

[AS 2.2 (2004) 243-62]
ISSN 1477-8351

THE PESHITTA OF BEN SIRA: JEWISH AND/OR CHRISTIAN?*

Wido van Peursen

Faculty of Theology, Leiden University

1. *Introduction*

In his commentary on Ben Sira, Rudolph Smend characterised the Syriac translation of Ben Sira as the worst piece of translation of the Syriac Bible.¹ The text contains many additions, paraphrases, and free renderings, a number of times reflecting a misunderstanding of the Hebrew text.² Some of the most striking features of the Syriac text are its omissions, which amount to 370 cola, one-ninth of the whole book.

The differences between the original book and its Syriac translation are not only quantitative. In many cases the translator gives not just a free rendering, but changes the purport of verses or whole passages. Some of these changes reflect adaptations to later socio-cultural circumstances. References to polygamy, for example, have been altered or omitted, and some of the notorious passages expressing Ben Sira's

*This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the *Third International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions (LISOR): Religious Change in Pluralistic Contexts*, Leiden 28-30 August 2003. The investigations have been supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). The author wishes to express his gratitude to Dr. Mervyn Richardson for his correction of the English text. Abbreviations: A, B, C, D, E, F: Geniza Manuscripts of Ben Sira; S: Syriac translation of Ben Sira. For SirII see below, § 2.

¹Rudolf Smend, *Die Weisheit des Jesus Sirach erklärt* (Berlin: Reimer, 1906), p. cxxxvii ('das schlechteste Uebersetzungswerk der syrischen Bibel').

²For a general survey of these phenomena see W.Th. van Peursen, *Language and Interpretation in the Syriac Text of Ben Sira: A Linguistic and Literary Study* (forthcoming), Part One; on the additions in the Syriac text and their relationship with expansions in the other Ancient Versions, see below, § 2.

negative attitude towards women have been altered. Striking differences between the original Ben Sira and the Syriac translation occur also in the field of religious ideas and beliefs.

Because of the many traces that the translator left behind in the text, much more than in any other part of the Peshitta,³ one may think that the religious and cultural context in which he lived can be reconstructed without too much difficulty. But the debate about the origin of the Syriac text of Ben Sira shows that this is not the case. V. Ryssel thought that the translator was a Jew, although the present Syriac text also contains some later Christian interpolations.⁴ R. Smend argued that the translator was a Christian with an anti-Jewish attitude.⁵ A. Edersheim suggested that S was made by Jewish-Christians.⁶ M.M. Winter argued that the Jewish-Christian community in which S originated could be narrowed down to the Ebionites and that their translation was later revised by orthodox Christians in the aftermath of the Arian controversy.⁷

³An exception may be made for the book of Chronicles.

⁴V. Ryssel, 'Die Sprüche Jesus', des Sohnes Sirachs', in E. Kautzsch (ed.), *Die Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen des Alten Testaments*, 1. *Die Apokryphen des Alten Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1900), pp. 230-475 (253); similarly M.D. Nelson, *The Syriac Version of the Wisdom of Ben Sira Compared to the Greek and Hebrew Materials* (SBLDS, 107; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), p. 132.

⁵Smend, *Jesus Sirach*, p. cxxxvii; similarly M.H. Segal, *ספר בן סירא השלם* (The Complete Book of Ben Sira) (2nd edn; Jerusalem: Bialik, 1958; repr. 1997), p. 60; cf. Franz Böhmisch, 'Die Textformen des Sirachbuches und ihre Zielgruppen', *Protokolle zur Bibel* 6/2 (1997), pp. 87-122 (115).

⁶A. Edersheim, 'Ecclesiasticus', in Henry Wace (ed.), *The Holy Bible according to the Authorised Version (A.D. 1611) with an Explanatory and Critical Commentary and a Revision of the Translation by the Clergy of the Anglican Church: Apocrypha*, II (London: Murray, 1888), pp. 1-239 (29): 'We infer the Jewish origin of the translation from the occasional occurrence of expressions in rabbinic usage. The evidence of the Christian character of the version—although necessarily inferential—is found throughout the whole book'.

⁷Cf. M.M. Winter, *Ben Sira in Syriac* (doctoral dissertation, Freiburg, 1974), pp. 110-11: 'A large group of alterations can be explained satisfactorily on the hypothesis that Ben Sira was first translated into Syriac by the Ebionites, and later revised by strictly orthodox Christians after Arianism, for its insertion into the Peshitta; and that both parties inserted their distinctive theology into the text in the course of their operations'. See also *idem*, 'Ben Sira in Syriac: An Ebionite Translation?', in Elizabeth A. Livingstone (ed.), *Studia Patristica*, XVI. *Papers Presented to the Seventh International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 1975* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1975), pp. 121-23; *idem*, 'The Origins of Ben Sira in Syriac', *VT* 27 (1977), pp. 237-53 (Part I), 494-507 (Part II); *idem*,

2. Textual History of Ben Sira

For a proper appreciation of the Syriac translation of Ben Sira, it is necessary to give some basic information about the textual history of Ben Sira. The Hebrew witnesses are the following: one manuscript from Masada, containing portions of about five chapters; the tiny fragments of 2Q18, containing some words from Sir. 6.14-15, 20-31; the text of Sir. 51.13-30 in 11QPs^a; and six manuscripts from the Cairo Geniza from the eleventh and twelfth centuries (designated A to F). Altogether about two-thirds of the book of Ben Sira is now extant in Hebrew. Two Ancient Versions go back to a Hebrew original: the Greek and the Syriac (although it seems likely that the Syriac translator consulted also a Greek text). The Latin translation is based on the Greek.

