RABBULA OF EDESSA AND THE PESHITTA

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It is one of the surprises of Syriac patristic studies that, until recently, none of the extant writings of Rabbula of Edessa (ob. a.d. 435) has ever been examined for any light the Biblical quotations of that famous Bishop of the Syrian Church might shed on his reputed labours as translator and reviser of the Syriac Scriptures and 'author' of the Peshitta. An attempt to make good this omission has been made in a recent study by Dr. Arthur Vööbus, at one time Professor of Hebrew in the Baltic University of Pinneberg and now at the Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary.¹

Dr. Vööbus is mainly concerned with Rabbula's Syriac version of Cyril of Alexandria's de recta fide, a work containing some forty quotations from the Gospels alone.² This Syriac translation can be dated to the closing years of Rabbula's life, when, presumably, his translation and revision of the Scriptures in Syriac had already been completed. Is there any evidence of Peshitta influence in the Gospel quotations of this work? Before answering this question, Vööbus seeks to establish that Rabbula did not translate Cyril's Biblical quotations de novo into Syriac, but was in the habit of inserting his own familiar Syriac Biblical text. Investigation of this text then leads to the striking result that Rabbula was using, not the Peshitta, but an Old Syriac form of text. On the basis of this and similar evidence from other sources, Vööbus has gone on to challenge the late F. C. Burkitt's whole theory of the Rabbulan 'authorship' of the Peshitta Gospels, and, for that matter, the entire Peshitta New Testament.³

¹ Investigations into the Text of the New Testament used by Rabbula of Edessa, Contributions of Baltic University, No. 59, Pinneberg, 1947.
An old controversy is thus revived. In an article on ‘The Remaining Syriac Versions of the Gospels’ in the Expository Times for 1915,¹ Dr. Alphonse Mingana raised several objections to Burkitt’s theory. The main support for his view Burkitt had found in a statement of the Syriac biographer of Rabbula, an admiring contemporary, that the zealous Bishop of Edessa, among his other reforms, had ‘translated by the wisdom of God which was in him the New Testament from Greek into Syriac, because of its variants, exactly as it was’.² Mingana urged caution in accepting at their face value the statements of Syriac traditionalists, and recalled an even better attested Syrian tradition which attributed a translation of the whole Bible from Greek into Syriac to a certain Maraba, Nestorian Patriarch of Seleucia, in the first half of the sixth century. Dr. Rendel Harris was more favourably disposed to the hypothesis, but still believed that evidence could be produced to show that the Peshitta was in existence in the fourth century, and referred to a forthcoming study of the New Testament quotations in a newly discovered mystical work of the Syrian monk Gregory of Cyprus, a contemporary of Ephrem and Aphraates.³ This promised study did not appear till thirteen years later, but its quotations proved, on examination, to be of the same type as those which Burkitt had found in all other pre-fifth century sources.⁴

It had not apparently occurred to any of these scholars to subject the writings of Rabbula himself to investigation in this connexion, no doubt mainly because of their fragmentary character and the doubts felt about their genuineness,⁵ and the fact that the longest authentic work, the version of the de recta fide of Cyril was a translation from the Greek. If Vööbus's

⁵ One only of the forty-six letters attributed to Rabbula by his biographer has survived, the Letter to Bishop Gamelinos, and its authenticity is disputed; it is also a translation of an original Greek letter. Cf. Baumstark, Geschichte der syrischen Literatur, p. 72, and Vööbus, Researches, etc., p. 26.
contention, however, is correct that Rabbula does not translate Cyril's New Testament quotations afresh but inserts at each place where a quotation occurs the current Syriac Biblical text, then the Syriac version of Cyril's treatise assumes a new importance in this connexion.

