

The Hebrew Bible

Volume 1C
Writings

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other texts. He notices that Albrektson's reluctance to acknowledge the existence of variant readings is to a large extent due to the fear that it might suggest preference for a Hebrew text superior to MT.

Date of the Translation and Identity of the Translator(s)

Observing the different ways in which the same Hebrew word is translated into Syriac, Weitzman⁶ thinks that s-Lam and s-Job (→ 11.3.4) represent conservative translations. The fact that s-Job probably was influenced by s-Lam suggests that Lamentations was translated earlier, as an appendix to Jeremiah (→ 6–9.1.4).⁷

Alexander⁸ accepts Weitzman's theory that the Peshitta derived from a Jewish version of the Hebrew Bible made in Edessa around 200 C.E. He even suggests that s-Lam was translated long before. The closer one brings s-Lam to 70 C.E. the easier it is to understand the *raison d'être* of such a translation. According to Alexander, this view is confirmed by the hypothesis of Bogaert,⁹ according to whom the presence of the *Apocalypse Baruch*, 4 Ezra (→ 11.7.2.2), and of the sixth book of the Jewish War in manuscript s^{7a1} reflects a Judeo(-Christian) tradition of the commemoration of the fall of Jerusalem. Against this hypothesis, in this manuscript, 4 Ezra took the place of 1 Esdras (3 Ezra; → 11.7.1.3), and therefore probably the translation of 1 Esdras was not available to the scribe.¹⁰

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Claudio Balzaretto

13–17.1.4.5 Esther

13–17.1.4.5.1 Background

Translated by the end of the second century C.E., the original text of the Peshitta version of Esther (s-Esth) – as far as such can be retrieved – represents a clear and close (though not slavish) rendering of the Hebrew text as represented by MT (→ 17.2.2). In only a handful of instances, after allowing for the possibility of scribal corruption in the Syriac transmission process, does the extant text of s-Esth reasonably imply a consonantal reading and/or vocalization of the Hebrew text that differs from that of MT (→ 13–17.1.4.5.4). Moreover, the possibility of Jewish influence on the translator(s) of s-Esth is suggested not only by the high degree of Hebrew proficiency to which the Syriac translation attests, but also by the possible incorporation, in at least one instance, of early Jewish (i.e., rabbinic) exegetical tradition (→ 13–17.1.4.5.5).

13–17.1.4.5.2 Text and Editions

As of 2016, the book of Esther has not yet appeared in the Peshitta Institute's *Vetus Testamentum Syriace* (Leiden: Brill, 1977–). The earlier European editions of Walton (1655)¹ and Lee

⁶ Weitzman, *The Syriac*, 178–81.

⁷ Cf. Jerome's *Prologus Galeatus* attesting to a Jewish sequence in which Lamentations was combined with Jeremiah (→ 1.1.2.1.3; → 1.1.2.2.6.4).

⁸ Alexander, "The Cultural History," 91–92.

⁹ Bogaert, *Apocalypse*.

¹⁰ He was aware of the arrangement of the books according to LXX.

¹ This is the date given in the colophon of vol. 2 of Walton, **Polyglotta* (London), in which the *editio princeps* of s-Esth

Finally, with respect to biblical citations in the works of pre-modern Syriac writers (→ 21.9) – a category of textual testimony that is so rich with respect to other books of the Bible – little is to be found that bears directly on the text of Esther (not surprisingly, given the unpopularity and inconsistent canonicity of the book of Esther in Eastern Christianity¹⁶). Indeed, the only direct citation from s-Esth is apparently supplied by the pen of the fourth-century C.E. church father Aphrahat, who, in his homily 21, “On Persecution,” sec. 20, cites the proclamation of Haman in Esth 6:11: “So shall it be done for the man in whose honor the king delights,”¹⁷ the text of which is identical to that in all of the above-mentioned editions (including manuscript s^{7a1}).¹⁸

