

CONSIDERATIONS IN RENDERING ܐܘܬܐܪ ܕܡܝܢ IN A CHURCH BIBLE

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ABSTRACT:

During the revision of the Antioch Bible, the question of how ܐܘܬܐܪ ܕܡܝܢ should be translated arose. Currently, different translators have offered different solutions. This essay will trace the history of the term from the original translators of both the Old and New Testaments, through the commentators, and then through the lexicographers. The essay will offer a solution to the problem going forward.

١. INTRODUCTION

In preparing a translation of the Syriac Bible to English for the modern church, translation issues arise.¹ One such issue is how

¹ This study arose through reviewing the translation of the book of Exodus for the Antioch Bible project and discussing the issue with the larger review committee. In particular, I wish to thank my co-reviewer Tarsee Li of Oakwood University, Huntsville, Alabama, for his critique of an earlier draft of this essay. The original translation of Exodus was done masterfully by Mark R. Meyer, *Exodus in The Syriac Peshiṭta Bible with English Translation*, eds. George Anton Kiraz and Andreas Juckel (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2017).

to render the expression ܣܘܦܗ ܕܝܡܐ “the sea of Suph,” found in both the Old and New Testaments.² In this essay, I will examine the problem historically and then offer a solution. The essay will move from the original translations through the native commentators to the lexicographers. Roughly speaking, the Peshitta Old Testament was made in the second century from the Hebrew.³ By contrast, the Peshitta New Testament came into being about the fifth century.⁴ While there was undoubtedly an older Syriac translation of the New Testament, it is not extant for the relevant books, namely Acts and Hebrews.⁵ So, how did native Syriac speakers understand the term at the translation stage and did this understanding change over time?

1. THE ORIGINAL TRANSLATIONS

The second century translators of the Old Testament did not fully understand the meaning of ܣܘܦܗ ܕܝܡܐ, the Hebrew construction consisting of a noun in construct state followed by another noun in the absolute state. In keeping with other such constructions, they rendered it as ܣܘܦܗ ܕܝܡܐ “the sea of Suph,” understanding ܝܡܐ to be a proper noun. This is in agreement with the rendering of other geographic terms like ܕܢܗܪ ܕܝܡܐ “the

² Exod 10:19; 13:18; 15:4, 22; 23:31; Num 14:25; 21:4; 33:10, 11; Deut 1:40; 2:1; 11:4; Josh 2:10; 4:23; 24:6; Judg 11:16; 1 Kgs 9:26; Ps 106:7, 9, 22; 136:13, 15; Jer 49:21; Judith 5:13; Neh 9:9; 2 Chron 2:15; 1 Chron 4:9; Acts 7:36; Heb 11:29. The cases in the New Testament render ἐρυθρὰ θάλασσα “the Red Sea,” the translation of the Hebrew ܣܘܦܗ ܕܝܡܐ known from the Old Greek of Exodus and elsewhere. At times in the Old Greek, the adjective comes after the noun as θάλασσα ἐρυθρὰ.

³ M. P. Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament*, University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 56 (Cambridge: Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Cambridge, 1999), 258.

⁴ Sebastian P. Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, Second Revised Edition, Gorgias Handbooks 7 (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2006), 17.

⁵ Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, 17 and 19.

garden of Eden” rendered as **גֶּן-עֵדֶן** “the paradise of Eden” (Gen 3:23), **אֶרֶץ-מִדְיָן** “the land of Midian” translated as **אֶרֶץ מִדְיָן** “the land of Midian” (Exod 2:15), **מִדְבַּר-סִין** “the wilderness of Sin” expressed as **מִדְבַּר סִין** “the wilderness of Sin” (Exod 17:1), **הַר סִינַי** “the mountain of Sinai” put as **הַר סִינַי** “the mountain of Sinai” (Exod 24:16), **נְהַר מִצְרַיִם** “the river of Egypt” expressed by **נְהַר מִצְרַיִם** “the river of Egypt” (Gen 15:8), and **מְקוֹם שֶׁכֶם** “the vicinity of Shechem” phrased as **מְקוֹם שֶׁכֶם** “the vicinity of Shechem” (Gen 12:6).

