

Two West Aramaic Elements in the Old Syriac
and Peshitta Gospels

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In a recent study in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* I undertook to demonstrate West Aramaic provenance for 17 elements (including words, grammatical forms and syntagms) occurring in the Syriac gospel text¹. The profile of these elements taken as a group led to the hypothesis that they derive from a West Aramaic gospel tradition that was in use with the earliest Mesopotamian church. Furthermore, the distribution of the elements in the Old Syriac and the Peshitta, and other factors, seemed to point to the Diatessaron as the source of these West Aramaic elements in the later Syriac versions of the Gospels. Thus the 17 elements formed the basis for a theory of an early attestation (before ± 170 AD) of an Aramaic Gospel tradition relatively independent from the canonical Gospels². If this theory were to be confirmed in future research its importance for textual criticism of the NT should be considerable.

In the present note I will adduce two instances of West Aramaic elements occurring in the Old Syriac or Peshitta Gospels which were not included in my earlier study. The first has all the characteristics of a christian loanword. The second is a grammatical form foreign to Syriac, which entered the Syriac language as a technical term for an institution of the NT age.

To distinguish West-Aramaic elements in Syriac texts is not an easy affair. One is dealing with two Aramaic dialects which share the greater part of their vocabulary and grammar. Valid criteria for isolating elements of

1 J. JOOSTEN, "West Aramaic Elements in the Old Syriac and Peshitta Gospels", *JBL* 110 (1991), 271-289. This study critically reviews, as well as builds upon earlier research by TORREY and BLACK. See esp. C.C. TORREY, *Documents of the Primitive Church* (New York, 1941) 245-270; M. BLACK, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, 3d edition (Oxford, 1967) 281-86.

2 The same theory was defended in my short study: "The Text of Matt 13. 21a and parallels in the Syriac Tradition" *NTS* 37 (1991) 153-159.

West Aramaic origin are the following³. These words must in principle:

- a) be absent from pre-Christian Syriac literature⁴;
- b) be used exclusively in NT or Christian contexts;
- c) have a synonym which is used in profane contexts;
- d) be well-known, in the required sense, from a West Aramaic dialect⁵.

In some cases, especially with loanwords which have become an organic part of the Syriac language, it is difficult to apply all the criteria with the same stringency. On the other hand, various other arguments may come to our help in making the decision (e.g. the absence of a Syriac root from which to derive the word).

1 **ܥܘܨܬܐ** "cross"; **ܥܘܨܘܬܐ** "to crucify"

ܥܘܨܬܐ occurs in Matt 10:38C; 19:21C; Mark 10:21P; Luke 9:23C; 14:27PC;

ܥܘܨܘܬܐ in Luke 23:39PCS; John 19:6,6,15,15P⁶. At first sight it may seem senseless to see in these words West Aramaic elements, since they are so well-known from Syriac texts of all types⁷. Consider, however, the following facts. In the OT Peshitta, wherever "crucifixion" is mentioned, the terms are always **ܘܨܘܬܐ** and **ܘܨܬܐ**⁸, the root **ܥܘܨ** is completely absent. In later literature **ܥܘܨܬܐ** and **ܥܘܨܘܬܐ** are found side by side with **ܘܨܘܬܐ** and **ܘܨܬܐ** without it being possible to show that the former terms are more specifically Christian terms than the latter⁹. The two seem to be entirely synonymous. How-

3 A broader discussion of these criteria in JBL 110 (1991), 272.

4 Pre-Christian Syriac literature would be a very meager collection, and one in which many of the terms under discussion would not have the occasion of being used, were it not for the Peshitta Old Testament. The Peshitta OT is probably a Jewish work dating from the early 2nd century, compare my study on "The Old Testament Quotations in the Old Syriac and Peshitta Gospels" Textus 15 (1990), 55-76.

5 For an overview of the Aramaic dialects see K. BEYER, Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 1984), 23-71, English translation: K. BEYER, The Aramaic Language. Its Distribution and Subdivisions (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 1986).

6 S reads **ܥܘܨܘܬܐ** "he will be crucified" also in Mark 9:12. In view of the Greek εἰσοδέσθη this is almost certainly a scribal error for **ܘܨܘܬܐ** "he will be rejected". Outside the Gospels the verb is found Gal 3:1 and the noun in Acts 13:29; Heb 12:2; 1Pet 2:24 (in the Peshitta version).

7 See R. Payne SMITH ed., Thesaurus Syriacus (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879-1897).

8 Gen 40:19,22; 41,13; Deut 21,22,23; Josh 8:29; 10,26; Esth 2:23; Ezra 6:11. The question whether "crucifixion" or "impaling" is meant by these terms is of secondary importance for our purposes. At no stage of the Syriac language is it possible to detect a semantic opposition between the two words. Such distinctions as are found in late dictionaries (see

ever, it is not to be expected that a language would have two indigenous words to denote the concrete object "cross". If ܩܘܨܬܐ is assured for Syriac by its use in the OT Peshitta, ܩܘܨܬܐ is the usual term in West Aramaic¹⁰. The conclusion all this leads up to is that ܩܘܨܬܐ and ܩܘܨܬܐ are West Aramaic words which penetrated into the Syriac Gospel text¹¹. The use of ܩܘܨܬܐ and ܩܘܨܬܐ in later literature can easily be explained as being due to influence of the NT.

