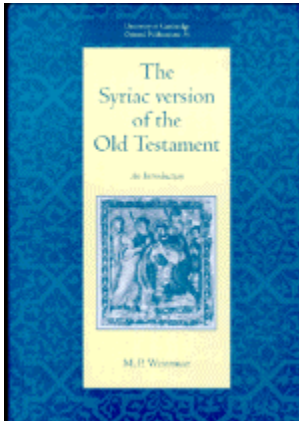


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**Weitzman, M.P.**

***The Syriac version of the Old Testament: An Introduction***

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Robert Shedinger  
Luther College  
Decorah, IA 52101

Few versions of the Hebrew scriptures present more problems of interpretation than the Syriac Peshitta. But with this work, Michael Weitzman has gone a long way toward opening new avenues of discussion on many of the problematic issues, even if he has not solved them to the satisfaction of all Peshitta scholars. Unfortunately, the author's untimely death has deprived the scholarly world of a proposed second volume on the Peshitta, a volume that would undoubtedly have gone a long way toward such solutions. The volume we do have, however, can only be regarded as the standard introduction to the Syriac version of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (leaving aside for now whether this was a Jewish or Christian product).

Following an introduction which surveys previous research on the Peshitta, and offers the thesis that the Peshitta was principally translated from a Hebrew *Vorlage* with some reference to the Septuagint, Weitzman sets about to explore the relationship between the Peshitta and its *Vorlage* in more detail. He concludes that the Peshitta represents a faithful but idiomatic translation of a Hebrew text close to, but not identical with, the Masoretic Text. Therefore, Weitzman, in agreement with E. Tov but against F. M. Cross, argues that the Peshitta's role as a source for variant Hebrew readings is modest at best. The translators, according to Weitzman, strove for clarity over grammatical or lexical equivalence, rendering problematic any attempt to reconstruct the Hebrew behind the Syriac, especially since the translators may have turned to the Septuagint for help in rendering difficult Hebrew passages.

Weitzman turns next to an exploration of the relationship between the Peshitta, the Septuagint, and the Targums. Regarding the Septuagint, Weitzman argues that the Peshitta translators made sporadic use of the Greek text to solve problems in the Hebrew in much the same way Jerome claims to have done in creating the Vulgate. But Weitzman cautions that not all agreements between the Peshitta and the Septuagint against the Hebrew are the result of dependence upon the Septuagint. Here Weitzman introduces the idea of polygenesis, arguing that some readings common to both the Peshitta and Septuagint are the result of both translators independently making similar sense out of the same Hebrew text before them. A brief example of polygenesis will be helpful.

In 1 Sam 17:6, 45 the Hebrew reading *kydwn* (dart or javelin) appears in both the Septuagint and Peshitta as "shield" or "armor." Since the Peshitta and Septuagint agree against the Hebrew, one might argue here for dependence of the Peshitta upon the Septuagint. But Weitzman suggests that because all of the items listed in 1 Sam 17: 4-5 are defensive in nature (helmet, breastplate, greaves), the translators of the Peshitta and Septuagint may have independently rendered the offensive weapon *kydwn* as the defensive "shield," (p. 69). One wonders, however, if two translators would have independently made a distinction between offensive and defensive weapons, especially in a place where the Hebrew is not ambiguous. Dependence of the Peshitta upon the Septuagint may be a better solution here. Moreover, in Song 4:1 and 6:7, where the Hebrew uses the phrase "behind your veil" (*mb 'd lšmtk*), both the Peshitta and Septuagint render "beyond your silence." Weitzman correctly observes that the Septuagint has erroneously read the root as *smt* (be silent) rather than the correct *smh* (veil), but suggests that the Peshitta translator took over this error from the Septuagint, rather than having made the same misreading of the Hebrew independently (p. 76). It seems to this reviewer, however, that this might be a better candidate for polygenesis than the previous example. The point is that there is much of a subjective interpretive nature in judging between dependence and polygenesis, and this point becomes critical because Weitzman will turn to the concept of polygenesis frequently in his important discussion of the relationship between the Peshitta and the Targums.