Furthermore, this is in harmony with the renderings of **יָם** “the Sea of Kinnereth” and **יָם בְּנֵרוֹת** “the Sea of Kinneroth” as **יָם בְּנֵרוֹת** “the Sea of Kinnereth” (Num 34:11 and Josh 12:3 respectively), and **יָם יַעֲזָר** “the Sea of Jazer” as **יָם יַעֲזָר** “the Sea of Jazer” (Jer 48:32). Although in these cases the noun **יָם** is vocalized in Hebrew with *qametz*, allowing for the interpretation of the collocation as an apposition, the grammarians Takamitsu Muraoka and Paul Joüon consider the form **יָם** as being in the construct state, noting that the only time that the form **יָם** is used in Hebrew is in the collocation **יָם-סוּף**.⁶ Moreover, the Syriac translator had no problem with the directional *he* intervening between **יָם** and its *nomen rectum* in **וַיִּתְקַעְהוּ יָסָה סוּף** taken over as **וַיִּתְקַעְהוּ יָסָה סוּף** “and (the wind) cast it (the locust) into the sea of Suph” (Exod 10:19). Again, when the *nomen rectum* is a common noun, it comes in the *status emphaticus* as in **יָם הַמֶּלַח** “the sea of salt” rendered as **יָם הַמֶּלַח** “the sea of salt” (Gen 14:3).

As well, compare: **לְשׁוֹן יָם-מִצְרַיִם** “the tongue of the sea of Egypt” encoded as **לְשׁוֹן יָם מִצְרַיִם** “the tongue of the sea that is in Egypt” (Isa 11:15) and **אֶל-יָם יָפוֹא** “to the sea of Joppa” realized as **לְיָם לְיָפוֹא** “to the sea, to Joppa” (Ezra 3:7). Here,

⁶ Paul Joüon, S. J., and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006), § 13c and § 96An. Accordance module: Jouon–Muraoka Hebrew Grammar, version 2.6.

the translators demonstrate flexibility in conveying the meaning to the target audience.

Apart from the collocation $\eta\iota\sigma\text{---}\iota\mu$, the word $\eta\iota\sigma$ appears by itself as a geographic designation once (Deut 1:1). There, the Old Greek offers $\pi\lambda\eta\sigma\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu\ \tau\tilde{\eta}\varsigma\ \acute{\epsilon}\rho\upsilon\theta\rho\tilde{\alpha}\varsigma$ “near the red” for the Hebrew $\eta\iota\sigma\ \text{לִיָּם}$, apparently understanding this $\eta\iota\sigma$ to be a reference to the Red Sea. Thus, NETS translates the phrase as “near the Red Sea.” Some Greek text witnesses in fact explicitly read $\pi\lambda\eta\sigma\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu\ \tau\tilde{\eta}\varsigma\ \acute{\epsilon}\rho\upsilon\theta\rho\tilde{\alpha}\varsigma\ \theta\alpha\lambda\acute{\alpha}\sigma\sigma\eta\varsigma$ “near the Red Sea.” Targum Onqelos agrees with this interpretation of $\eta\iota\sigma$, rendering it as $\eta\iota\sigma\ \iota\mu$ “the Sea of Suph.” Targum Neofiti, Cairo Geniza manuscript Br, and the Fragment Targums concur with Targum Onqelos in identifying this $\eta\iota\sigma$ as the sea through which the children of Israel passed.⁷

