Choosing a Textual Basis for the New English Annotated Translation of the Syriac Bible

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As various projects for rendering the ‘Bible of Alexandria’ into French, English, German, and Italian were starting up or in progress, people pointed out the need also to translate the ‘Bible of Edessa’ into one of the modern languages: it was time to start thinking of a new translation of the Peshitta into English. The Leiden Peshitta Institute responded to these calls by setting up an editorial board and organizing a seminar on the policy and guidelines of such a translation in 1999. With the formal support of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament (iosot), this editorial board has started inviting collaborators for what has become known as the New English Annotated Translation of the Syriac Bible (or NEATSb).

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1It is indeed a new translation, which is intended to replace George M. Lamsa, The Holy Bible from Ancient Eastern Manuscripts Containing the Old and New Testament Translated from the Peshitta, the Authorized Bible of the Church of the East (Philadelphia: A.J. Holman Company, 15th edn., 1967). This translation is assimilated to the Hebrew text in quite a few places, and is not based on a reliable text of the Peshitta. The latter point also applies to Andrew Oliver’s lesser known A Translation of the Syriac Peshito Version of the Psalms of David (Boston: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1861; New York: James Pott, 1867). I am most grateful to Dr. Craig Morrison (Rome) and Dr. Ignacio Carbajosa (Madrid) for drawing my attention to the latter version and sending me a photocopy of this work.

Among the main issues discussed at several meetings and at the first NEATS seminar mentioned above, was the question of which text should serve as the basis of the translation. Participants in the 1999 seminar agreed that the ‘BTR text as published in *Vetus Testamentum Syriace*’ (i.e. the Leiden edition), should serve as the basic text, ‘though only in the perspective of a well-founded text-critical and text-historical evaluation’. This presentation discusses the background of the decision taken in 1999, as well as its implications and the problems connected with it. How this decision should be implemented is still a matter of discussion, so this paper will also outline possibilities for its implementation. Samples taken from Genesis and Samuel, among other books, illustrate the importance of an evaluation of variants and of including a very concise critical apparatus in translation.

1. **Three Options**

The first discussions on the basic text for the translation took place in 1994, in the framework of deliberations on the possibility of a ‘Student Edition of the Peshitta’. The late Jonas Greenfield had asked the Peshitta Institute several times to set up such an edition, which in his opinion should present a vocalized Syriac text as well as an English translation. In this way one could meet the needs of students who were interested in biblical studies, but lacked sufficient knowledge of Syriac. In these first discussions on the Syriac text of the Student Edition, on which also the English translation would be based, three main options were evaluated and arranged in the following order of preference:

1. An edition of the text of the preferred manuscript for individual biblical books. The relevant manuscripts in this option seemed limited to 5b1, 5ph1, 8b1, and 9a1. Obvious clerical errors, it was conceded, should be corrected.

2. The establishment of a critical text. The aim of this option should be to establish the best and most original text on the basis of text-critical and text-historical criteria.

3. The reproduction of the text presented in the Leiden edition. Choosing this option would result in a text which is close to, but not identical with, Koster’s BTR, the average text of the seventh-