Comparison of the Syriac with the Greek text in Migne does not bear out Vööbus's assertion, at any rate without serious qualification. In one case only (not noted by him) can we be sure that Rabbula is inserting an Old Syriac form of text entire in place of the Greek quotation; this is John iii. 34, discussed below. In other cases it is quite evident that Rabbula is translating Cyril's Greek, even including Cyril's own expansions of the canonical text. Even where a variant is attested in Old Syriac sources only, this translation factor cannot be ruled out.

The most that can be said for Dr. Vööbus's view is that Rabbula's Syriac equivalents of Cyril's quotations have been influenced by the current form of the Syriac vernacular Scriptures.

Even this, however, is something, and may furnish enough evidence on which to form a judgment of the character of Rabbula's New Testament, and Dr. Vööbus has rendered scholarship a valuable service in drawing attention to the undoubted presence of an Old Syriac textual element in these quotations, and to the wider problem thereby raised.

1 Mt. xviii. 20 (670, 1176), is introduced in CyrG., followed by CyrS., by verse 18a, 'Verily, verily, I say unto you'. In verse 20, CyrG. reads συναχθώσι instead of συνηγμένοι of all Greek texts; in rendering by an imperfect yOJULdK*., instead of by the participle (συνηγμένοι) of all the older Syriac versions, it is evident that Rabbula is translating his Greek original. Mt. xix. 4 (680, 1185) has the variant in CyrG. of πλάσασι for ποίησασι, again a reading confined to Cyril; this is reflected in Rabbula's translation (f for חמה). The addition here in CyrS. of לְָּיָנָּה (male and female created he them and blessed them') is not, however, in our text of CyrG. Jn. vi. 31, 30, 32 (quoted in this order and so translated into Syriac) (684, 1189) contains an expansion of the Greek text, probably Cyril's own.

2 Mt. xxviii. 19 (638, 1144) contains an 'Old Syriac' variant which Vööbus traces in a number of sources (מיָד, 'preach', for syr. vg. מֹדָא. 'teach'), but the 'variant' may have arisen through the influence of the translation of ἐκηρυχθη in the quotation of I Tim. iii. 16 a few lines before.
(681, 1185), quoted with a characteristic Old Syriac variant, is sufficient by itself to give us pause.¹

In dealing with the problem thus raised, Dr. Vööbus confines himself, for the most part, to the discussion of the seven most striking examples where this Old Syriac textual element occurs.² For the rest of his analysis of these quotations his results only are given. They may be summarised as follows:
of some thirty Gospel quotations in the treatise (I have counted forty), one-third agree with Old Syriac textual tradition; one-third have peculiar Syriac readings not found in any other known sources, and the remaining third agree with the Peshitta where the latter is itself in agreement with syr. vt. Two quotations only are cited as being in agreement with the Peshitta against the Old Syriac, S and C (Jn. xiv. 9 (649, 1156) x. 30 (669, 1173)), of which the first is too short and colourless to admit of any conclusions, while in both cases we can only compare them with S (C vac.).³ The evidence as a whole points, Dr. Vööbus thinks, to the employment by Rabbula, not of our Peshitta, but of some form of the Old Syriac Gospels.

I have submitted these quotations to a similar analysis and reached a different conclusion. Examination of the quotations gave the following picture:

(a) Eight examples agree practically verbatim with the Peshitta against S and C;⁴ six more agree with Peshitta against S and C but have some individual feature or features of their


² Three further examples deal with the text of the Epistles (Investigations, etc., pp. 13 ff.).