The extant textual witnesses show a great number of additions. The Hebrew Geniza manuscripts show about 90 additions of the length of one bicolon or more. In 60 cases the text contains two alternative readings or formulations of the same text. In the case of the Greek text we can distinguish between a short, original Greek text (GrI) and an expanded text, which contains about 300 additional cola and a number of shorter additions (GrII), some of which are also found in the Geniza manuscripts. The Old Latin (which Jerome incorporated into the Vulgate) has many of the additions of GrII, but contains also 75 bicola particular to itself. The Syriac text shares with GrII about 70 of the 300 extra cola and a number of shorter additions. It contains a further 74 cola and other shorter variants of its own.

It is a debated issue how we should account for the many additions in the textual witnesses. It has been argued that at an early stage the Hebrew text was revised and that thus a secondary recension of the Hebrew text was created (HebII or SirII), which is reflected mainly in GrII (and the Latin translation) and partly in the Hebrew Geniza manuscripts and the Syriac translation.⁸ Others explain the additions in terms of an ongoing process of accretion.⁹

'Jewish and Christian Collaboration in Ancient Syria', in Ada Rapoport-Albert and Gillian Greenberg (eds.), *Biblical Hebrew, Biblical Texts: Essays in Memory of Michael P. Weitzman* (JSOTSup, 333; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 355-64. Skehan and Di Lella accepted Winter's thesis in their commentary in the Anchor Bible Series (Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* [AB, 39; New York: Doubleday, 1987]).

⁸The *terminus ante quem* is the end of the first century CE, because Lk. 1.17 cites Mal. 3.23 in a form that presupposes the GrII text of Sir. 48.10 and Didache 1.6 is

The textual history of Ben Sira and the place of the Syriac translation in it is a broad field of study, which will not further concern us here.¹⁰ For the moment it will suffice to note that any discussion of the Syriac translation of Ben Sira should take into account its complex relationship to the other textual witnesses and especially its parallels to the expanded text of Ben Sira.

3. Evidence for a Jewish Origin of the Syriac Text of Ben Sira

3.1. The Language of the Vorlage

A first argument in favour of a Jewish origin of the Syriac text of Ben Sira is that the translation was made from a Hebrew *Vorlage*. For the first three centuries of the Common Era there is hardly any evidence for knowledge or study of Hebrew outside Jewish (including Jewish-Christian) groups. The interest in Hebrew of Christian scholars like Jerome is exceptional and of a later date.¹¹ Even Origen probably did not know Hebrew, even though Eusebius and Jerome claimed that he had made a thorough study of it.¹² Nor did the presence of the He-

based on the GrII reading of Sir. 12.1; see W.Th. van Peursen, *The Verbal System in the Hebrew Text of Ben Sira* (Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics, 41; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2004), pp. 15-19), p. 14 and the references given there. There is no other *terminus post quem* than the composition of the book of Ben Sira in the first quarter of the second century BCE.

⁹Van Peursen, *Verbal System*, pp. 15-19.

¹⁰For the Syriac text of Ben Sira see my forthcoming monograph *Language and Interpretation*; for the other Ancient Versions see my *Verbal System*, pp. 11-26.

¹¹Cf. C.J. Elliot, 'Hebrew Learning among the Fathers', in William Smith and Henry Wace (eds.), *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines*, II (London: Murray, 1880), pp. 851-72 (872): 'With the exception of Jerome, and perhaps of Origen, none of the early Christian writers appear to have possessed any knowledge of Hebrew which was worthy of the name'; see also William Horbury, 'Old Testament Interpretation in the Writings of the Church Fathers', in M.J. Mulder (ed.), *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (CRINT, 2.1; Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1998), pp. 727-87 (770-73); Lawrence Lahey, 'Hebrew and Aramaic in the Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila' in William Horbury (ed.), *Hebrew Study from Ezra to Ben Yehuda* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), pp. 106-21 (106-107). This issue will also be discussed in R.B. ter Haar Romeny, 'Hypotheses on the Development of Judaism and Christianity in Syria in the Period after 70 CE', in H. van de Sandt (ed.), *Matthew and the Didache: Two Documents from the Same Jewish-Christian Milieu?* (Assen: Van Gorcum; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming).

¹²Cf. N.R.M. de Lange, *Origen and the Jews. Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third-Century Palestine* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 25; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 22.

brew text in the second column of the Hexapla evoke much interest in Hebrew among Greek Christians.¹³ This attitude towards the Hebrew language is closely related to a similar lack of interest in the Hebrew text of the Bible.¹⁴

3.2. *Rabbinic Elements*

A second argument for a Jewish origin is the rabbinic flavour of the translation. This rabbinic colouring consists of the following.

1. Parallels with rabbinic literature as in 18.10.

In 18.10 S reads ‘thousand years from this world, they are not like one day in the World of the Righteous’ instead of ‘so are these few years among the days of eternity’ (LXX). S is reminiscent of m. Abot 4.22 (Albeck 4,17) ‘better is one hour of blissfulness of spirit in the World to Come than the whole life of this world’.¹⁵

2. The use of typical rabbinic idioms, such as ‘the place of your Shechina’ in 36.18.

3. Renderings that suggest acquaintance with halakhic traditions, like the double bride-price that is mentioned in 9.5.

The rabbinic elements are rather frequent in S and cannot be ignored when evaluating its background. The question is, however, how many of these elements are the work of the Syriac translator. From our short survey of the textual history of Ben Sira it appeared that the textual transmission was very free, characterised by paraphrases and additions. Accordingly, parallels between S and rabbinic literature led M.H. Segal to the conclusion ‘that Syr is based upon a Hebrew text which embodied popular paraphrases of certain verses originally current orally in Jewish circles of the Talmudic period’.¹⁶ In the model of a gradual

¹³See Adam Kamesar, *Jerome, Greek Scholarship, and the Hebrew Bible: A Study of the Quaestiones Hebraicae in Genesim* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 38: ‘The presence of the Hebrew text in the *Hexapla* does not seem to have stimulated the Greeks to come to terms with the original language of the Bible any more than the presence of the various translations.’