13–17.1.4.5.3 Translation Character¹⁹

The text of s-Esth, as attested by the published editions, represents a clear and generally faithful – though not slavish – rendering of the Hebrew text as attested by MT (→ 17.2.2).²⁰ Departures from a

strictly “literal” rendering are for the most part characterized by adjustment towards Syriac idiom, e.g., *ad* Esth 2:19: ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ “in the gate of the king” for MT ܒַּשְׁעַר-הַמֶּלֶךְ (as opposed to the *status constructus* ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ); *ad* Esth 4:8: ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ “and that she make entreaty of him” for MT ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ “and to make entreaty before him” (as opposed to rendering ܡܠܟܐ by ܡܠܟܐ [as *ad* Esth 1:19], which is not normative with the verb ܡܠܟܐ “to make entreaty”); and *ad* Esth 9:27: ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ “in every year” for MT ܒְּכָל-שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה. On a few occasions, s-Esth does seem to adopt a slavish rendering – as, e.g., *ad* Esth 4:16, where it reproduces Hebrew אֶצְוֶה as ܐܘܨܝܐ (both meaning “I will fast”) rather than ܢܝܬܝܐ “we will fast,” which would be syntactically normative – although in such instances the translator(s) of s-Esth may well have intended to preserve what they perceived to be an interpretively significant element of the Hebrew text, especially (as in the example cited) where the underlying Hebrew syntax is itself non-normative.²¹

Among the more substantive semantic differences in s-Esth are:

- *Additions*, such as *ad* Esth 3:7, in which s-Esth clarifies the elliptical syntax of Hebrew ܐܡܪ ܡܠܟܐ “and from month to month twelve” by inserting ܡܠܟܐ “in the month” (and construing such as the beginning of the next clause), hence: ܐܡܪ ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ “and from month to month. In the twelfth month ...”; and *ad* Esth 3:13, in which, after ܠܠܗܝܐ “to take as plunder” (for MT ܠܒܝܐ “to plunder,” with which the verse ends), s-

¹⁶ Cf., in this regard, the telling statement of Saadia Gaon b. Joseph, writing in the first half of the tenth century, probably in Babylonia (from his Judeo-Arabic commentary on Esth 2:16–20): “Some of the ignorant among the Gentiles may occasionally censure us over Esther’s getting into a predicament with King Ahasuerus – especially in view of how we extol her and have continued to hand down the record of her affair over the course of time, and even more so for our saying, ‘and the king loved Esther’ (v. 17)” (see M.G. Wechsler, “Saadia’s Seven Guidelines for ‘Conviviality in Exile,’” *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 1 [2013]: 203–33 [209, n. 29]). On the canonicity of Esther in Syriac tradition, see Haelewyck, “Le canon de l’Ancien Testament dans la tradition syriaque,” *passim*.

¹⁷ See I. Parisot (ed. and trans.), *Aphraatis sapientis persae Demonstrationes*, Vol. 1: *Demonstrationes I–XXII* (PS 1.1; Paris: Firmin-Didot et socii, 1894), 981, lines 6–8: ܐܠܗܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ.

¹⁸ The single *scholium* on Esther offered by Theodore bar Koni constitutes a précis of the book and, as far as we can tell, contains no direct citation from the biblical text; see A. Scher (ed.), *Theodorus bar Kōnī: Liber scholiorum, pars prior* (CSCO 55/Syr. 2.65; Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1910), 366–67.

¹⁹ All citations from the text of s-Esth are from Ceriani’s photolithographic edition of manuscript s^{7a1}, unless otherwise indicated.

²⁰ See the similar assessment of Grünthal, *Uebersetzung*, 14:

“er [d.h., der Übersetzer] sich in den weitaus meisten Fällen von sklavischer Wörtlichkeit ferngehalten und im ganzen bestrebt gewesen, eine gute und lesbare Übersetzung zu liefern.” Cf. also Haefeli, *Die Peschitta des Alten Testaments*, 31–32.

²¹ Grünthal’s assertion (*Uebersetzung*, 14) that the text of s-Esth is occasionally “weak and colorless” (“Öfter ist die Übersetzung schwach und farblos”) is, in any event, rather unfair seeing that in the examples he cites (Esth 2:11; 3:14; 4:16; 6:12) s-Esth represents a semantically faithful rendering of the Hebrew text; indeed, his assertion might be applied equally to the latter.

Esth adds (possibly by influence of v. 12, if not an early scribal error) **בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא** “in one day, in the month of Adar. On the thirteenth [day] it was written, ...”

