

## THE HEBREW AND SYRIAC TEXT OF DEUTERONOMY 1:44

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The Old Testament Peshitta is without doubt the ancient version most neglected by textual critics. Beyond the questions of language and script, the unreliability of textual editions may be partially to blame for this sad state of affairs. The progression, however, of the Leiden edition should transform earlier practice: the text of the Old Testament Peshitta is now available, for almost all books of the Bible, in an edition based on the best manuscripts and presented in a way designed to facilitate its use in textual criticism. For this achievement, the Peshitta Institute and its present custodian, who is the laureate of this volume, deserve high praise. The following study intends to illustrate the potential value of the Peshitta for the textual criticism of the Hebrew text of the Bible.

Deut 1:44 relates the catastrophic outcome of Israel's attempt, against the express command of YHWH sanctioning their earlier refusal, to conquer the promised land:

וַיֵּצֵא הָאֱמֹרִי הַיּוֹשֵׁב בְּהַר הַהוּא לִקְרַאתְכֶם וַיִּרְדְּפוּ אֹתְכֶם כְּאִשֶּׁר תַּעֲשִׂינָה הַדְּבָרִים וַיִּכְתּוּ  
אֹתְכֶם בְּשֵׁעִיר עַד חֶרְמָה

Then the Amorites who lived in that hill country came out against you and chased you as bees do and beat you down in Seir as far as Hormah. (RSV)

At first sight the text of Deut 1:44a poses no problems. The verse can easily be translated, and fits the context well. In comparison with the earlier narration in Num 14:45 one notes that the sentence 'and they chased you as bees do' is added. Such an embellishment is entirely natural in Moses' oral retelling of the event: the simile adds life to the story of this terrible turn of affairs. The Masoretic text of the verse is in the main supported by the Samaritan Pentateuch,<sup>1</sup> the Septuagint,<sup>2</sup> the Targums,<sup>3</sup> and the Vulgate.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Samaritan Pentateuch exhibits several variants which make the verse agree with the parallel text in Num 14:45. Conversely, the simile of the bees is introduced in the Numbers passage, where it is absent from the MT. Such harmonisations are typical of the Samaritan text and are generally agreed to be secondary.

<sup>2</sup> For the syntax of the Septuagint, see the article quoted below in note 5.

<sup>3</sup> A minor variant in some of the Targums will be discussed below.

1. *A Problem of Style*

There is, however, a stylistic reason to suspect the soundness of the transmitted Hebrew text. The use of the verb עשה 'to do' in replacement of the verb of the main clause is unique in similes likening an action to the same action as proverbially attributed to a different subject.<sup>5</sup> In English, and other European languages, the use of 'to do' as a 'pro-verb' in order to avoid repetition is entirely idiomatic. The Hebrew language, however, requires repetition of the identical verb. Consider the following examples from the Book of Deuteronomy:

- Deut 1:31      The Lord your God *bore* you, as a man *bears* his son.  
 Deut 8:5       As a man *disciplines* his son, the Lord your God *disciplines* you.  
 Deut 28:29     And you shall *grope* at noonday, as the blind *grope* in darkness.

In all these examples, the simile contains an adverbial complement thus setting them apart from the simile in Deut 1:44. But even when there is no further complement, the main verb is repeated:

- Judg 7:5       Every one that *laps* the water with his tongue, as a dog *laps*.<sup>6</sup>  
 Amos 2:13      Behold, I am *pressed* under you, as a cart is *pressed* that is full of sheaves (AV).

The repetition of the verb of the main clause is the rule, not only in Deuteronomy, but in the Hebrew Bible in general.<sup>7</sup> Whereas such repetition is found 18 times, the substitution of עשה in the comparative clause is found only in our verse.<sup>8</sup> In light of this rule, one would have expected the text of Deut 1:44 to read:

וירדפו אתכם כאשר תרדפנה הדברים  
 ...and *chased* you as bees *chase*.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A minor variant in the Vulgate will be discussed below.

<sup>5</sup> On the syntax of similes, see J. Joosten, 'Elaborate Similes – Hebrew and Greek. A Study in Septuagint Translation Technique', *Bib* 77 (1996), 227–236; T.L. Brensinger, *Simile and Prophetic Language in the Old Testament* (Mellen Biblical Press Series 43; Lewiston NY, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> See the French translation *La Bible en Français Courant*: 'Ceux qui laperont l'eau avec la langue comme le font les chiens.'

<sup>7</sup> See also: Exod 33:11; Num 11:12; Judg 7:5; 16:9; 1 Sam 19:4; 1 Kgs 14:10; 2 Kgs 21:13; Isa 25:11; 66:20; Jer 13:11; 43:12; Amos 2:13; 3:12; 9:9; Mal 3:17.