¹⁴On this issue see e.g. Kamesar, *Jerome*, 4-40.

¹⁵The ‘World of the Righteous’ is also attested in some pseudepigraphical sources, see Conleth Kearns, *The Expanded Text of Ecclesiasticus: Its Teaching on the Future Life as a Clue to its Origin* (doctoral dissertation, Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Rome, 1951), p. 213.

¹⁶M.H. Segal, ‘The Evolution of the Hebrew Text of Ben Sira’, *JQR* NS 25 (1934-35), pp. 91-149 (123).

accretion of the Hebrew text, in which the text was expanded more and more by, among others, rabbinic proverbs, it seems likely that at least some of the passages that suggest rabbinic influence were already present in the Syriac translator's *Vorlage*. In this context it should be noted that parallels with rabbinic literature are not restricted to S. Also in the Hebrew text we find proverbs that have their parallels in the tractate Abot, readings that presuppose halakhic traditions and the like. It cannot be established whether or not the Syriac translator added to the rabbinic elements already present in his *Vorlage*. Because of this uncertainty the rabbinic elements in the Syriac version cannot be used as an argument for a Jewish background of the Syriac translator.

3.3. Targumic Elements

While parallels with rabbinic literature may derive from the Hebrew *Vorlage* of S, some typical characteristics of its translation technique cannot, which brings us to the targumic elements in S. In some respects S follows practices that are well-attested in Jewish Aramaic Bible translations, and these include the following.

1. The device to translate two different Hebrew words in adjacent lines with the same Syriac word, thus creating repetitive parallelism: e.g. 36.4 'as you have sanctified Yourself in us before their eyes, so before our eyes sanctify Yourself in them'.¹⁷
2. The substitution of a metaphor by its *signifié*: e.g. 36.31 '(the man who has no) wife' interprets 'nest', which is found in the Hebrew (MSS B,C) and the Greek.
3. The replacement of a common noun referring to God by the word 'God': e.g. 47.18 'the name of God' corresponds to MS B 'the name of the Honoured One' (or: 'the honoured name').
4. The tendency to make explicit the referents of pronouns and the subjects of verbs: e.g. in 6.20 S has 'wisdom' instead of 'she' (MS A).
5. Shared lexicographical traditions: e.g. the interpretation of ܠܘܘܐ as 'clouds' in 40.13.¹⁸
6. The avoidance of anthropomorphisms.

¹⁷The Hebrew text (MS B) has 'sanctify' in v. 4a and 'glorify' in v. 4b.

¹⁸Cf. Israel Lévi, *L'Éclésiastique ou la Sagesse de Jésus, fils de Sira*, I (Paris: Leroux, 1898), p. 21.

With respect to the alleged anti-anthropomorphisms, we can distinguish a number of categories: the addition of prepositions before references to God (e.g. ‘from before the Lord’ instead of ‘from the Lord’);¹⁹ the replacement of direct references to God by references to the fear of God, the word of God etc.; the avoidance of references to God’s ears, eyes, face and to His anger and other human emotions; and the turning of active constructions in which God hears, sees, and the like, to passive constructions.

In 16.18 S has ‘at His revelation upon them (i.e. the mountains)’ instead of ‘when He descends upon them’ (MS A). In this respect S agrees with Targumim against other parts of the Peshitta. Compare Gen. 11.5; 11.7; 18.21 and others: MT ‘to descend’; TgOnq ‘to be revealed’; Pesh. ‘to descend’.²⁰

In other respects, too, S stands closer to the Targumim than to other parts of the Peshitta. The latter, for example, does not usually avoid bodily terms in relation to God.²¹

It is undeniable that the ‘translation technique’ or ‘translation strategy’ in S—in some respects even more than the other parts of the Peshitta—resembles that of the Jewish Aramaic translations in various ways. However, it is admissible to infer a Jewish origin from this evidence only if it can be demonstrated that some of the so-called targumic elements are *exclusively* Jewish and this is not the case. The evidence adduced here can assist us to locate S within the Aramaic-Syriac translation tradition, but it does not help us to answer the question whether it originated in a Jewish and/or a Christian context.

4. Evidence for a Christian Origin of the Syriac Text of Ben Sira

4.1. Eschatology

It has been argued that the eschatology of S betrays a Christian origin.²² Whereas in the original Ben Sira the end of all people is in Sheol

¹⁹But it is doubtful whether this is really an anti-anthropomorphism. Cf. Michael Klein, ‘The Preposition ܩܕܡܐ (‘before’): A Pseudo-Anti-Anthropomorphism in the Targums’, *JTS* 30 (1979), pp. 502-507.

²⁰Cf. H.P. Rüger, *Text und Textform im hebräischen Sirach: Untersuchungen zur Textgeschichte und Textkritik der hebräischen Sirachfragmente aus der Kairoer Geniza* (BZAW, 112; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1970), p. 113; Van Peursen, *Verbal System*, p. 336.

²¹M.P. Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament. An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 29. With Chronicles the situation is different, see *ibid.*, pp. 119-20.

and people have nothing to hope for but to leave behind a good name, the Syriac text gives many references to eternal life in the World of the Righteous, the written record of bad deeds before God, and God's judgment after the end of the world, while it omits verses like 17.27-28 'Who shall praise the Most High in the grave, instead of them which live and give thanks? Thanksgiving perishes from the dead, as from one that is not: the living and sound in heart shall praise the Lord' (LXX).