- *Omissions*, such as *ad* Esth 1:6: **בְּהֵט** (RSV: “porphyry”);²² *ad* Esth 2:2: **בְּתוֹלוֹת** “virgins/virginal” (cf., by contrast, **בְּתוֹלוֹת** “virgins” in v. 3); *ad* Esth 3:8: **בֵּין הָעַמִּים** “among the peoples”; *ad* Esth 4:11: **וְעַם-מְדִינוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ** “and the people of the king’s provinces”; *ad* Esth 5:5: **אֲשֶׁר-עָשְׂתָה** “that Esther had prepared”; *ad* Esth 6:13: **וּלְכָל-אֶהְיֹו** “and to all of his friends”; *ad* Esth 8:5: **וְטוֹבָה אֲנִי בְּעֵינָיו** “and [if] I be pleasing in his eyes”; and *ad* Esth 9:28: **דּוֹר וָדוֹר** “every generation.”
- *Substitutions*, comprising, on the one hand, *lexical* substitutions, such as *ad* Esth 8:3, in which MT **וַתִּבְךְ** “and she wept” is rendered **וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה** “and (she was) imploring”²³; *ad* Esth 8:9, in which, for the sake of contextualization, MT **סִינָן** “Sivan” is rendered by the Syriac month name **חַזִּירָן** “Haziran”; and *ad* Esth 9:26, in which MT **הַפּוֹר** “the Pur” (i.e., lot) is rendered **חֲסִי** “Passover” (on which see → 13–17.1.4.5.5 below); and, on the other hand, *grammatical-syntactic* substitutions, such as *ad* Esth 6:8, in which MT **וְאֵשֶׁר** (conj. + relative pron.) – representing a long-standing grammatical-exegetical crux – is rendered in s-Esth by the temporal adverb **בְּ**

“when” (as if reading **כַּאֲשֶׁר**), hence: “when the royal crown was placed²⁴ on his (i.e., the king’s) head.”

The degree to which LXX and its various recensions may have influenced the text of s-Esth – both in its earliest retrievable form as well as in its successive stages of transmission – remains indeterminate in the absence of a critical edition. So far, no conclusive examples of such influence on s-Esth have been adduced from manuscript s^{7a1},²⁵ which represents one of the earliest extant text forms, although Munnich²⁶ has remarked several instances wherein the text represented in the editions of Walton and Urmia appears to have been corrected towards LXX (→ 13–17.1.1.5) and/or the Lucianic recension (away from manuscript s^{7a1}; → 13–17.1.6).

13–17.1.4.5.4 Text-Critical Value

The text of s-Esth represented by manuscript s^{7a1} reflects a Hebrew *Vorlage* that, notwithstanding any orthographic differences, was essentially identical to the unvocalized text of Esther represented by MT (→ 17.2.2). At the same time, however, – after accounting for a certain degree of stylistic adjustment on the part of the Syriac translator(s) – there are several instances wherein manuscript s^{7a1} suggests a reading of the Hebrew *Vorlage* that differs (semantically) from the text of MT, e.g.: *ad* Esth 1:8 and 4:16: **בְּחֹקֵי הַחֹקֵי** “by (the) law,” suggesting **בְּדֵת/בְּדֵת** over against MT **בְּדֵת** “according to the law”; Esth 2:3: **חֻמֵּי** “orders,” suggesting **מְקִידִים** over against MT **מְקִידִים** “commissioners”; Esth 4:14: **אַתָּה אֲנִי** “you yourself will perish,” suggesting **תִּשָּׁחֲדֶי** over against MT **תִּשָּׁחֲדֶי** “you

²² It may be the case, however, that the translator(s) of s-Esth construed **בְּהֵט** “porphyry and marble” as a practical hendiadys (not necessarily reflecting ignorance of the meaning of **בְּהֵט** “porphyry,” as suggested by Grünthal, *Die syrische Uebersetzung*, 23), which he thus sought to resolve by the single lexeme **בְּהֵט** “marble.” Indeed, on the medieval identification of **בְּהֵט** “porphyry” and **בְּהֵט** “marble” in this verse as denoting two varieties of marble, see M.G. Wechsler, *Strangers in the Land* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2010), 197–98 and the notes therein.

²³ However, as pointed out by Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament*, 275, s^{10a} has here **וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה** “and (she was) weeping,” which corresponds more precisely to the Hebrew verb and in all likelihood represents the original reading of s-Esth. This underscores the provisional nature of our present discussion concerning the character of s-Esth and its relevance for textual criticism.

²⁴ So, reading **כַּאֲשֶׁר** in place of the clearly erroneous (since they are all contextually nonsensical) readings in all of the aforementioned published editions, viz.: **כַּאֲשֶׁר** “was placed, you will place” (Walton, Lee, and Urmia editions) and **כַּאֲשֶׁר** “you will place” (s^{7a1}; Mosul edition). This corrected reading was already suggested by Thorndike in his *variae lectiones* published in Walton, *Polyglotta* (Vol. 6, 40) and reiterated by Grünthal, *Uebersetzung*, 11.

