a survey of the availability of manuscripts for the various parts of the Old Testament as follows (Residence, p. 15):

1. Pentateuch: “not so rare as some other portions”
2. Rest of the Old Testament till Psalms, minus Chronicles: “few”
3. Chronicles: “very rare”
4. Psalms: “comparatively numerous”
5. Prophets: “rare”

Perkins adds that it is interesting to compare “the printed edition, as also our own, with these ancient Syriac manuscripts.” Sometimes there are “slight differences, not such at all to invalidate either as a standard.”

Whether for a certain book or group of books use was made of one or more manuscripts and, if so, to what extent can only be established by a comparison between the Urmia edition and Lee’s text, and an evaluation of the differences. One may, however, wonder whether this would be worth the time and energy. What the ABCFM’s archives tell us about the Sitz im Leben of the Urmia edition leaves little doubt that as far as the text is concerned this edition was in the main a reproduction of Lee’s text. Or, in other words, the Urmia edition does not witness to a type of text at all different from that of Lee, but rather to Perkins’s respect for the sensitivities, the language, and the culture of the Nestorians.