Although the eschatology of S fits a Christian context very well, it does not by any means indicate a Christian origin. We are dealing here with beliefs and ideas that entered Judaism already before the rise of Christianity. Moreover, it is this eschatology that is one of the typical characteristics of the so-called expanded text of Ben Sira. It is likely, therefore, that many of the references in question were already present in the Hebrew text used by the Syriac translator.²³

4.2. *Sacrifices, priesthood, temple*

Tendencies in S that reflect ideas that were widespread in both Jewish and Christian circles in the first centuries of the Common Era, like those mentioned in § 4.1, do not help us to locate the origin of S within the Jewish-Christian spectrum. There are, however, some elements in S that are rather typically non-Jewish. One of these is the translator's attitude towards sacrifices, priesthood and the temple. Many references to sacrifices have been shortened or omitted, and in some cases they have been replaced by remarks about prayer (35.8) or charity (35.10-11). Where the translator retains references to sacrifices, his renderings are often imprecise. Towards the priesthood, too, the translator was indifferent, if not hostile. In 45.8-14, for example, S omits a lengthy description of the liturgical vestments of Aaron. In several other places the translator omits references to the eternal degree of the priesthood.

In 7.31 S has 'bread of the offerings and the first-fruits of the hands' instead of 'the bread of the sacrifices, and the heave-offering of the hand, sacrifices which are due, and the heave-offering of holiness' (MS A). The

²²See especially the commentaries of Smend and Edersheim on passages mentioning eternal life, judgment, etc.

²³Kearns, *Expanded Text*, p. 66. This observation does not take away the need to investigate the eschatological reworking of Ben Sira attested in some versions, but it makes this investigation part of the study of the textual transmission of this book in the first century BCE and the first century CE (see above, n. 10), rather than the study of the religious background of the Syriac translator.

Hebrew text contains a number of technical terms referring to sacrifices. S shortens the list of sacrifices but retains the **קרבן**. This is interesting, because this idiom perfectly fits a Christian setting. In Syriac literature it is used for the bread of the eucharist.²⁴

One could contest the claim that the translator's attitude towards the temple cult and related institutions is typically Christian by referring to passages in rabbinic literature that likewise declare charity or prayer superior to sacrifice.²⁵ In those rabbinic sources, however, the hope for the restoration of the sacrificial cult was never abandoned.²⁶

In non-rabbinic circles there seems to have been a more explicit negative attitude to sacrifices and priesthood. Philo says of the Essenes that they are 'not offering animal sacrifices, but taking care to keep their minds in a state worthy of consecrated priests'.²⁷ Some Dead Sea Scrolls reflect strong sentiments against the priesthood in Jerusalem and the temple service,²⁸ while the idea that praise offerings replace sacrifices is reflected in 1QS IX 5: 'the offering of the lips in compliance with the decree will be like the pleasant aroma of justice, and the perfection of behaviour will be acceptable like a freewill offering'.

Even in these non-rabbinic sources, however, sacrifices and the temple service were not rejected as such. Thus in the Dead Sea Scrolls the ruling priesthood in Jerusalem is rejected and its sacrifices are considered illegitimate, but a restoration of the sacrificial service was part

²⁴See, e.g., W. Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents Relative to the Earliest Establishment of Christianity in Edessa and the Neighbouring Countries from the Year after our Lord's Ascension to the Beginning of the IVth Century* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), p. Δ, line 1, and other references in R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), col. 3726; cf. Edersheim, 'Ecclesiasticus', p. 65.

²⁵We find also parallels elsewhere in the Peshitta. Cf. Weitzman, *Peshitta*, 217-18: 'A certain negligence [regarding sacrifices] can indeed be detected in P's rendering of sacrificial laws. In fact, an indifferent or even hostile attitude to sacrifice—and to the priesthood and temple—can be traced right through the Peshitta of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha'. It is our impression, however, that S surpasses the other books of the Peshitta in its negative attitude towards sacrifices.

²⁶Cf. Weitzman, *Peshitta*, pp. 214-15.

²⁷Madeleine Petit (ed.), *Philon d'Alexandrie: Quod omnis probus liber sit* (Les Œuvres de Philon d'Alexandrie, 28; Paris 1974), 75 (p. 196); cf. Kearns, *Expanded Text*, p. 271.

²⁸Jacob Milgrom, 'Sacrifice', in L.H. Schiffman and J.C. VanderKam (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 807-12

of the community's hope for the future.²⁹ This is completely different from the Syriac translator of Ben Sira. His negative attitude towards the priesthood concerns also the past (e.g. the descriptions of Aaron) and the future (e.g. the references to the 'eternal decree').

4.3. *Israel and the Nations*

Another feature that at first sight can be characterised as typically non-Jewish is the translator's attitude towards Israel and the nations. Most striking is the omission of the verse mentioning the eternal existence of Israel/Jeshurun in 37.25, where the Hebrew (MSS B, D) and the Greek have 'the life of a man (lasts) a number of days, but the life of Jeshurun days without number'. Further, S adds positive references to the nations, like the addition of 'and all the inhabitants of the earth will know' in 23.27.³⁰ Also the change of the singular 'the community' into the plural 'communities' in 31.11 may reflect a Christian origin.