Knowledge of the Greek rendering $\acute{\epsilon}\rho\upsilon\theta\rho\tilde{\alpha}\ \theta\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha\sigma\sigma\alpha$ “the Red Sea” was not widely known among the Syrians⁸ until the translation of the Greek Old Testament, known to us as the Syrohexapla. In that translation, made in 616-17 at the Enaton monastery near Alexandria, Egypt, Paul of Tella used ܠܝܡܐ ܕܝܡܐ “the Red Sea” as the reflex of $\theta\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha\sigma\sigma\alpha\ \acute{\epsilon}\rho\upsilon\theta\rho\tilde{\alpha}$ “the Red Sea.” In Deut 1:1, Paul renders ܠܝܡܐ ܕܝܡܐ “the Red Sea,”⁹

⁷ For the targums, I have used the following Accordance modules: TARG-T for Onqelos, TARG2-T for Neofiti, TARGG-T for the Cairo Geniza manuscript, and TARGF-T for the Fragment Targums.

⁸ Where it was known was in the translations of church fathers such as in the Syriac translation of Basil of Caesarea’s *Hexaemeron* (Robert W. Thomson, *The Syriac Version of the Hexaemeron by Basil of Caesarea* [CSCO 550, SS 222; Louvain: Peeters, 1995], 57, l. 12), which translation dates probably to the fifth century (compare Thomson, *The Syriac Version of the Hexaemeron by Basil of Caesarea*, VI, and Sebastian P. Brock, “Basil of Caesarea,” *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock et al. [Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011], 64). I owe this insight to an unnamed reviewer.

⁹ Arthur Vööbus, *The Pentateuch in the Version of the Syro-Hexapla, A facsimile Edition of a Midyat MS. discovered 1964*, CSCO 369, Subsidia 45 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1975), fol. 152r.

supporting the Greek variant τῆς ἐρυθρᾶς θαλάσσης “(near) the Red Sea.”

Now, there are three or possible four places in the Old Testament where Hebrew סִיָּה indicates a water plant. Richard D. Patterson has called attention to these passages, stating that סִיָּה is “a general term for marshplants.”¹⁰ In Exod 2:3 and 5, Patterson glosses it as “marsh reeds,” in Isa 19:6 as “rushes,” and in Jonah 2:6 as “seaweed.” He also renders the Hebrew collocation סִיָּה יָם as “sea of reeds.” What is interesting for this study is that the Peshitta finds appropriate words to translate these passages, never using the word אֲשֶׁר. In Exodus, the Peshitta uses the word אֲשֶׁר “a shallow,” in Isaiah the word אֲשֶׁר “papyrus,” and in Jonah the phrase אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם “at the bottom of the sea.” There is, therefore, no indication that the translator of Peshitta Exodus understood the סִיָּה of סִיָּה יָם as a water plant. One could say the same for Onqelos and its twin Targum Jonathan to the Prophets. In Exodus, Onqelos translates the סִיָּה of Exodus 2 as יַעֲרָא “rushes.” Jonathan renders it as גִּזְמָא “papyrus reed” in Isaiah, but understands the סִיָּה of Jonah 2:6 to be a reference to the Sea of Suph (יָם סוּף). Similarly, the Palestinian targums Neofiti and the Fragment Targums rendered סִיָּה of Exodus 2 as אֲפֶרֶת “grassy area.”¹¹

The early fifth century translators of the Peshitta New Testament at Acts 7:36 and Heb 11:29 substituted the Old Testament expression אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם “the sea of Suph” for the Greek ἐρυθρὰ θάλασσα “the Red Sea,” rather than translate it as אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם “the Red Sea.” The reference to the Exodus in

¹⁰ Richard D. Patterson, סִיָּה, entry 1479 in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, eds. R. Laird Harrison, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1980). Accordance module TWOT.

