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*SOME NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF THE SYRIAC
NEW TESTAMENT.*

It is well known to scholars that the history of the versions of the New Testament is beset with obscurities of all kinds ; it is rare, in the case of the greater versions, to find either geographical or historical landmarks ; to this day we are not able to say positively in what century the Latin Bible was first produced, nor in what part of the Roman Empire the New Testament found its first Latin readers : nor can we say what books of the New Testament had precedence in translation, nor whether the Old Testament had precedence of the New. In the same way we meet with perplexity with regard to the Syriac Bible : one venerable and beautiful version of the New Testament has been commonly supposed to belong to the second century, and upon this unverified (and probably unverifiable) supposition much incorrect reasoning has been based, with regard to the original form and development of the text itself. Examination shows that the text in question is not the translation of a single hand, and that behind the so-called Peshito (or Vulgate) version there loom up the spectral forms of earlier versions, or at least of variant versions which are claimed as prior ; in particular, one sees for the Gospels the towering figure of the lost Harmony or Diatessaron of Tatian, which is regarded in some quarters as the *fons et origo* of all the Syriac gospels. It will be seen that with all this variety of form, and uncertainty as to the times of production, the Syriac version presents problems to the scholar of unusual intricacy and obscurity. There is, however, no reason to regard these questions as insoluble and intractable. They are already beginning to yield to treatment ; fresh documentary evidence on the one hand,

and further acquaintance with the Syriac language and literature, point to conclusions which, if not as yet absolutely certain, are in the region of the larger probabilities.

We may, for instance, regard it as highly probable that the Syriac Church was cradled under Jewish influences, and it is possible to demonstrate that the Old Testament was prior, in translation, to the New, by the simple method of showing the traces of the language of the Syriac Old Testament in the text of the New. It is an interesting study, and one which has not been adequately treated in England, nor perhaps in Germany; probably a re-statement of the matter might be made with advantage before long.

The question of the chronological position of the Peshito, for long the battleground of opposing schools in textual criticism, has been greatly advanced in recent years by Professor Burkitt's investigations, which have rendered it highly probable, on the one hand, that St. Ephrem, the great Syrian father, who died in 373, was unacquainted with the Peshito version, and, on the other hand, have brought to light the fact that a version of the New Testament was made by the Syrian father, Rabbula, in the early part of the fifth century, according to the biography of that father preserved in the Syrian Church. It stands to reason that if Ephrem never certainly quotes the Peshito in his voluminous writings, the Peshito did not exist in his day; and if one of the leading ecclesiastics in the period immediately following St. Ephrem's death is credited with a Syriac version of the New Testament, we must admit the probability that the Peshito, which even in MS. form goes back nearly to the time of Rabbula, was actually the result of that father's energy or origination. It is, therefore, commonly held that we should refer the Peshito to the beginning of the fifth century; this means that there were early versions which preceded it, known comprehensively

under the title of Old Syriac, according to the nomenclature of Hort, whose insight would be, in this regard, abundantly justified. What is not clear is the period to which these first versions (or this prior version) should be referred. The question whether it belongs to the second century is not finally closed, nor the connected question, whether it should be regarded as subsequent to the Diatessaron of Tatian (say 165 A.D.), or anterior to it. On these points further investigation is much to be desired.

In the present paper, I desire to point out one or two directions in which the desired inquiry can be pressed forward, and fresh facts can be brought out as the fuel for the flame of fresh inquiry.

In the commentary of the Syrian father, Isho'dad, upon the Pauline Epistles, I find at the close of the epistle to the Romans the following subscription :

“ Mar Koumi translated this epistle from Greek into Syriac, for Mari the presbyter, with the help of Daniel the Presbyter, the Indian. Here end the Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans.” It is clear that Mar Koumi was attached in some way to Mari and worked with or for him.

It is evident that this note has been taken by Isho'dad from the text upon which he is commenting, and it becomes at once an important question as to the character of the text commented upon, and as to the personality to whom the translation is referred.

An examination of the quoted part of the text in Isho'dad will, I think, show that the text is, with hardly any sensible variation, the Peshito. In the first eight chapters of Romans, the only important variant was in Romans v. 20, where Isho'dad's text has—

“ The law entered into the midst ” (*παρεισῆλθεν*), where the Peshita has—

“ The entrance which occurred to the law.”

Setting this aside as a possible variant, and neglecting one or two microscopic changes, we are entitled to say that the text is that of the Peshito.

Who then is Mar Koumi who is credited with the translation? Can we identify him, locate him, determine his date?

The first thing that we find out is that Mar Koumi is one of a celebrated group of scholars and translators in the Syrian Church.

In Duval's *Littérature Syriaque* (p. 87) we are told that the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia were translated in the fifth century, soon after his death, at the School of Edessa, by Ibas and his disciples—Koumi, Probus and Mana. On referring to p. 254 we find that Duval is deriving his information in part from Ebedjesu's Catalogue of Syriac writers, for he, Ebedjesu, tells us that at the celebrated School of the Persians, at Edessa, the Syrians began in the fifth century to teach the Peripatetic philosophy. It was here that Ibas, Koumi and Probus translated the writings of Theodore and the works of Aristotle.