Weitzman, who discusses similar tendencies throughout the Peshitta, thinks that they do not necessarily indicate a Christian origin: 'The combination of high regard for the nations with disdain for those Jews of differing beliefs was not unknown among Jewish groups. Indeed, it is only to be expected in a non-rabbinic group that lacked any rapport with rabbinic Judaism, which now commanded majority allegiance'.³¹ He refers to Enoch 89-90, which reflects a negative attitude towards Jews outside the writer's group. However, such an opposition of Jewish 'insiders' against Jewish 'outsiders'—which is also attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls—does not imply a rejection of 'Israel' as such. It concerns rather the question who belongs to the legitimate 'Israel'. If, therefore, the omission of 37.11 is intentional, it reflects anti-Jewish sentiments, which are not attested in other Jewish sources.

We cannot be completely sure that the omission of 37.11 was intentional; it could have been the result of inattentiveness of the translator, or the absence of this verse from his Vorlage. The references to the nations, which provide additional information about the translator's attitude towards non-Jewish people, do not go beyond statements that

²⁹Cf. Milgrom, 'Sacrifice'.

³⁰Compare the positive references to the nations in Peshitta-Wisdom, on which see H.J.W. Drijvers, 'The Peshitta of *Sapientia Salomonis*', in H.L.J. Vanstiphout *et al.* (eds.), *Scripta Signa Vocis: Studies about Scripts, Scriptures, Scribes and Languages in the Near East, Presented to J.H. Hospers by his Pupils, Colleagues and Friends* (Groningen: Forsten, 1986), p. 18.

³¹Cf. Weitzman, *Peshitta*, 245-46.

we find already in Deutero-Isaiah. Accordingly, all this material should be treated with care, and no firm conclusions can be based on it.

4.4. *The Law*

Sometimes S suppresses references to the Law.³² We can distinguish the following categories.

1. For 'the Law' another word is substituted, like 'the ways of the Lord' (9.15), 'his way' (32.24), 'the way' (32.17),³³ 'the fear of God' (19.20), 'almsgiving and love' (29.1) and 'the words (of the Most High)' (44.20).
2. The Hebrew and/or Greek text contain a reference to the law. S has a completely different reading (19.17; 28.6; 34.8; 37.12; 41.8).
3. The Hebrew and/or Greek text contain a reference to the law. S omits the verse (32.15; 33.2-4).

Although one may question the interpretation of some individual passages,³⁴ the cumulative evidence of this list of instances (which is not exhaustive) shows that the Syriac translator was at least indifferent towards the Law.

Winter argued that the negative attitude to the Law was characteristic of a revision of S by orthodox Christians at the end of the fourth century. In his view the original translators had a high esteem of the Law, as appears from 35.4 'and he who gives alms keeps the Law' instead of 'he who gives alms makes a sacrifice of praise' (LXX). However, this complimentary remark about the Law can easily be explained from a scribal error. While LXX reflects תורה, S reflects תורה. Probably this reading was already present in the translator's *Vorlage*. And even if it is an intentional variant, it can be interpreted as a reinterpretation of the Law, rather than an approval of it. The Law is fulfilled by giving alms, rather than by sacrifices and the like. Accordingly, there is no evidence for a more positive understanding of the Law in S, and hence there is no need to ascribe the negative attitude to a later revision.

³²Winter, *Ben Sira in Syriac*, pp. 181-90; 'Origins', II, pp. 494-98.

³³This reminds us of 'the way' in Acts 9.2 and 19.9 (see also Payne Smith, *Thesaurus*, I, p. 375), but since this use of the idiom was common in Antiquity, we cannot consider it as an indication of a Christian origin of S.

³⁴In 28.6, for example, the reading in LXX rather than that in S is probably secondary.

4.5. *Parallels with the New Testament*

It has been claimed that the following passages display influence from the New Testament.³⁵

- 3.22 'And there is no confidence (ܠܠܘܢܐ) for you over (ܠܐ) what is hidden' instead of 'you should have no business in hidden things' (MSS A,C). S may have been influenced by 1 Tim. 6.17.
- 18.13 'And He leads them like a good shepherd who shepherds his flocks'. The epithet 'good' is a plus compared with LXX. Compare Jn 10.11.
- 35.11 'And with joy lend to the man who will not repay you', instead of 'and with joy sanctify your tithe' (MS B). The reading in S is clearly reminiscent of Lk. 6.34.
- 38.24 'And who is not distracted (ܡܝܘܨܘܢ) with vanities (ܠܚܘܒܐ ܝܘܒܐ)' instead of 'who is free from toil' (LXX). S reflects influence from 1 Tim. 5.13.
- 40.15 'For the root of sins is like a spike that springs up on the tooth of a rock' instead of 'for the root of the godless is like a tooth on a rock' (MS B; LXX). According to Edersheim the reading in S seems to indicate that the translator was thinking of the familiar parable in Matthew 13.³⁶

The examples in 3.22 and 40.15 are doubtful, but in 18.13, 35.11 and 38.24 influence from the New Testament is much more likely. Further, the most clear references to the New Testament occur in Sir. 48.10-11, which deals with the future return of Elijah. The Syriac text runs as follows:

And he is prepared to come before the day of the Lord comes, to turn the sons to the fathers and to bring good tidings to the tribes of Jacob. Blessed is he who sees you and dies. Yet he will not die, but he will surely live (or: but giving life he will give life).

We can make the following comments.

1. 'And he is prepared to come (ܠܚܘܒܐ ܝܘܒܐ ܢܘܨܘܢ³⁷)' instead of 'who is written as destined at the appointed time' (MS B) or 'who is written to be destined' (LXX) may be due to the influence of Mt. 11.4 ܠܚܘܒܐ ܝܘܒܐ ܢܘܨܘܢ 'Elijah, who is prepared to come'.

