I. East and West

Little is known about the early history of the Peshitta of the O.T. There is, for example, no certain answer to the question where and when this translation came into being, whether originally it was a Jewish or a Christian translation, what the relation is between the text of the Peshitta and the Targumic tradition, and even what was the exact meaning of the name. One thing, however, has for a long time been taken to be an established fact: that within the tradition of the Syriac text we have to distinguish between a western or Jacobite text and an eastern or Nestorian text. This division into two text traditions developed—so it is held—from the end of the fifth century, when, after the destruction of the Nestorian school in Edessa, the Nestorians withdrew to the East, into Persia, and the Jacobites remained in the Byzantine empire. From this time, the ecclesiastical division coincided with the political and the geographical one. The result of this was a separate development of an eastern and a western Peshitta text. With only very few exceptions, all Peshitta manuscripts which have been preserved contain either a western or an eastern text. The common form of the text prior to the division can be obtained only by reconstruction. This has to be done by first establishing the western text on the basis of

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1 This article was read at a meeting of the Dutch-Belgian Society of O.T. Studies (het Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap in Nederland) in Tilburg in June 1983, and partly—in adapted form—at the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Strasbourg in August 1984. The writer is indebted to Mr. M. van Vliet, his colleague at the Peshitta Institute, for checking the English translation and correcting a number of points. The following abbreviations have been used: List: List of Old Testament Peshitta Manuscripts (Preliminary Issue) (Leiden, 1961); PIC: Peshitta Institute Communication; Wright: W. Wright, Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum, acquired since the year 1838, 3 vols. (London, 1870-1872).

2 The exceptions are MS. London, Nat. Libr., Add. 14,512 (5ph1; 459/60; List, p. 19) and MS. London, Nat. Libr., Add. 14,425 (5b1; 463/4; List, p. 15).
the western MSS, and the eastern text on the basis of the eastern MSS, after which, through comparison of these two text forms, the pre-schismatic text may be established. Admittedly, this does not take us back to the original text of the Peshitta, but at least it gives us the text as it existed a few centuries prior to the oldest MSS we have available now.

The beginning of this approach to the Syriac text of the Bible lies in an article by Alfred Rahlfs, “Beiträge zur Textkritik der Peschita”, ZAW 9 (1889), pp. 161-210. This article is made up of four studies. In the first of these Rahlfs deals with an article by R. Gottheil of the same year on the same subject, and in this connection he discusses the importance of the Urmia edition of the Peshitta. This edition was published in 1852 for the Syrian Christians by American Presbyterian missionaries in Urmia in northwest Persia, near the Turkish border. This edition gives no indication as to what MSS had been used. Because of the Nestorian script used in this edition it was at first generally assumed that it represented a Nestorian text form. Later it appeared that, to a considerable extent, this edition can be traced back indirectly to western MSS. Rahlfs takes the Urmia text to be Nestorian and then states: “Was wir sonst erst mühsam suchen müssen, ist uns hier durch die Geschichte gegeben: die Handschriften der Peschita zerfallen in zwei Familien, in die nestorianischen und jakobitischen, oder in die östlichen und westlichen, wie sie Bar Ebhraya zu Psalm 10.5 unterscheidet” (pp. 164-5). He continues by saying that these two text forms will hardly have influenced each other because of the animosity between Nestorians and Jacobites, so that through comparison between the two texts we can establish the common text which existed at the time of the schism at the end of the 5th century.

For this reconstruction the following rules apply (pp. 165-6):
1. When the two available witnesses to the western text, the “Ambrosianus” and the Paris Polyglott of 1645, agree with the (Nestorian) Urmia text, the text antedates the schism.

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3, 4 See the footnotes for references.

5 MS. Milan, Ambrosian Library, B. 21. Inf. (7a1; List, p. 28).