¹¹ See the discussion of Jerome A. Lund, “2.4.5 Peshitta,” in *The Hebrew Bible*, Vol. 1B: Pentateuch, Former and Latter Prophets, eds. Armin Lange and Emanuel Tov, in *Textual History of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Armin Lange et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 178.

both of these verses is patently clear. Their translation strategy of substitution, that is, using the expression that appears in their Old Testament, removed any apparent discrepancy with the Peshitta Old Testament. It was not until the translation of Thomas of Harkl, made at the same time and in the same place as the Old Testament translation of Paul of Tella, that the reading ܠܠܗܐ ܠܠܗܐ “the Red Sea” entered the Syriac New Testament. Thomas rendered ποιήσας τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα ἐν γῇ Αἰγύπτῳ καὶ ἐν ἐρυθρᾷ θαλάσῃ “doing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and at the Red Sea” as ܠܠܗܐ ܠܠܗܐ ܦܕܝܬܐ ܠܝܬܐ ܠܠܗܐ ܠܠܗܐ “doing signs and wonders in the land of Egypt and at the Red Sea” (Acts 7:36). From his translation, Thomas could have had σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα “signs and wonders” in his Vorlage rather than τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα “wonders and signs.” His rendering ܠܠܗܐ ܠܠܗܐ ܠܠܗܐ ܠܠܗܐ “By faith the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea” (Heb 11:29) apparently goes back to the Greek πίστει διέβησαν οἱ υἱοὶ Ἰσραὴλ τὴν ἐρυθρὰν θάλασσαν “By faith the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea.”¹² In his edition of the Greek New Testament, Hermann Freiherr von Soden records this plus of the expressed subject οἱ υἱοὶ Ἰσραὴλ as appearing in one thirteenth century miniscule.¹³

2. THE COMMENTATORS

The ninth century Ishodad of Merv dealt with the understanding of the term ܠܠܗܐ ܠܠܗܐ in his commentary on Exod 15:4. It is clear that he had no straightforward answer to what the word ܠܠܗܐ meant. He states that the sea in question

¹² I wish to thank Andreas Juckel of the University of Muenster for providing me with these texts from the Harklean version. As well, Dr. Juckel was kind enough to critique a draft of this essay, offering concrete suggestions for its improvement.

¹³ Hermann Freiherr von Soden, *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1913), 819.

had two names, one ܬܗܝܬܐ ܬܗܝ “the Red Sea” ala the Greek and the other ܐܡܝܢ ܬܗܝ “the sea of Suph” as found in the Peshitta. Some, he says, do not give any special meaning to the terms — the place was just called that. Others explain that the sea was called ܐܡܝܢ because Pharaoh and his forces came to an end (ܐܡܝܢ) there, similar to ܕܠܝܬ ܡܕܝܢܬܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ “It will be called the valley of the destruction of Gog” (Ezek 39:11). And these same exegetes would say that the sea was called ܬܗܝܬܐ “red” because of the blood of those of the house of Pharaoh who perished in it. Their interpretation of ܐܡܝܢ is rooted in etymology, deriving the term from ܐܡܝܢ “come to an end”; their interpretation of ܬܗܝܬܐ “red” stems from association with blood. Still others had another interpretation of ܐܡܝܢ, also rooted in etymology via the root ܐܡܝܢ “come to an end.” At that place, they say, the tongue of the sea of the Indians comes to an end (ܐܡܝܢ ܬܗܝܬܐ). Yet others, using the same etymology, assert that nothing moves in it, but when they come to that tongue they turn back, whether fish or anything else. In his comments, Ishodad does not mention any connection with flora that grows in wetlands.

In his commentary on Deut 1:1, Ishodad brings the view of a certain Michael on the meaning of ܐܡܝܢ ܬܗܝܬܐ “opposite Suph.” Michael explains that ܐܡܝܢ means ܬܗܝܬܐ ܬܗܝ “the Salt Sea.” In the margin of Ishodad’s commentary, someone added the following: ܬܗܝܬܐ ܬܗܝܬܐ ܬܗܝܬܐ ܬܗܝܬܐ ... ܬܗܝܬܐ “The Greek reads ‘the Red Sea’ in every instance of ‘the Sea of Suph.’” In her translation of this verse, Carmel McCarthy renders ܐܡܝܢ ܬܗܝܬܐ as “opposite Suph.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Carmel McCarthy, *Deuteronomy in The Syriac Peshitta Bible with English Translation*, eds. George Anton Kiraz and Andreas Juckel (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2013).

