

BOOK REVIEWS

Claudio Balzaretti, *The Syriac Version of Ezra-Nehemiah: Manuscripts and Editions, Translation Technique and Its Use in Textual Criticism*, Biblica et Orientalia 51 (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2013). Pp. xii + 417; €48.00.

SIAM BHAYRO, UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

For those interested in the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah in Syriac, these are indeed good days, for in addition to the monograph under review, there is also the recently published critical edition from the Peshiṭta Institute.¹ Balzaretti's study is a truly excellent resource that discusses in detail all the points in its subtitle. Its conclusions are very important, particularly regarding the unity of Ezra-Nehemiah and how this is reinforced in the Syriac tradition. The analysis of the manuscripts and editions will prove to be very useful for many years to come, as will some of the accompanying argumentation.

In his introduction, Balzaretti surveys previous scholarship on the Syriac Ezra and Nehemiah (hereafter: SyrEN), beginning with Hawley (1922) and ending with my teacher, Michael Weitzman (1999), whose posthumously published monograph represents the last major contribution prior to the work under review.² Balzaretti then discusses the unity of SyrEN, its canonical status within the Syriac tradition (which remains a subject of controversy), and its presence in Syriac literature—with reference to the *Cave of Treasures*, Theodore bar Koni, Isho'dad of Merv, Severus of Antioch, and various chronicles including that of Michael the Syrian and Bar Hebraeus.

In the second chapter, Balzaretti describes the manuscripts, noting that the Paris Polyglot, which was altered in the seventeenth century by Gabriel Sionita with the aim to better reflect the Hebrew Masoretic text, has served as the basis for all printed

¹ M. Albert *et al.*, eds., *The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshiṭta Version, Part IV Fasc. 4. Ezra and Nehemiah, 1–2 Maccabees* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Balzaretti's book has already been reviewed with typical incisiveness and erudition by Kristian Heal in *CBQ* 77.1 (2015), pp. 128–129.

² M. P. Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

editions. Balzaretti also identifies those (mostly ancient) manuscripts that should be used in the preparation of a critical edition.

Balzaretti then discusses translation technique (and here offers a nice summary of the history of this subject and how it has been applied to SyrEN) and outlines his methodology. These two chapters very much lay the groundwork for what follows: in successive chapters he analyses the translator's treatment of proper names, omissions and additions, word order, parallelisms, vocabulary, parallel texts, the flow of the narrative, and other versions.

Perhaps the most important point made in this work relates to the notion of translator as narrator. For Balzaretti, SyrEN has "a tendency to improve the narrative, not only because the text has become clearer but also the 'logic' of the narrative has been improved" (p. 80); furthermore, "Having reached this point, the proposed description of the translator as 'narrator' seems appropriate...we ought not to oppose the translation *verbum de verbo* to that *sensus de senso* because the translator has acted as *interpretes* seeking to be faithful to the Hebrew. However, where he has encountered difficulties, [he] has acted as *orator*, not recording the exact number of the words but their sense" (p. 327).

For those readers who are familiar with previous work on SyrEN, the most pressing question will be to what extent does Balzaretti modify Weitzman's work and, in doing so, is he justified? In many respects, Balzaretti himself raises this question, as his summary of previous scholarship ends with a section titled "From Roediger to Weitzman." Weitzman argued that Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles (and perhaps Esther) probably represent a distinct translation unit that was translated c. 200 CE, around fifty years after the translation of the majority of the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, according to Weitzman, the translators were Jewish, albeit non-rabbinic, and the translation was made from a Hebrew *Vorlage* with no use of the LXX. On the other hand, for Balzaretti, Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles do not represent a distinct translation unit but reflect the same environment (p. 343). Furthermore, Balzaretti would seem to reject a Jewish origin—although he expresses this always very cautiously and recognises the presence of Jewish influence (e.g., pp. 338–339).

When we come to attempt to adjudicate between the two, the waters become a little bit muddled. For example, Balzaretti states, "There are elements, however, which place in doubt a Jewish origin

for the Syriac version of EN. The first is the use of *kwmr* to indicate Jewish priests because, in the Targum, *kwmr* always refers to pagan priests. The second is the transformation undergone by many legal prescriptions which seems to suppose a community that is not interested in the kind of rabbinical discussions which had been concluded in the Mishnah and in the Talmud" (p. 338). The problem, of course, is that Weitzman had already presented a detailed argument for why the Jewish translators of Ezra-Nehemiah were not rabbinic Jews, so the second point is rather moot. Furthermore, it is not clear why the use of a cognate term in Targumic Aramaic should be of any relevance to the discussion of the origins of SyrEN, especially since there is no Targum Ezra or Targum Nehemiah. Balzaretto's reference to 'the Targum,' therefore, is problematic (especially given how many different targumim there were). In terms of argumentation, therefore, I am sometimes left wondering whether Balzaretto has engaged with sufficient rigour with Weitzman.

Overall, however, there is much of value here—Balzaretto should be congratulated for presenting a wealth of research that is organized in a very clear and helpful way, and for bringing important methodological questions to bear on the study of SyrEN.