³⁵There is also a striking parallel between 25.8 'blessed is the husband of a good wife, who does not plough with bullock and ass combined' (instead of LXX: 'blessed is the husband of a prudent wife') and 2 Cor. 6.14, but the exact relation between the two passages is hard to establish.

³⁶Edersheim, 'Ecclesiasticus', p. 195. See especially Mt. 13.5.

³⁷7a1 has ܠܚܘܒܐ ܝܘܒܐ.

Winter has argued that there are four passages where S avoids speaking about the creation of Wisdom (1.4, 9; 39.32; 42.21).⁴³ He ascribes this phenomenon to orthodox Christians who revised S in the aftermath of the Arian controversy. But R. Owens has demonstrated that Winter's argument is not convincing. In 1.9, for example, both S 'he distributed her' and LXX 'The Lord created her' may go back to a Hebrew text that had חלקה. In that case there is no question that the Syriac translator *altered* the text to avoid a reference to the creation of wisdom.⁴⁴

5. Other Tendencies

5.1. An Ebionite Translation?

In a number of studies M.M. Winter has argued that S was an Ebionite translation. In addition to the more general tendencies discussed above, which could indicate an origin in any Jewish or Jewish-Christian context, Winter has pointed out some tendencies that allow a more specific identification of the community in which S originated. These are an unwillingness to quote from the Prophets, an inclination towards vegetarianism and a stress on the moral goodness of poverty.

We need not repeat here the convincing arguments that R. Owens put forward against the Ebionite hypothesis. In fact we do not know what were the distinctive tenets of the Ebionites and whether it is true, for example, that they rejected the Prophets. It is very difficult to go beyond the general observation that the sources that provide us with information about Jewish-Christian groups like the Ebionites, the Elkaites, or the Nazoreans demonstrate that issues like vegetarianism, poverty, the attitude towards the Prophets and the like played a role in the identification of these groups.

The definition of Jewish Christians is problematic. The Christian element is that they accepted the messianic status of Jesus, which distinguished them from other Jews. The Jewish element, however, is more difficult to grasp. We follow here J. Carleton Paget, who favours a praxis-based definition (rather than an ethnic or an ideological and doctrinal one): a Jewish Christian is someone who accepts the messianic status of

⁴³Winter, *Ben Sira in Syriac*, pp. 164-76; 'Origins', II, pp. 501-505.

⁴⁴Robert J. Owens, 'The Early Syriac Text of Ben Sira in the Demonstrations of Aphrahat', *JSS* 34 (1989), pp. 39-75 (42-48). For the Hebrew verb חלק in Ben Sira see also Van Peursen, *Verbal System*, p. 72.

Jesus but feels it necessary to keep, or perhaps adopt, practices associated with Judaism such as circumcision, the observance of the Sabbath and the keeping of food laws.⁴⁵

Rather than trying to identify the community in which S originated with one of these groups known from ancient sources, we can make a profile of this community. Before doing so (§ 6), we have to discuss three issues that play an important role in Winter's argument (§§ 5.2-5.4).

5.2. *The Prophets*

According to Winter the Syriac translator was unwilling to quote from the Prophets. The Syriac translator omitted the references to Mal. 4.6 in 48.10, to Jer. 1.10 in 49.07 and to Ezek. 14.4 in 49.9.⁴⁶ In 48.10, however, S has 'to turn the sons to the fathers' instead of 'to turn the fathers of the sons', but the reading of S, too, comes from Mal. 4.6. Moreover, in the same verse S adds a reference to Mal. 3.23 'before the day of the Lord comes'.

It should also be noted that other references to the Prophets are retained in S. See, for example, 48.24 about Isaiah, who 'comforted the mourners of Zion' (cf. Isa. 40.1-2; 49.8-13), 49.8 on Ezekiel, who 'made known a sort of chariot and saw a vision' (cf. Ezek. 1-3) and the reference to the Twelve Prophets in 49.10. There are also cases where S introduces a reference to the Early or Late Prophets or the Writings not found in the Hebrew or the Greek.⁴⁷

If S really originated in a community that cherished the Pentateuch and rejected the Prophets, one would expect a much stronger favourable attitude towards 'the Law'. S reflects neither such an adherence to 'the Law', nor a negative attitude to the Prophets.

5.3. *Vegetarianism*

According to Winter there is one verse that shows that the translator has a preference for vegetarianism.⁴⁸ In 19.1 S has 'and he who loves flesh (ܠܝܫܐ) will inherit poverty' instead of 'he who despises small

⁴⁵Cf. J. Carleton Paget, 'Jewish Christianity', in William Horbury *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, III. *The Early Roman Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 731-35 (733-42). See also Glenn A. Koch, 'Jewish Christianity', in Everelt Ferguson (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, I (2nd edn; New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), pp. 613-16.

⁴⁶Winter, *Ben Sira in Syriac*, pp. 157-62; 'Origins', I, pp. 249-51.

⁴⁷Note also the references to 'prophecy' in 19.20 and 47.17.

⁴⁸Winter, *Ben Sira in Syriac*, pp. 141-42; 'Origins', I, p. 244.

things will be destroyed' (MS C; LXX). It is hard to establish, however, what the idiom 'to love flesh' means in this verse. Does it really refer to someone who likes to eat meat, or does ܠܝܫܐܘܪܐ refer to one's own body or perhaps even to the Greek $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\acute{\xi}$ as it is used in the Pauline letters, with its markedly negative connotation.⁴⁹ The parallelism with 'a drunken labourer will not become rich' could be taken to imply that in S the verse concerns wine and meat; but this parallelism could also suggest that the verse deals with excessiveness of consumption rather than drinking wine and eating meat as such. Because of these uncertainties about the purport and meaning of the verse, it is not justified to conclude that the translator had a preference for vegetarianism only on the basis of this verse. Moreover, in other cases the Syriac translator did not bother to modify a positive statement about meat (cf., e.g., 20.16 'a fat tail cannot be eaten without salt').