It is commonly held that the Peshitta is dependent upon the Targums, given the many agreements between the two texts against the Hebrew. But here Weitzman employs the dual notions of polygenesis and dependence on common exegetical traditions to argue that the Peshitta translators made no use at all of the Targums. All agreements between the two can be explained on the theory that the translators of the Peshitta and Targums independently solved a problem in the Hebrew in the same way, or made explicit what was implicit in the Hebrew. Even in the case of the Peshitta of Chronicles, often labeled a Syriac Targum due to its significant departure from the MT, Weitzman believes that the Hebrew *Vorlage* was damaged and the translators were forced to fill in the rough spots with their own interpretive renderings, giving the text a Targum-like quality. Weitzman's attempt to completely divorce the Peshitta from the Targums will probably not be

convincing to all Syriac scholars, but his argument is thorough and detailed and he has put important information on the table for further discussion.

Weitzman next turns his attention to the diversity revealed in this translation and the question of how many translators contributed to the work. He considers how certain representative Hebrew words are rendered differently into Syriac in different books and draws a distinction between what he calls conservative and modern renderings. He then arranges the books on a scale from conservative to modern from which he develops a picture of the order in which the books were translated. This turns out to be roughly the order of the Hebrew canon. Weitzman concludes from all this that there was definitely more than one translator, and perhaps as many as fifteen, and that they show evidence of having consulted each others work. Thus Weitzman argues that the Peshitta translators were colleagues in a school. But was this a Jewish or Christian school?

To answer this important question, Weitzman attempts to create a portrait of the Peshitta's religious outlook through an analysis of Chronicles. He uses Chronicles because he has already argued that it was translated from a defective *Vorlage*, meaning that the translator, in filling in the gaps in his text, would be more likely to reveal his various biases and his unique outlook. Having identified certain characteristics, Weitzman then looks to the other books for other examples. He concludes that the Peshitta identifies itself with the Jewish people, rendering untenable any theory of Christian origin, but also shows disregard for certain aspects of Rabbinic *halakhah*. The Peshitta, then, must stem from a non-Rabbinic Jewish community, probably one that was somewhat isolated from the rest of Judaism. Weitzman argues for the location of the translation as Edessa, with the time probably between c. 150-200 C.E. He then states that the non-Rabbinic Jewish community that produced the Peshitta converted to Syriac Christianity (or at least some members did), and they brought the Peshitta into the church with them where it was preserved and transmitted after the original Jewish community had died out.

This is an interesting scenario and bears further study. The issue of the provenance of the Peshitta has been much debated without any clear consensus emerging. It must be said, though, that for his dating Weitzman depends on the idea that Tatian used the Peshitta in the creation of his Gospel harmony, the Diatessaron. Elsewhere the reviewer has called Tatian's use of the Peshitta into question, which would remove the main piece of positive evidence Weitzman presents for a date as early as 150. This, of course, does not preclude a date this early, but it does suggest that despite Weitzman's admirable effort to develop a plausible scenario for the provenance of the Peshitta, this is an issue that will continue to be contested in the scholarly literature.

In a final chapter, Weitzman considers issues related to the textual criticism of the Peshitta. He considers the inter-relationships between manuscripts, the relevance of

Syriac patristic citations, and issues of textual emendation. He also employs his considerable mathematical skills to do statistical analysis of manuscript relationships and introduces the concept of manuscript maps, graphical depictions of the degree of dependence and independence between manuscripts.

The hallmark of Weitzman's book is its attention to detail and its piling up of textual evidence in support of his various arguments. Not all will agree with the conclusions he draws, but he has put a tremendous quantity of primary data on the table for further study and reflection. It is fair to say that he has shifted the burden of proof over to those who would disagree with his conclusions. To be sure, wading through all of his detailed examples is not easy; this is a book for serious Syriac scholars, not the casual reader. But the effort is well worth it and will undoubtedly lead to new ideas and insights into this most vexing of biblical versions. Weitzman has written the standard scholarly introduction to the Syriac version of the Hebrew Bible, and it will likely remain the standard for some time to come.