Bar Hebraeus says that the translation of Aristotle was due to Mana, whom he calls Magna : ¹ and it is quite likely that he is correct in the reference. However that may be, it is clear that the Koumi, who is referred to in the commentary of Isho'dad, is to be found in the Persian School at Edessa, in the fifth century, at the time when that school was in its greatest splendour and activity, and when the work of translation of the most admired Greek writers was being carried on with surprising zeal and fidelity. Somewhere in this period there occurred the translation of the Epistle to the Romans into what we call the Peshito version, and it remains to be seen whether we can define the time of the translation more exactly. The only alternative

¹ Bar Hebraeus, *Chron.*, ii 55.

for this reference of the Peshito text of Romans to Koumi would appear to be the supposition that Koumi translated, not the Epistle to the Romans itself, but the Commentary of Theodore upon the Epistle to the Romans, including such parts of the text as were embedded in the Commentary. The alternative needs to be carefully examined, in view of the facts that we trace Koumi to the Persian School of Edessa at a time when the translation of the works of Theodore was being undertaken, and that Isho'dad undoubtedly draws heavily on that translation. We have in fact to decide between two conclusions :

(1) That Koumi was the original translator of the Epistle to the Romans as we find it in the Peshito version : or

(2) that Koumi translated the Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia upon the Romans, in the course of which he replaced the involved text by the equivalent from the (already existing) Peshito version. This translation fell into the hands of Isho'dad.

Now let us see whether we can get any further light on Koumi, the supposed translator of the epistle. From Isho'dad we learn that he had relations with Mari : apparently it was for Mari, and under his direction, that he translated the epistle. When we ask who Mari was, the answer is that he is well known in Syriac tradition, as Mari of Ardashir. That is, he is a well-known Syrian bishop of the fifth century. At the time when Koumi is translating for him, he is a presbyter, so that we place the translation before the episcopate of Mari at Ardashir. He is best known as a correspondent of Ibas, doctor of the Persian School at Edessa, at a critical moment in the development of the strife between the Monophysite and Nestorian parties in the Syrian Church. In a letter from Ibas to Mari, in which he describes the persecution which he, as a Nestorian, had suffered at the hands of his fanatic opponent, Rabbula,

there was said to have been contained a compromising statement in which Ibas had gone far beyond the Nestorian objection to calling the Virgin Mary by the name of Mother of God, and had said that he would not object to calling Christ God, since he could himself adopt a similar title. Whatever Ibas said, or meant, the perverse quotation stuck to him ; he tried to maintain that the letter had been interpolated ; in so doing he admitted the authorship and did not convince his enemies of the interpolation.¹

It will be seen that our friend Koumi, into whose history we are examining, was a member of the circle of scholars at Edessa, and in close touch with the Nestorian movement. This seems to throw him out of sympathy with Rabbula, to whom Professor Burkitt refers the translation and official revision, which we call the Peshito. Perhaps, however, the gulf was not yet so wide, nor so finally bridgeless, that Koumi could not have been one of the translators of the Peshito. Even in the heat of the great controversy which split the Eastern Church, there were moments of peace and intervals of reconciliation. If it had not been so, it would be almost an impossibility that the Peshito should have become the accepted Biblical tradition in both wings of the Church : indeed the strongest objection to Professor Burkitt's argument for placing the Peshito later than Ephrem, and for referring it to Rabbula, lies precisely at this point : the Nestorians would not easily have accepted a New Testament from the hands of those who were the authors of their excommunication ; still less would they have done so if the revision had emanated from their chief opponent, who was a fanatic of the first order. Hence it is important to remark the existence of breathing-spells in the great struggle ; and it is interesting that Ibas actually reports to Mari that the disputes are at an end, and that a formula of concord

¹ See Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans l'Empire Perse*, p. 254.

has been reached. It is possible that in some such period of reconciliation, the revision might have been planned, just in the same way as the Authorised English Bible of 1611 was the result of conference between the Puritan and Anglican parties at a time immediately preceding their final elongation. When Rabbula died in 435, Ibas actually succeeded him, and for a time at least, occupied the episcopal chair of Edessa. This is the period immediately succeeding the condemnation of Nestorius by the Council of Ephesus in 431. It seems that the assumption of a comparative peace in the Edessan Church, as the condition for a Biblical Revision, which should be generally accepted, requires that such a revision should be made some years before the death of Rabbula. We are accordingly led to this conclusion, that the conditions of a revision are best met by placing it under the auspices of Rabbula in the hands of a body of translators, already operating in the Persian School at Edessa, most of whom appear to have been Nestorian in sympathy ; and of this group of translators Mar Koumi was one, who is credited with the Peshito version of the Epistle to the Romans. We make the hypothesis in the interests of progress, and without any idea that we have finally disposed of the problem. Before leaving this point, it should be noticed that in his work on the Romans, Mar Koumi had the co-operation of an Indian Presbyter, named Daniel. The reference is important ; first, it is a definite landmark in the history of the Church in India, which must have been organised before the time at which Koumi was making his translations ; second, this Indian Church was in close connexion with Edessa, as we should have expected on other grounds ; third, the Indian Church was a Syrian Church, for Daniel the Presbyter not only has a western name, but he is a scholar in Greek and in Syriac, and there is no reason for supposing that the Indian Church to which he belonged

was a Greek-speaking Church. These considerations are of importance for the much-disputed question of the history and origins of the Church of St. Thomas in India.