A somewhat unexpected argument (but too interesting to leave aside) is afforded by the Peshitta version of the NT. In the Peshitta to John 19 (a chapter unfortunately non-extant for both C and S) we read in V. 6, "When the chief priests and the officers saw him they cried out saying: 'Crucify him, crucify him (ܩܘܨܬܐ ܩܘܨܬܐ)'. Pilate said to them: 'Take him yourselves and crucify him (ܩܘܨܬܐ ܩܘܨܬܐ)'". And in V. 15, "But they were crying out: 'Lift him up, lift him up, crucify him, crucify him (ܩܘܨܬܐ ܩܘܨܬܐ)'. Pilate said to them: 'Shall I crucify (ܩܘܨܬܐ) your king?'" That is to say, the Jews use the verb ܩܘܨܬܐ for "to crucify", but Pilate uses the verb ܩܘܨܬܐ ¹². Since this happens twice, in V. 6 and V. 15, and since these are the only verses where ܩܘܨܬܐ is used in the Peshitta Gospel of John, we can hardly write it off as a coincidence¹³. We may rather suppose this points to a certain consciousness that ܩܘܨܬܐ though used in Syriac, was in fact the Jewish Palestinian term for "to crucify"¹⁴.

the quotes in Payne SMITH, Thesaurus, coll. 1149 and 3404) do not reflect the actual usage of the terms.

- 9 See for examples R. Payne SMITH ed., Thesaurus Syriacus (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879-1897) col. 3403f.
- 10 SOKOLOFF, A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period (Ramat Gan, 1990), 464f; F. SCHULTHESS, Lexicon Syropalaestinum (Berlin, 1903), 170-171.
- 11 The same conclusion is reached, though without explicit argument, in Payne SMITH, Thesaurus, col. 3403: "verbum e Chald. receptum pro Syr. ܩܘܨܬܐ ".
- 12 The verb ܩܘܨܬܐ occurs also in V. 10, again in the mouth of Pilate. It is used by the narrator as well, VV. 16, 18, 20, 23, 41. The Greek has the same verb σταυρωω in all these places.
- 13 It is to be supposed that the P version, produced around the turn of the 4th to the 5th century, is merely following a textual tradition. Still, we may inquire about the origin of this peculiar tradition.
- 14 The literary technique whereby foreigners are made to use foreign idioms has been observed also in the OT, see e.g. J.C. GREENFIELD, "Aramaic Studies and the Bible", VTSuppl 32 (1981), 129-30.

2 ܠܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ "the twelve"

This form occurs in Matt 26:47PS; John 6:71S; 20:24PS, each time in the expression "one of the twelve"¹⁵. ܠܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ is the *status emphaticus* of ܝܘܠܝܘܬܐ "twelve". Now in Syriac it is not usual to put a cardinal number in the *status emphaticus*¹⁶. The expected form to express "the twelve" would be ܝܘܠܝܘܬܐ, and this is in fact the usual form in the Peshitta and Old Syriac Gospels¹⁷. In Christian Palestinian Aramaic, however, it is normal for the cardinal number to appear in the *status emphaticus* when it is definite and when there is ellipsis of what is counted¹⁸. Thus we find in the Christian Palestinian Aramaic Gospels¹⁹, Matt 22:28 ܠܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ "the seven (brothers)"²⁰, and Mark 10:41 ܠܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ "the ten (other disciples)"²¹.

It is fairly certain, then, that ܠܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ is also a West Aramaic element which somehow penetrated into the Syriac Gospel text. Its use in later Syriac texts is dependent on its occurrence in the Gospel text²².

If the arguments advanced above for West Aramaic provenance are cogent, then these two elements clearly belong to the same group as the 17 elements discussed in the earlier study. The word ܠܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ belongs to the domain of *realia*, but in the NT it is fraught with meaning and occupies a central place²³. The word ܠܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ also refers to a concept important in the New Testament context. Thus the two items studied here further confirm the conclusions reached in my article in JBL. It is quite unlikely that these ele-

15 Compare also the cases of ܡܘܠܝܘܬܐ "His twelve": Matt 10:1S; Mark 4:10P; 6:7P; 9:35S; 10:32PS; 14:17PS; Luke 8:1PCS; 9:1PCS; 18:31PCS; John 6:67PCS.

16 Th. NÖLDEKE, *Grammatik*, § 151, p. 95. In addition to ܠܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ NÖLDEKE mentions ܠܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ "a fourfold" and ܠܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ "a decade", but these forms are found only in very late Syriac texts, see Payne SMITH, *Thesaurus*, cols. 3800, 2940. Moreover, since these forms do not mean "the four", "the ten", they are not really comparable.

17 See Mt 26:14PS; Mark 9:35P; 11,11PS; 14,10PS; 14,43PS; Luke 22:3 PCS; 22:47PCS; John 6:71PC. Also 1Cor 15:5P.

18 SCHULTHESS, *Grammatik* § 128c, p. 54.

19 I have used the edition of A.S. LEWIS and M.D. GIBSON, *Palestinian-Syriac Lectionary of the Gospels* (Jerusalem, 1971; repr. of ed. London, 1899).

20 Contrast P ܠܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ

21 Contrast PS ܠܫܘܢܝܘܬܐ

22 See Payne SMITH, *Thesaurus*, for examples.

23 It is interesting to note, too, that the noun occurs only in sayings of Jesus.

ments are representative of archaic Syriac, Jewish Syriac or a local dialect slightly different from Edessene. They are, from the linguistic point of view, *Fremdkörper* in Syriac, and must therefore be accounted for by supposing that something happened to this specific text, namely the translation of the Gospels. For further details and a broader discussion I must refer the reader to the earlier study.