CHRISTIAN FEATURES
IN THE PESHITTA TEXT OF BEN SIRA:
THE QUESTION OF DEPENDENCY
ON THE SYRIAC NEW TESTAMENT

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Any attempt at a general characterization of the Syriac translation of Ben Sira is complicated by the formidable variety of its differences from the extant Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. Though certainly based on a Hebrew Vorlage, it is full of divergent readings that Lévi grouped in the following categories: commentary; paraphrase; eccentric rendering; repetition; collapsing of several lines into one; additions; expansions; misunderstandings. Commentators have identified many of these divergent readings as the result of sheer misunderstanding, carelessness, or accident. Rudolf Smend, for example, famously described Syriac Ben Sira as “probably the worst piece of translation in the Syriac Bible.” Box and Oesterly concluded that the Syriac translation was “done carelessly and without much trouble being expended upon it.” However, within this mélange of textual vagaries, some interpreters have claimed to be able to perceive patterns that reflect an original Christian Tendenz. Ryssel and Nelson also proposed traces of a Christian hand, but only as secondary revisions of an original Jewish translation.

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analysis offered in the recent monograph by Wido van Peursen—the most extensive to date—also points tentatively toward the view that the Syriac translator was a Christian (or Jewish Christian). It is mainly the following patterns within the unique Syriac readings that have been posited as evidence of a Christian hand:

- Omits or changes references to altar worship and priesthood, and to the nation of Israel
- Elevates prayer as the equivalent of cultic worship
- Eliminates or softens references to the Law
- Aggrandizes the spiritual value of poverty
- Introduces the notion of eschatological judgment and eternal life

However, the caution displayed by Van Peursen and most others is justified by the following facts: 1. None of these proposed tendencies is entirely consistent throughout the book. Thus, for example, in 1:12 (where the Hebrew is not extant) the Greek reads: “The fear of the Lord makes the heart rejoice and gives gladness and joy and length of days.” Maybe it is the Christian doctrine of the Syriac translator that leads him to change “length of days” to “eternal life” (ܐܬܘܪ ܐܚܝ). But if indeed the translator’s Christian sensibilities are so reactive at this subtle level, why does that same translator leave 10:11 unchanged: “When a person dies corruption is his portion and his worm crawls before him”? And one recalls that “eternal life” (עולם חי) does indeed occur in the Hebrew Bible (Dan 12:2) as well as in other Jewish apocalyptic writings. 2. This points also to the second fact, namely, that some of these religious concepts that occur in the Syriac are not incompatible with the beliefs of Jewish groups as well, especially the doctrine of eschatological judgment or the valuation of poverty. The pluriform character of Second-Temple Judaism, and the complexity of the process by which orthodox Christianity finally became distinct from rabbinic Judaism, are much better understood now than was the case early in the twentieth century. 3. Some of the proposed Christian patterns in the Syriac consist almost entirely of textual “minuses” over against the Hebrew and Greek. Given a pervading tendency to shorten throughout the Syriac text (Smend counted 370 such minuses throughout the book), it is methodologically risky to assume that a given omission was consciously made in

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7 Smend, Weisheit, cxxxvii.