[illegible]

¹⁹ William Jennings, *Lexicon to the Syriac New Testament*, revised Ulric Gantillon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), 149.

of our people interpret the collocation as ‘the Red Sea’.”²⁰ Manna defines ܣܘܦܗ as ܣܘܦܗ ܕܥܝܢ ܕܥܝܢ “sea squill” or “rush.”²¹

Carl Brockelmann, on the other hand, does not include it in his *Lexicon Syriacum*.²² He must have done so because he regarded ܣܘܦܗ in this collocation as a proper noun. In this, he was followed by Michael Sokoloff, who likewise fails to record it.²³

4. ANTIOCH BIBLE CONTRIBUTORS’ RENDERINGS OF ܣܘܦܗ ܕܥܝܢ ܕܥܝܢ

Translators of different books of the Bible handled the expression ܣܘܦܗ ܕܥܝܢ ܕܥܝܢ in different ways. For Exodus, Mark R. Meyer consistently renders the expression as “the Sea of Suph” (Exod 10:19; 13:18; 15:4, 22; 23:31).²⁴ By contrast, for Numbers, Edward M. Cook translates ܣܘܦܗ ܕܥܝܢ ܕܥܝܢ as “the Reed Sea” (Num 14:25) and “the Sea of Reeds” (Num 21:4; 33:10-11).²⁵ Similarly in Deuteronomy, Carmel McCarthy phrases it as “the Sea of Reeds” (Deut 1:40; 2:1; 11:4).²⁶ Gillian Greenberg and Donald M. Walter consistently render ܣܘܦܗ ܕܥܝܢ ܕܥܝܢ as “the Sea of Suph” in Joshua

²⁰ Toma Audo, *Treasure of the Syriac Language (Simtā d-leššānā suryāyā)*, 2 vols. (Mosul: Dominican Press, 1897), 134. The second volume was published in 1901 but bears the date of the first, to wit, 1897. See George A. Kiraz, “Introduction,” in Thomas Audo, *Treasure of the Syriac Language*, vol. 1 (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2008), 3*.

²¹ Jacques-Eugene Manna, *Chaldean – Arabic Dictionary* (Mosul, 1900; reprinted Beirut: Babel Center Publications, 1975), 486.

²² Carl Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, Second Edition (Halle: Niemeyer, 1928).

²³ Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns and Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009).

²⁴ Mark R. Meyer, *Exodus*.

²⁵ Edward M. Cook, *Numbers in The Syriac Peshitta Bible with English Translation*, eds. George Anton Kiraz and Andreas Juckel (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2015).

²⁶ McCarthy, *Deuteronomy*.

(Josh 2:10; 4:23; 24:6),²⁷ as “the sea of Suph” in Judges (Jud 11:16)²⁸, and again as “the Sea of Suph” in 1 Kings.²⁹ For Psalms, Richard A. Taylor uses “the Sea of Reeds” as his slot translation (Ps 106:7, 9, 22; 135[MT 136]:13, 15). In Jdt 5:13, Walter, Greenberg, and Eric Tully use “the Sea of Suph” as their translation.³⁰ In sum, the most prominent translations in the Old Testament are “the Sea of Suph” and “the Sea of Reeds.”

While an early error entered the Syriac text tradition at 2 Chron 2:16 (MT 15) as ܐܡܝܢ ܠܐ “the Sea of Suph” as attested by the only reading found in the Leiden edition,³¹ the Antioch Bible correctly reads ܐܡܝܢ ܠܐ “the sea of Joppa,” a reading confirmed by the Hebrew יָם יָפוֹ “the sea of Joppa.”³² The translations of Neh 9:9 and 1 Macc 4:9 have yet to appear in print.