5.4. Poverty

There are some passages in S that reflect a high esteem of the state of poverty and a negative attitude towards wealth.⁵⁰ Thus in 37.14 S has 'a man's heart rejoices in his way more than riches of the world that do not profit' instead of '... more than seven watchmen on a watchtower' (MSS B,D; LXX). That this tendency is present in S is undeniable, although it is not as pervasive as suggested by Winter. A number of his examples are open to alternative explanations, and references to charity (e.g. 29.28) do not necessarily indicate holding poverty in high esteem.⁵¹

On the basis of the translator's attitude towards poverty and wealth Winter argued that S originated in a community that had chosen to live in poverty. Was there any community to fit this picture better than the Ebionites, 'the poor ones'? However, the devotion to poverty and even the designation 'the poor ones' is not exclusively Ebionite. A positive assessment of poverty is found in several New Testament passages⁵² and can be expected in other early Christian communities as well. And although rabbinic sources do not show any high esteem

⁴⁹Throughout the Syriac New Testament $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\acute{\xi}$ is translated with ܠܝܫܐܘܪܐ.

⁵⁰Winter, *Ben Sira in Syriac*, pp. 143-51. Compare Weitzman, *Peshitta*, pp. 14, 225-26, for a 'disdain for earthly wealth' elsewhere in the Peshitta.

⁵¹Moreover, there are also counter-examples, where 'poverty' is used with a negative connotation. Cf. 19.1 discussed above, § 5.3.

⁵²Cf. e.g. Lk. 6.20; Jas. 5.1-6.

for poverty,⁵³ it did exist in some non-rabbinic circles, as appears, for example, from the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁵⁴

6. *Towards a Profile of the Context in Which S Originated*

The Syriac translation of Ben Sira reflects a number of tendencies that help us to build up a profile of the translator's linguistic, cultural and religious background.

1. The translator knew Hebrew. In size and content his *Vorlage* differed much from the original book of Ben Sira. It included a number of the alleged characteristics of SirII (e.g. references to eternal life) and reflected some rabbinic sapiential and halakhic traditions. There is no proof that the translator himself had affinity with rabbinic Judaism.
2. The freedom, negligence, and thoughtlessness with which the translation was made are a strong indication that the translator did not consider the book of Sirach canonical.⁵⁵
3. The translation stands in the Aramaic-Syriac translation tradition inasmuch as the translator uses techniques (like the avoidance of anthropomorphisms, or the poetic device to create repetitive parallelism) that are characteristic of this tradition.
4. The translator did not bother much about 'the Law'. Perhaps it goes too far to say that he had a hostile attitude towards it, but his indifference suggests at least that he did not belong to a circle that was preoccupied with the Law. There is no evidence for Winter's thesis that the Syriac translation was made by people who had a high esteem for the Law, and later revised by people with a negative attitude to it.

⁵³Cf. F. Hauck and E. Bammel, 'πτωχός, πτωχεία, πτωχέω', *TWNT*, VI, pp. 885-915 (901).

⁵⁴Note also the references to the 'the poor ones' which we find in the Scrolls; cf. Igor R. Tantlevskij, 'Ebionites', in Schiffman and VanderKam, *Encyclopaedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, I, pp. 225-26; see also Catherine M. Murphy, *Wealth in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran Community* (STDJ, 40; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002).

⁵⁵We can see here a parallel with the book of Chronicles; cf. Weitzman, *Peshitta*, 208.

5. The translator seems to have been familiar with all parts of the Hebrew Bible and was sometimes influenced by them in his translation.
6. The translator was indifferent, if not hostile, to sacrifices and priesthood. His negative attitude concerned not just the contemporary priests or sacrificial service (cf. Qumran) but the institutions as such.
7. The translator adds some positive references to the nations. He omits a statement about the eternity of Israel, but not much can be concluded from this. The omission may be unintentional and the references to the nations do not go beyond some passages in the Hebrew Bible.
8. The translator had a high esteem for poverty.
9. The translation reflects some striking parallels with passages from the New Testament.

7. Jewish and/or Christian?

There is no consensus among scholars about the context in which the Syriac translation of Ben Sira originated. Some scholars argue that it originated in a Jewish context, others that it has a Christian background. Still others have suggested that it was made in a Jewish-Christian context. However, the question 'Jewish or Christian?' or even 'Jewish and/or Christian?' is a simplification of the problem. To consider Jews and Christians in the first centuries of the Common Era as two distinct groups, or even to make a tripartite division into Jews, Christians and Jewish Christians is anachronistic. Within the Jewish-Christian spectrum there was a plurality of movements and the borders between these movements were often not clearly marked.⁵⁶ This plurality existed both at the Jewish and at the Christian side of the spectrum.⁵⁷ H.J.W. Drijvers has argued that in Edessa and the Syriac-speaking regions of Northern Mesopotamia it was not before 400 AD

⁵⁶It would be inaccurate to consider rabbinic Judaism and 'orthodox' Christianity as the extremes of this spectrum. Thus on the Christian side we also find forms of Christianity that were further removed from Judaism than what we can anachronistically call orthodox Christianity. An example is Marcionism, which played an important role in second- and third-century Syriac Christianity.

⁵⁷Cf. Weitzman, *Peshitta*, 207-208: 'Previous generations, then, could not agree on the question of Jewish versus Christian origin. For them, Judaism was repre-

that the victory of Christian orthodoxy marked the final break between Jews and Christians.⁵⁸

We can try to locate the community in which S originated within the spectrum of Jewish-Christian types in the second or third century CE by comparing some segments in this spectrum with the profile we have established for the origin of S.

