THE PSALMS IN EARLY SYRIAC TRADITION

HARRY F. VAN ROOY

The Psalms played a major part in the life of many communities in Jewish and Christian traditions. For example, more than 200 of the nearly 900 manuscripts found at Qumran may be classified as biblical scrolls. Thirty-six manuscripts from Qumran and three from other locations contain (parts of) the Psalter, the most of any biblical book.\(^1\) With regard to the Greek version of the Psalter, more translations have been made into Greek than for every other book of the Old Testament, and more than ten times the number of Septuagint manuscripts are available for the Psalter than for any other book.\(^2\)

In the same way the Psalter played an enormous role in the history of the Syriac-speaking churches. The majority of the manuscripts containing the Psalms in the Peshitta are Psalters, that is Hymnbooks or books for ecclesiastical services.\(^3\) Of the forty-two manuscripts used for the critical edition of the Peshitta, only four are complete Bibles (7a1, 8a1, 9a1 and 12a1).\(^4\) The remainder are all Psalters, representing different branches of Syriac Christianity.\(^5\) The place of the Syriac versions in the textual history of the Psalter is the subject of a separate contribution in this volume. The present contribution will deal with the translation of the Psalter in Syriac, the headings of the Psalms, commentaries on the Psalms and a small collection of Syriac Apocryphal Psalms.


\(^3\) W. E. Barnes, *The Peshitta Psalter According to the West Syrian Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904) xxxv.

\(^4\) For manuscripts used in the critical edition of the Peshitta, the notation of that edition is used, see Peshitta Institute, *List of Old Testament Peshitta Manuscripts* (Leiden: Brill, 1961).

THE PSALMS IN SYRIAC TRANSLATION

The version of the Psalms contained in the Peshitta must be regarded as the most important and the oldest of the extant Syriac versions of the Psalter. The translations of the different books of the Peshitta are related to a Hebrew original\(^6\) (or rather a number of originals for the different books of the Old Testament that were translated into Syriac). This Hebrew original was fairly close to the Masoretic text, although not identical in all respects.\(^7\) Questions for debate are where, by whom, and for whom this translation was made. There is no consensus regarding these issues, with the result that one may still say that the origins of the Peshitta are obscure.\(^8\)

A detailed view on these questions is to be found in M. Weitzman’s substantial introduction to the Syriac Old Testament.\(^9\) He discusses these issues in his chapter 5,\(^10\) and situates the origin of the Peshitta in Edessa at about 150 CE. According to Weitzman, the translators were Jews, but Jews who can be described as non-rabbinic and anti-ritual.\(^11\) This community gradually converted to Christianity and took their translation with them, which accounts for why a translation made by Jews was not transmitted by Jews, but by the church.\(^12\) The transition happened over a period of time, explaining why the books that were translated last, perhaps at about 200 CE (Ezra-Chronicles), were not part of the original Syriac canon. They did not form part of the corpus of translated books the original converts brought with them. Although the Peshitta originated in Jewish circles, it was not accepted by the Jews, just as was the case eventually with the Septuagint.\(^13\) Alison Salvesen agrees to some extent with this view, but is somewhat more

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\(^9\) Weitzman, *Syriac Version*.


\(^12\) Weitzman, *Syriac Version*, 259.