Turning to the New Testament, Robert Kitchen offers the rendition “the Red Sea” for ܐܡܝܢ ܠܐ in the text, but adds a

²⁷ Gillian Greenberg and Donald M. Walter, *Joshua in The Syriac Peshiṭta Bible with English Translation*, eds. George Anton Kiraz and Andreas Juckel (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2015).

²⁸ Donald M. Walter and Gillian Greenberg, *Judges in The Syriac Peshiṭta Bible with English Translation*, eds. George Anton Kiraz and Andreas Juckel (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2015).

²⁹ Donald M. Walter and Gillian Greenberg, *Kings in The Syriac Peshiṭta Bible with English Translation*, eds. George Anton Kiraz and Andreas Juckel (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2018).

³⁰ Donald M. Walter, Gillian Greenberg, and Eric Tully, *The Book of Women: Ruth, Susanna, Esther, and Judith in The Syriac Peshiṭta Bible with English Translation*, eds. George Anton Kiraz and Andreas Juckel (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2020).

³¹ R. P. Gordon in collaboration with P. B. Dirksen (eds.), *Chronicles, Part IV.2 of The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshiṭta Version* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

³² Robert P. Gordon, *Chronicles in The Syriac Peshiṭta Bible with English Translation*, eds. George Anton Kiraz and Andreas Juckel (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2019).

footnote stating that it literally means “sea of reeds.”³³ In Heb 11:29, Daniel King and J. Edward Walters render ܐܡܝܢ ܬܗܝ ܐܝܢܐ as “the Red Sea” without any footnote.³⁴ These renderings ignore the Syriac and slot in a contemporary traditional translation based on the Greek.

5. CONCLUSION

Historically speaking, the translators of the Peshitta Bible understood the word ܐܡܝܢ in the collocation ܐܡܝܢ ܬܗܝ ܐܝܢܐ to be a proper noun, that is, “The Sea of Suph.” The translators of the New Testament borrowed the Old Testament term ܐܡܝܢ ܬܗܝ ܐܝܢܐ “the Sea of Suph” to bring harmony to the text of Scripture, rather than translating the Greek ἐρυθρὰ θάλασσα “the Red Sea,” as ܬܗܝ ܐܝܢܐ ܬܗܝ ܐܝܢܐ “the Red Sea.” It was not until the translations of Paul of Tella and Thomas of Harkl that the term ܬܗܝ ܐܝܢܐ “the Red Sea” entered Syriac literature. Later interpreters tried to add meaning to the text by explaining the term ܐܡܝܢ etymologically, connecting it to the root ܐܡܝܢ “come to an end.” For some, it was where the Egyptian hordes came to an end. For others, it was where the sea came to an end as its tongue extended into Egypt. No one connected it to river fauna. Only in modern times have native speakers of Syriac followed the view that ܐܡܝܢ is equivalent to an Egyptian word meaning “papyrus,” a water plant. While British scholars quickly embraced the suggestion, Carl Brockelmann did not. But since both Toma Audo and Jacques-Eugene Manna accept the view that ܐܡܝܢ means “papyrus,” it is permissible to translate ܐܡܝܢ ܬܗܝ ܐܝܢܐ as “the Reed Sea” or the like in a modern church Bible,

³³ Robert Kitchen, *Acts in The Syriac Peshitta Bible with English Translation*, eds. George Anton Kiraz and Andreas Juckel (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2014), 47.

³⁴ Daniel King and J. Edward Walters, *Hebrews and the General Catholic Epistles in The Syriac Peshitta Bible with English Translation*, eds. George Anton Kiraz and Andreas Juckel (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2016), 123.

even though the ancient translators and interpreters of the Bible did not recognize it as such. My personal preference would be to render ܐܡܝܢ ܬܡܢܐ as “the Sea of Suph” in the Antioch Bible, adding the modern understanding in a footnote. For the New Testament, the note should read that the New Testament translators substituted the Old Testament expression “the Sea of Suph” rather than translated the Greek “the Red Sea.”

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