THE PLACE OF THE SYRIAC VERSIONS
IN THE TEXTUAL HISTORY OF THE PSALTER

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INTRODUCTION

The Classical Syriac\(^1\) versions of the Bible are of considerable text

critical significance, as a perusal of editions like *Biblia Hebraica

Stuttgartensia (BHS), Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum*

(Göttingen), and *The Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies)

makes clear. When it comes to the Old Testament, the fact that Syriac

was the first Semitic language into which the whole of the original

Hebrew/Aramaic canon was translated\(^2\) further demonstrates that the

importance of this segment of the larger textual history must not be

underestimated. In this essay, highlights of that history are surveyed

and comparisons of Hebrew, Greek, and Syriac versions are carried

out in order that the kinds of textual relationships that exist among

them may be explicated.

ORIGINS OF THE SYRIAC BIBLE

Textual scholars have debated when the process of translating the

Hebrew Scriptures into Syriac began. Some have associated it with
developments in the mid-first century CE in the kingdom of Adiabene

in Mesopotamia east of the Tigris River. The Jewish historian Josephus

and midrashic sources describe members of the royal house at that
time reading the Torah and converting to Judaism.\(^3\) Such accounts, it

\(^1\) This dialect is sometimes called Eastern Aramaic. It is to be distinguished

from Christian Palestinian Aramaic or Palestinian Syriac, a Western Aramaic
dialect, into which the Old Testament was translated from the Septuagint. Only
parts of this translation are extant (S. P. Brock, “Syriac Versions,” *ABD* 6.794–99,
esp. 794; A. Vööbus, “Syriac Versions,” *IDBSup*, 848–54, esp. 849–50). The fo-
cus in this essay is on Classical Syriac versions of the Bible.


(University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 56; Cambridge: Cambridge Uni-
versity Press, 1999) 2.

\(^3\) Josephus (*Ant.* 20.17–53, 71, 75) reports on the conversion of Queen Helena
has been suggested, would presuppose the existence of those Scriptures in the vernacular of the region. It has also been argued that the Vorlage for such a version would not have been the original Hebrew text, but a Western Aramaic, Palestinian Targum. Furthermore, this Targum would have been the basis either for a Vetus Syra (an old Syriac version or an assortment of such versions which, in turn, would have been revised to produce the principal version of the Syriac Old Testament, the Peshitta)\(^4\) or for the Peshitta itself. Others have asserted that the initial impetus for the production of the Syriac Bible is to be found in the circumstances surrounding the origins of Christianity in Mesopotamia — either in Adiabene or in Osroene, one of whose principal cities, Edessa, was by the second century a centre from which this faith spread generally eastward.\(^5\)