<sup>8</sup> This statement is valid only for quasi-proverbial similes. Where a comparison is made to a specific event, the verb עשה may be used, see Deut 2:12.

<sup>9</sup> The verb רדף may occur without explicit direct object: Gen 14:14; 1 Sam 30:10.

Vulgate *persecutus est vos sicut solent apes persequi* (similarly Targum Neofiti)

Alongside the similes exhibiting repetition of the main verb, a less frequent type of simile exists whose verb is not the verb of the main clause. In this case, an action is compared to a different action, of proverbial tenour. An example may be quoted from Deuteronomy:

In this example, the proverbial flight of the eagle illustrates the menace and the speed of the nation that will be brought against Israel. Other cases show the same phrasing:

2 Sam 17:12    We shall light upon him as the dew *falls* on the ground.

## 2. *The Peshitta and its Vorlage*

നീക്കം എടുക്കുക - അതിനോട് അനുബന്ധം നീക്കം ചെയ്യാൻ സാധിക്കും

</>Text, Translation, and Tradition : Studies on the Peshitta and its Use in the Syriac Tradition Presented to  
Konrad D. Jenner on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday</>, edited by Peursen, Wido Th. Van, Brill Academic Publishers, 2005. ProQuest  
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And the Amorites dwelling in that hill country came out against you and pursued you like bees *driven out by smoke*.

As is indicated by Weitzman, the Syriac translator appears to have read, instead of תַּעֲשֶׂנָּה, the graphically similar תַּעֲשֶׂנָּה understood as a 3rd fem. plur. Pual imperfect of the verb עָשָׂן ‘to smoke’. The Hebrew text reflected by the Peshitta may thus be reconstructed:

וַיִּרְדְּפוּ אֹתְכֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂנָּה הַדְּבָרִים

...and chased you as bees *are smoked out*.

One cannot be certain that such a Hebrew text ever existed except in the mind of the Syriac translator. Yet, the reconstructed text is possible, both grammatically and lexically.<sup>11</sup> Contextually, the effect of the clause is to compare the action of the Amorites in chasing Israel to the action of bees when they are smoked out. This simile seems to be quite apt. Last but not least, the text reflected in the Peshitta conforms to the usual syntax of similes in the Hebrew Bible.

Textual critics are usually very hesitant to propose corrections of the MT on the basis of the Peshitta alone. Recent research has made it clear, however, that the Syriac translation originated early enough to have preserved non-Masoretic variants, and generally does not depend on other versions of the Bible. There is nothing inherently improbable in the hypothesis of a non-Masoretic Hebrew variant reflected only by the Peshitta. If there was such a variant text for Deut 1:44, internal considerations—i.e. the stylistic problem in the MT—could lead one to prefer the variant over the transmitted text.<sup>12</sup>

The Masoretic reading could be accounted for as a facilitating reading. In a non-vocalised text, תַּעֲשֶׂנָּה, the 3rd fem. plur. imperfect Qal of עָשָׂה and תַּעֲשֶׂנָּה, the 3rd fem. plur. imperfect Pual of עָשָׂן are very similar. Moreover, the verb עָשָׂה is much more frequent than the verb עָשָׂן. An early scribe could easily have mistaken the latter for the former and thus created the MT, stylistically weak but contextually serviceable.

### 3. Conclusion

In his novel *The Chosen*, Chaim Potok stages a rabbi scandalized by the suggestion that a passage in the Talmud should be emended because it is

<sup>11</sup> The verb עָשָׂן occurs in the Hebrew Bible in the Qal only. The Bible is a small corpus, however, and lack of attestation does not imply that a Pual did not exist in ancient Hebrew. Post-biblical Hebrew knows both a Piel and a Pual of עָשָׂן with the meaning “to smoke, to fumigate, to be touched by smoke”.

<sup>12</sup> Note Weitzman’s prudent judgment (*Syriac Version*, 20): ‘Occasionally it is arguable that P’s identification is superior to the conventional one.’

grammatically indefensible. One might have even stronger reservations about an emendation of the biblical text based on a mere stylistic anomaly.

Nevertheless, the case of Deut 1:44 merits consideration. The stylistic anomaly in the MT corresponds to the textual evidence provided by the Peshitta as do two sides of the same coin. Not only is there a difficulty in the Hebrew text, there is also a variant reading attested in an ancient version. Taken together, the two phenomena tend to indicate that the Hebrew text reflected by the Syriac translation is the more original text of Deut 1:44.

