HEBREWS 2:9B IN SYRIAC TRADITION

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In the recently published *Commentary on the Prologue of John* the Syrian Orthodox theologian Philoxenus (died 523) has an important passage where, while charging the authors of the Peshitta translation of the New Testament with wilfulness in certain of their renderings, he explains how biblical translators should go about their work; it was because the Peshitta translators had failed in this respect that Philoxenus felt obliged to sponsor a new translation (or rather, revision)—a task undertaken, as we know from other sources, by his chorepiskopos Polycarp, and completed in 508/9. Although we shall be concerned in this article with only one of the biblical verses that Philoxenus adduces, the passage is nevertheless worth giving at some length; in the following translation words added for the sake of the sense, and other explanatory material, are given in brackets.¹

(p. 51) The Apostle (Paul) too did well to say here (i.e. Rom. 1:1) “he became” (= Greek), and not “he was born in the flesh” (= Peshitta) as those ancients who translated (apperq(w)) from Greek (into Syriac) were pleased to interpret (lampašāqu), thus providing strength to the heretics, (enabling them) to understand one (i.e. the Son of God) as having been born in another (i.e. the son of Mary). Whereas (Paul) too concurs here as well with the Evangelists and the angel, each of whom spoke first of all of “becoming” and (only) then of “birth”.

If the people who translated (pašq(w)) imagined that it was not proper that (p. 52) the “becoming” of Christ, or of God, or of the Son, should be put (literally) into Syriac, then they should have realized that, for someone who is concerned to translate (npaššeq) the truth, it is not right to choose phrases that are appropriate to each individual language, but rather to seek out what are the very words that have been uttered by God or by the Spirit through the prophets and the apostles. For what has been set down in the Holy Scriptures is not the product of human thoughts so that it is susceptible to correction or rearrangement through human knowledge.

With the Greeks each one of these phrases and words that we have mentioned as having been spoken by the Evangelists and Apostles is to be found exactly as we have given it, namely: "He became from the seed of David in the flesh" (Rom. 1:3, = Greek), and not "He was born in the flesh" (= Peshitta); and again, "The book of the becoming of Jesus Christ" (Matt. 1:1) and "The becoming of Jesus Christ is as follows" (Matt. 1:18).

Seeing that the books of the New Testament were spoken in their language (i.e. Greek), it is all the more proper to defer to the wording that is to be found with them, rather than to what has been translated (etpāšaq) by whoever it might be— for that is just a matter of someone’s opinion, and is not teaching that stems from the Spirit. Consequently, anyone who alters, or translates (mpašeq) in a different way phrases and words that have been uttered by the Spirit, such a person not only is reprehensible and blameworthy, but he is also a wicked blasphemer, and an associate of the Marcionites and Manichaeans who removed from the Scriptures things uttered by God, and at the same time altered things, replacing them by others that they supposed to be better. It was into this sort of iniquity that Theodore and Nestorius—the leaders of the heresy of the man-worshippers—also fell, when they too attempted to alter some phrases of the Scriptures and to interpret (mpašaq) others in the opposite sense. For when the Apostle said “God sent his Son who became (flesh) from a woman, who became under the Law” (Gal. 4:4), indicating the distinction between the one Son by (lit. of) nature, and the many (other sons), these men interpreted (pāšeq(u)) (p. 53) and blasphemously read as follows: “God sent his Son, him who became (flesh) from a woman, him who was under the Law”, so as to show that the Son who became (flesh) from a woman and was sent, is different from the one who did not “become” and was not sent.2

The same applies to the passage in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Jesus the Son by the grace of God”—that is, of the Father—“tasted death on behalf of everyone” (Heb. 2:9, Greek). This they altered and wrote “apart from God”, taking care to transmit (l-mašlāmū) that this Jesus, who accepted death on behalf of us, is not God.

And instead of what the Evangelist wrote, “The Word became flesh and dwelt in us” (John 1:14), Nestorius understood it (otherwise), reading it as follows: “Flesh came into being and the World dwelt in it”.3

Having deferred to such (opinions) those who of old translated the Scriptures missed the mark (or sinned) in many respects, whether out of their own wilfulness or out of ignorance; this was not just in passages which teach concerning the Economy in the flesh, but also in other matters, in passages on other topics. It was for this reason that we too have taken provision to have the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament translated anew (men d-riš nepašqūn) from Greek into Syriac.

Although numerous points in this excerpt call for comment, here we must confine ourselves to a single passage, that concerning Heb. 2:9b. As is well known, the vast majority of Greek manuscripts provides the following text in the second half of Heb. 2:9:

\[\text{... ὁπώς χάριτι θεοῦ ὑπὲρ παντὸς γεύσηται θανάτου,}\]

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