⁴ Jn. i. 1-3 (687, cf. 646; 1193, 1152); vi. 51 (684, 1189); ix. 35 (678, 1184); xiii. 13 (694, 1200); xiv. 9, 10 (649, 669, 676; 1156, 1173, 1181) (example given by Vööbus; cf. supra and op. cit., p. 27); xiv. 28 (669, 1173); xx. 22 (683, 1188); xx. 30, 31 (679, 1184) (om. μέν οὖν καὶ ἄλλα et éνωτιν τῶν μαθητῶν, syr. vg. + αὐτός ante [ου] post υἷον [ου]); Add. Mt. xxviii. 20 (670, 1176) (vac. SC); Lk. i. 30 (637, 644, 671; 1141, 1149, 1176) (syr. vg. [ου] vac. SC).
Thus 14-17 or 35-42 per cent. agree with our Peshitta against the Old Syriac. It is not always possible to decide whether this agreement with Peshitta is anything more than accidental; a literal *ad hoc* translation of *CyrG* may have resulted in a text identical with our Peshitta. But in others the influence of the Peshitta translation is unmistakable, e.g. Jn. i. 3, Ἰησοῦς Παῦλος rendering **παντὰ δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο.** Jn. xvii. 11-13 (670, 1176) is a good example of a longer text which is close to the Peshitta yet with individual variants which correspond neither to *CyrG* nor to any known Syriac version; the clause ὁς δέδωκας μοι . . . καθὼς ἡμεῖς is inserted c. *CyrG*. *syr. vg.* contra S (vac. C) but later *CyrS*. omits the second ὁς δέδωκας μοι of *CyrG*. The translation of the last clause is manifestly derived from *syr. vg.*; S has a quite different rendering.

(b) A further group of seven quotations agrees with the Peshitta where the latter itself agrees with one or both of our two Old Syriac witnesses; five more are of the same type, with one or more individual features not traceable elsewhere.

(c) The last group consists of eleven quotations and includes the seven 'Old Syriac' quotations discussed by Vööbus. For the most part they show traces of the influence of both Peshitta and Old Syriac. In one case only can we be said to have anything like a pure Old Syriac text, viz. Jn. iii. 34 (683, 1188), and not with measure

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1 Jn. i. 12, 13 (679, 1185); vi. 56, 57 (584, 1189); viii. 39, 40 (666, 1172); vii. 57, 58 (646, 690; 1152, 1196); xii. 44, 45 (677, 1181); xvii. 11-13 (670, 1176) (discussed above). Add i. 49 (694, 1200) (vac. SC).

2 Cf. further, Jn. xiv. 9, 10 at 649, 1156, xx. 22, 693, 1188.

3 Mt. xiv. 33 (674, 1180); xxxiii. 9 (680, 1185); Jn. vi. 53 (684, 1189) (om. ἐν οὐρανοῖς); x. 30 (649, 669, 670; 1156, 1173, 1181). (This is the second example given by Vööbus of a characteristic Peshitta reading; cf. supra and op. cit., p. 27. But the variation is orthographical only, *CyrS* = *syr. vg.*: and no importance can be attached to it); xiv. 6 (650, 1156); ix. 36, 38 (678, 1184); xiv. 8 (649, 1153).

4 Mt. xxiii. 8 (680, 1185); Jn. i. 30 (690, 1196); x. 37 (676, 1181); xvii. 1 (675, 1180). Add Jn. xvi. 11 (670, 1176); S omits this part of the verse.

5 Mt. iii. 11 (681, 1188); xvii. 5 (681, 1185); xxii. 29 (638, 1144); Lk. ii. 11, 12 (639, 1144); ii. 14 (638, 1144); Jn. i. 18 (678, 1184); iii. 9, 11 (660, 1165); iii. 9, 12, 13 (685, 1192); iii. 34 (683, 1188); iv. 22 (675, 1180); vi. 61, 62 (685, 1192).
was the Father giving the spirit to His Son'; CyrG. = syr. vg., 'for not with measure was God giving the spirit'; Rabbula's text is that of the Curetonian Syriac; the Sinaitic Syriac is practically that of the Peshitta. When the verse is compared with the Peshitta, it must be pronounced a remarkable form of text to be found in a translation from the hand of Rabbula of Edessa within a year or two at most from his death. If the Old Syriac text is original, it may be that a dogmatic motive inspired the Peshitta alteration, but, if so, it was a motive that did not trouble Rabbula, and he certainly cannot in this case be held responsible for the Peshitta form of this verse. The type of Old Syriac text is the same as that to be found in one Johannine quotation in the only surviving fragment of Rabbula's correspondence.¹