1. Rabbinic Judaism. We have seen that parallels with rabbinic halakhic and sapiential traditions do not demonstrate that S originated in a rabbinic Jewish context. The tendencies mentioned in § 6 under 4 (Law), 6 (sacrifices and priesthood), 7 (Israel and nations),⁵⁹ 8 (poverty), and 9 (NT parallels) argue against such an origin.
2. Non-rabbinic Jewish groups. A non-rabbinic Jewish origin can account for 8 (poverty). At first sight it might also explain 6 (sacrifices and priesthood), but after a closer look at the material that explanation is not satisfying. Unlike Weitzman, we think that it cannot account for 7 (Israel and the nations). Moreover, the remaining objections against a rabbinic Jewish origin (4 and 9) argue against a non-rabbinic Jewish origin as well.
3. Jewish Christians (in a praxis-based definition).⁶⁰ Two tendencies that argued against a non-rabbinic (and non-Christian) Jewish origin of S, namely 6 (sacrifices and priesthood) and 9 (NT parallels) do fit a Jewish-Christian group, but 4 (Law) does not.

Many authors have argued for a Jewish or Jewish-Christian origin of S and ascribed features that do not agree with this hypothesis to later

sent by the rabbinic texts (...) and so the alternatives were either this rabbinic Judaism or Christianity (...) The explanation lies in the diversity which the last few decades have revealed within both religions. In particular, not all Judaism was rabbinic'. In the subsequent discussion, however, Weitzman emphasises the plurality of ideas that may have existed in non-rabbinic Jewish groups, but pays hardly any attention to the plurality that characterised early Christianity.

⁵⁸H.J.W. Drijvers, 'The Jews of Edessa and the Origins of Syriac-Speaking Christianity', in Judith Lieu *et al.* (eds.), *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 124-46; *idem*, 'Jews and Christians at Edessa', *JJS* 36 (1985), pp. 88-102; see also Ter Haar Romeny, 'Hypotheses'.

⁵⁹But note the uncertainties related to this topic; see § 4.3.

⁶⁰For the sake of clarity distinguished from the preceding group, but compare Carleton Paget, 'Jewish Christianity', pp. 732, 774-75.

revisions. In our view, however, there is no reason to stick to the ‘Jewishness’ of the translation. Once the parallels with rabbinic literature have lost their value as an argument in the discussion, the only remaining argument is the use of a Hebrew *Vorlage*. The combination of this argument with the Christian elements of the translation do not compel us to assume a Jewish-Christian context in the praxis-based definition given above. It suggests a Jewish-Christian origin in a genetic sense (i.e. the translator was a Jew converted to Christianity). Since, however, the Jews who became Christians represented a large variety of opinions, a genetic definition of Jewish-Christians does not define anything specific at all.⁶¹ Therefore the designation ‘Jewish-Christian’ is not very useful in a discussion about the origin of S.

Our conclusions agree much with what Smend wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century, namely that the translator’s knowledge of Hebrew indicates that he was probably born as a Jew, but that his translation reflects an anti-judaistic tendency.⁶² We can say more about the translator, especially concerning his attitude towards poverty, but that does not assist us in identifying the community in which S originated with any known religious group from the second or third century CE. The attempts that have been made to do so are unconvincing.

⁶¹Thus Carleton Paget, ‘Jewish Christianity’, pp. 733-34.

⁶²Smend, *Jesus Sirach*, p. cxxxvii: ‘Zugleich tritt aber bei dem Verfasser, der nach seiner hebräischen Sprachkenntnis wahrscheinlich ein geborener Jude war, hier eine gewisse antijüdische Tendenz zu Tage’. Note, however, that even though we agree with Smend’s conclusion, we do not agree with many his arguments; cf. above, § 4.1.

are examined: 1. the word *šrp* (ܫܪܦ) and the shifting meanings of some of its cognates across time; and 2. the word *'nk* (ܐܢܟ), that appears in Amos 7.7-8.

MATTHEW MORGENSTERN, Notes on a Recently Published Magic Bowl.

This article presents a new transcription and translation of the Aramaic magic bowl BM 135563, and suggests an interpretation that differs considerably from the previous editions. It is argued that the bowl presents a narrative is that more coherent than has been suggested, and that it is the product of carefully considered literary activity.

HARRY SYSLING, Three Harsh Prophets: A Targumic Tosefta to Parashat Korah.

In MS Paris of the Fragmentary Targums one finds lengthy introductions to the festival readings and also to the weekly sabbath readings. In one of these introductions (to Numbers 16.1ff.) a story is told about three prophets who denied their own prophecies, namely Moses, Elijah and Micah. This story is of special interest because of the quotations it contains of scriptural verses from the Prophets that are at variance with the official targum on the Prophets. The article offers a detailed analysis of the story and discusses its date and origin by comparing it to the extant parallels in rabbinic sources.

WIDO VAN PEURSEN, The Peshitta of Ben Sira: Jewish and/or Christian?

The religious context in which the Syriac translation of the Bible originated is a much-debated issue. Some scholars argue that it originated in a Jewish context, others that it has a Christian background. Also various hypotheses about a Jewish-Christian origin have been put forward. This paper argues that the question 'Jewish or Christian?' and even the question 'Jewish, Christian, or Jewish-Christian?' is an oversimplification of the problem because of the broad Jewish-Christian spectrum that existed in the first centuries of the Common Era. The paper concentrates on the Syriac translation of Ben Sira, which has some undeniable traces of an origin somewhere on the Christian side of the spectrum.