We now pass on to a second field of inquiry, from which we may before long expect some important accretions to our knowledge of the textual history of the New Testament in the East.

The great test for the existence of types of transmission in the New Testament lies in the confirmation of the suggested types by actual quotations in the Fathers. Every student knows the stress which is laid on the coincidence between the quotations of Chrysostom and the supposed Antiochian revision of the New Testament; and it is clear that it is to Patristic quotations that we must look for the justification of theories which assign special types of New Testament text to particular places and periods. We have already alluded to this test, in discussing the history of the Peshito version: as far as manuscript evidence goes, there is no type so early attested nor so well preserved: but, the critic inquires, is it, as a translation, earlier or later than St. Ephrem? If it is earlier, and if it is an official text, we may expect to find citations from it in the writings of Ephrem. The fact that we have not as yet succeeded in making the verification required is the best proof that the Peshito version is later than Ephrem.

In the Syrian Church, when we come to discuss our textual hypotheses in the light of Patristic quotations, in order to find out what fathers used the Diatessaron or the Old Syriac, or the Peshito, we find ourselves in great straits for want of a sufficient body of early Syriac Christian literature. We have nothing till the fourth century, and in the fourth century we have only the Persian father Aphrahat, and the before-mentioned Ephrem. Aphrahat is Ephrem's senior; he was writing his book of Demonstrations or Homi-

lies between 337 and 345. These Homilies are full of Scripture references and constitute an important textual landmark. Every one who studies the textual problem in Syriac knows the important place occupied by Aphrahat in the criticism of the text. It is clear that we want more literature of this kind, belonging to periods of time that can be defined with sufficient nearness, and emanating from persons who can be historically recognised. The evidence, for example, of the work *De fato*, which is assigned to Bardesanes, is weakened for practical purposes by the fact that it comes from the hand of one of Bardesanes' disciples; the reduced date means lower usefulness, even if the book had been filled with Scriptural references, which it unfortunately is not. In the same way the *Acts of Thomas*, which, like the Bardesanian writings, come to us from Edessa, and perhaps from the very school of Bardesanes, have no definite mark of authorship, and no certain indication of date: and their value, to the textual critic, is reduced accordingly.

Is there any prospect of any fresh accession of evidence on the side of Syriac Patristic literature? May we hope for any important additions to our Patrology for the first four centuries?

In Duval's *Syriac Literature* we find (p. 231) an account of a lost Syriac writer, named Gregory. He is said to have been of Persian origin, to have embraced the monastic life, in consequence of visions which he had, to have studied at Edessa, after which he became a hermit, or at all events a member of a community of solitaries on Mount Izla; later on, he came westward, visited Cyprus, became intimate with St. Epiphanius, whose instructor he is said to have been, and with a monk named Theodore, to whom he addresses his writings and epistles. Of these presumably monastic writings, Duval says that nothing has come down to us.

On p. 338, however, he says that some fragments of his writing have been published by Assemani in the *Biblioteca Orientalis*. This appears to be an exaggeration on the part of Duval.

It is important to record that the missing book has come to light, and I have had the opportunity of examining the transcript of it made by one of my learned friends now residing with us at Woodbrooke. As the work belongs to the latter part of the fourth century, near to the middle of the century, and so occupies a place between the writings of Aphrahat and those of Ephrem, it will be seen at once that we have a large block of the fresh material that we are craving for. The work is monastic in character, and is fairly well sprinkled with Biblical quotations, sometimes in the form of allusions, but more often in direct reference to the books from which they are taken, or to their authors. The writer knows his New Testament well. The proof of this will be forthcoming presently, but it would be outside the limits of this article to enter into a detailed discussion of the citations of Gregory of Cyprus, as we may call him. Up to the present I have succeeded in finding one microscopic coincidence with the Old Syriac, and none with the Diatessaron. It remains to be seen whether the general body of the quotations conforms to the Peshito to such a degree as to identify that as the version employed by Gregory. If it should do so, then we may have to revise our theory of a fifth century Peshito, and of its translation, in part, by Mar Koumi. Having said thus much, it is clear that we have justified the expectation of fresh critical materials, and that we must set to work, ourselves and our friends, on the publication and interpretation of the long-lost, but now recovered, treatises of Gregory of Cyprus.

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