²⁵ Pace Grünthal, *Uebersetzung*, 19–20. See, however, the next section concerning the parallel readings *ad* Esth 4:8 and 8:7 remarked by Munnich.

²⁶ Munnich, “La Peshitta d’*Esther*,” 82.

(pl.) will perish”; and Esth 9:27: כִּנְחָמָם “in their times,” suggesting בְּיָמָם over against MT וְכִנְחָמָם “and according to their times.”²⁷ Two Hebrew variants that are more substantive, which also appear to be supported by LXX, have been suggested by Munnich,²⁸ viz.: the omission, *ad* Esth 4:8, of כֶּתֶב “the writ of the decree” and, *ad* Esth 8:7, of וְלִמְרַדְכֵי הַיְּהוּדִי “and to Mordecai the Jew.” Nonetheless, for all of these examples the possibility remains that we are dealing with evidence, not of Hebrew variants, but of idiomatic or stylistic adjustment, if not simply errors (e.g., the misreading of the similar letters ב/ב, א/א, and ו/ו). In the absence of a critical edition of s-Esth, any more decisive conclusions must be held in abeyance.

13–17.1.4.5.5 Exegetical Value

s-Esth, being a primary translation, offers a significant early contribution to the exegesis – or at least the exegetical history – of the various semantic-exegetical cruxes attested in MT (→ 13–17.2.2). While adhering to a generally close method

of rendering their Hebrew *Vorlage*, the translator(s) of s-Esth also consistently strive for clarity, and hence – regardless of the merit one assigns to their rendering – there is usually little doubt as to their intended meaning and underlying construal of the Hebrew text (see, e.g., the renderings in s-Esth of the semantic cruxes in Esth 3:7 and 6:8, discussed in → 13–17.1.4.5.3). In at least one instance, moreover, s-Esth may offer insight into the exegetical consciousness of the translator(s) and the community they represent, attesting the presence/influence of Jewish exegetical tradition thereon: *ad* Esth 9:26, where all of the published editions (including manuscript s^{7a1}) have חֲסִידָא “Passover” for MT הַפּוּר “the Pur,” apparently alluding to the early rabbinic tradition linking Purim and Passover as “mirrored book-ends” (occurring on the same day in the first and last months) commemorating God’s deliverance of His people (see *t. y. Meg.* 1:5).²⁹

²⁷ All of these examples are remarked by Grünthal (*Uebersetzung*, 13), who also cites the example of אֲרַם “and also” in Esth 7:8 as reflecting the reading אֲרַם “and also” over against MT אֲרַם “will he even ...?” We have discounted this example, however, since the Syriac rendering is in this case certainly within the bounds of idiomatic and stylistic adjustment. The situation regarding names – which are especially prone to variation in translation – is particularly tenuous, especially so for those in s-Esth, most of which, being non-Semitic, are not only more opaque to begin with, but in many cases have clearly suffered from misreading and/or scribal corruption (e.g., אֲרַם “Armath” [Esth 1:14] for אֲרַם “Admath(a)”; דַּלְחֹן “Dalkhon” [Esth 9:7] for דַּלְחֹן “Dalphon”; אֲרַי “Aridai” [Esth 9:9] for אֲרַי “Aridai”) vis-à-vis the etymologically more precise forms attested in MT (on which see, *inter alios*, A.R. Millard, “The Persian Names in Esther and the Reliability of the Hebrew Text,” *JBL* 96 [1977]: 481–88). Neither can anything be adduced from manuscript s^{7a1} one way or the other with respect to the twelve instances of *Qere/Ketiv* in MT-Esth.

²⁸ Munnich, “La Peshitta d’*Esther*,” 76–77. Munnich posits seven additional instances of a Hebrew variant attested jointly by the Peshitta and LXX, yet none of them, in our opinion, falls “beyond a reasonable doubt” of representing idiomatic or stylistic adjustment (e.g., the idiomatic rendering of וּבְכָל עִיר וָעִיר “and in every province and in every city” *ad* Esth 8:17 by כָּל הָעָרִים וְכָל הָעָרִים/κατὰ πόλιν καὶ χάραν; or the stylistic-clarifying addition of לֵאמֹר “saying”/καὶ εἶπον “and say” to the end of Esth 4:10).

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²⁹ For a detailed discussion of this rendering, see Wechsler, “The Purim-Passover Connection.”