The remainder of the quotations have generally a mixed form of Peshitta-Old Syriac text or represent a translation of CyrG. influenced at one point by the Peshitta, at another by the Old Syriac. Lk. ii. 14 (638, 1144) is discussed by Vööbus (pp. 11 and 16) and its Old Syriac element isolated;² he does not, however, remark on the characteristic Peshitta rendering of εὐδοκία, סחיים לֶח, 'good hope' in the same verse. This verse is one which was probably as well known to Rabbula's contemporaries as it is to ourselves, and it is here almost certainly being quoted by Rabbula in the form of text regarded by him as authoritative, no doubt his own revision; in that case, its Old Syriac element is a striking fact. A similar example of this mixed form of text is Lk. ii. 11, 12 (639, 1144) (another very familiar quotation), where a characteristic Peshitta rendering, δέωσιν for σωτηρία contra S (vac. C), is found side by side with the Old Syriac rendering of βρέφος by.credentials (syr. vg. חד), with, in addition, several individual renderings.

There are two conclusions which may be justifiably drawn from this evidence:

¹ The Letter to Bishop Gamelinos in Overbeck, Opera Selecta S. Ephraemi, etc., Jn. vi. 56, p. 234 (discussed by Vööbus, Researches, etc., p. 26).
(i) Group (a) makes it certain that Rabbula's translation of Cyril's treatise has been influenced in its Gospel quotations by the Peshitta. The Peshitta revision of the Gospels was, therefore, available when Rabbula translated the *de recta fide*; we have no reason to doubt and every reason for believing that it was his own revision that the Bishop of Edessa was utilising.

(ii) It is no less certain, however, that Rabbula is drawing on Old Syriac text forms in his translation of Gospel quotations. If Jn. iii. 34 were the only evidence we had, it might be possible to urge that Rabbula had simply recalled this Old Syriac text from memory and inserted it, instead of the usual Peshitta text, at this point. But such a theory cannot account for the other evidence of mixed texts, with Peshitta and Old Syriac elements side by side. Unless we are satisfied with the view that Rabbula is making up his Syriac text as he goes along, drawing now on his memory of the Peshitta, now on that of the Old Syriac, some alternative explanation of these textual phenomena must be given. I suggest that the true explanation of this mixed Peshitta-Old Syriac text or influence in Cyr5 is that, in fact, Rabbula is drawing throughout on his revision of the Syriac Gospels but that Rabbula's Syriac Vulgate was not identical textually with our Peshitta, but still contained a not unsubstantial Old Syriac element. His revision was a kind of half-way house between the Old Syriac represented by S and C and the final and definitive form of the Syriac Vulgate which has come down to us.

The first revision of the Old Syriac version was probably that represented by the Curetonian fragments. The quotation from Jn. iii. 34 above agrees verbatim with C, and this might point to the Curetonian text as the Rabbulan revision. There are, however, grave objections to such a theory; other Old Syriac readings in these quotations do not agree with C, and, in any case, the evidence of reminiscences of the current vernacular Syriac Bible, however striking, can never be wholly satisfactory, especially in a question of such weight. The most that can be said, on the basis of the few convincing examples which can be given, is that Rabbula's revision probably comes somewhere between attempts to revise the Old Syriac, such as we find in C, and the final definitive Peshitta text which has reached us.
Such a conclusion in no way affects Burkitt's main position that Rabbula was responsible for an authoritative revision of the Syriac New Testament, in the case of the Gospels, a revised Evangelion da-Mepharreshe, issued during the time he was Bishop at Edessa. Indeed, that position is, if anything, strengthened by the evidence of Cyr. But it does challenge the assumption universally made by scholars that Rabbula's revision of the Gospels has survived intact and without verbal alteration or variant in our Peshitta text.