

**Syriac-Speaking Judaism: They who Read and Write in the
(Syriac) Outside Books**

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**Paper presented to the
History and Literature
of Early Rabbinic Judaism Section**

**American Academy of Religion
Society of Biblical Literature
Annual Meeting**

Washington, D. C.

November 20, 2006

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In the brief time allotted for this talk, I will touch on three topics, any one of which calls for further development.

The first topic comes from the title reference to the Mishna on Outside Books. While I am probably sufficiently smart to understand what it means, I am certain that I am not sufficiently wise to understand it.

I am fairly certain of what it does not mean: books excluded from a hypothetical canon, possibly apocryphal, possibly pseudepigraphal, possibly “rewritten” something or other. That usage seems to have been an invention of medieval and renaissance rabbis. The root hwc and the word hitzonim do not seem to refer to exclusion, as we might understand the English “outside”—outside the number, or outside the usual, or other metaphorical applications. “External” is perhaps a better choice, or would be if it did not also imply “external to Judaism,” or “external to the rabbis.”

Rather, at least in their biblical sense, the root hws and the word wopirrab

wrn leassa uslh d a ther .

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the bible. [Greek, Syriac translations] This same usage is part of the Modern Israeli Hebrew phrase *ḥutz l'retz*, “(physically) outside the Land of Israel.”

In considering this question, it also occurred to me that if non-Jewish books were intended in the designation *sefarim ḥitzonim*, there were and are other Hebrew words available to indicate them, such as *zara*, meaning “strange” or “alien,” or what we might now term “other,” in the sense marked by literary criticism. Quite simply, *sefarim zeraim* would convey that sense nicely, and it would survive down through the ages! Or, taking the term *aḥer*, not so much in the biblical sense, but in Mishnaic sense applied to Elisha ben Abuyah, as someone who has become “other” than what he once was, espousing a new doctrine, changed in some way. So I cannot tell you what the phrase *sefarim ḥitzonim* means, for certain. I will speculate that originally *hitzonim* was written *hitzoni* or in both phrases a *shel* was omitted—and that would mean? Either a possessive or a gentilic, as the original phrase, and I’ll speculate a little more, that it applied in both instances. To do more than that would involve checking available MSS and MS variants, where they exist.

On the hypothesis that the phrase refers to books from outside the land (in whatever language) or to people from the streets, or outside the settled areas (Arabs, the Dura Europos synagogue, Qumranites, Palmyran Jews) (as in Mishnah Megillah 4.8?), I will make the connection now to Jewish Syriac literature—because that’s what my abstract said I would talk about.

There is a more secure method of establishing the existence of Jews in multilingual Mesopotamia, and that is to rely, as Jacob Neusner did in his *History of the Jews of Babylonia*, on the research and linguistic capability of Geo Widengren. To establish that the Jews of Mesopotamia made literary use of Syriac, we turn to recent work to develop a scholarly edition of the Peshitta OT—the use of the initials OT for Old

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Testament reflect the preservation and use of the Peshitta translation of the HB/OT by Christians. As summarized by a review in the dissertation of Johannes Erbes, of the University of Lund, the scholars who worked on each Peshitta translation of the OT were almost uniformly convinced that the Peshitta translators had in front of them a Hebrew version of the text. Of course there is evidence at specific points of consulting the LXX/OG, and passages that seem to draw upon the Targums. The more general truth appears to be that the translators of the Peshitta OT were Jews who knew and expressed themselves in both Hebrew and Syriac, and for some of them, in Hebrew, Greek, and Syriac.

There is one major overview of the Peshitta OT, rather than the monographs on individual Peshitta books, as produced by this group of translators. It is the work of Michael Weitzman,¹ who unfortunately died before he could undertake further work. In passage after passage he examines the work of the Syriac translators. Weitzman often looks at the Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and Syriac of the same passage (and includes an English translation) to show the subtle differences in interpretation between versions. The bulk of his book consists of these comparisons. The three- and four-way comparisons are an excellent way of establishing both the relationship of the Peshitta translation to existing Jewish translations, and the specific differences. This is the major value of the book.

Unfortunately, W also steps away from his collection of comparisons.

It has seemed, in view of Michael Weitzman's detailed work to establish that the Peshitta translation was the work of a single community [Weitzman, *passim.*], that we might take as a basis for discussion Weitzman's description of a Jewish community that was responsible, over a period of 50 years or so (150-200 CE), for translating the OT Peshitta. His text-critical work is so detailed throughout that he develops a fairly clear

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and consistent picture of a non-Rabbinic form of Judaism that is common to the community from which the translators came.

I am not sure of Weitzman's motive for a section in which he tries to extend his derived account of a Jewish community responsible for the Peshitta. In a few pages of speculation, which are not text-critically based, but rather loosely related to the work of other scholars in the period of early Syriac literature, Weitzman asserts that the Jewish community in the Edessene milieu that translated the Peshitta became Christian in the latter part of the second century, and brought its translation into Christianity.

This speculative picture reconciles the careful work of the inferred Jewish community with observations that the Peshitta is transmitted in Christianity and ignored in Rabbinic Judaism, until Nachmanides in the 13th century. His specific discussion of rabbinic knowledge of the Peshitta can be found on 160-162.. That is, according to Weitzman by implication, there were no Jewish communities using the Peshitta OT as their scripture, after the completion of the joint effort to make the Syriac translation. In order for this speculative reconciliation to be the case, however, Weitzman assumes the presence in the Edessene milieu of a form of Christianity that is attractive to many in the Jewish community, and that welcomes the translation of Jewish scriptures into Syriac. That this assumption is fairly unlikely is the topic of the third chapter of my dissertation, now online at <http://www.personlinks.org/Articles/>.

Unfortunately, there is no solid evidence to suggest the existence in the Edessene milieu of such a Christian community. And although Weitzman is clear that he is only speculating, and although examination shows that he is not citing Walter Bauer or Han Drijvers on early Syriac Christianity, who do argue from evidence, Weitzman's otherwise careful work based on demonstrable evidence tends to lend an air of

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authority to his speculations, enough that the book jacket material, as well as several reviews in our field, suggest the story of the conversion to Christianity as one of the major findings in the book. Certainly Weitzman himself cannot be held responsible for this; sadly, he is no longer with us, and could neither influence the book design, nor set the record straight.

The problem is that evidence is lacking to support Weitzman's and others' presumptions that a form of Christianity existed, documented in the early Syriac literature of the Edessene milieu,² that valued and asserted anything from Jewish Scriptures, beyond the occasional reference to the Psalms in Odes of Solomon or Acts of Thomas. Other references, such as Bardaisan's speculations on Adam as the first human, need not have been based on extensive knowledge and use of Jewish Scriptures. Such references as exist may be understood as appeals to members of the fairly extensive Jewish community, or as part of the cultural background of storytelling and narrative.³ For example, stories of talking lions, and dogs, like Balaam's ass, abound in the apocryphal Acts. But allusiveness alone, without citation or exegetical development, cannot prove that Syriac Christian communities of these texts ascribed authority to Jewish scriptures, only that these communities had some awareness of their narrative and poetic content.

It is critical to this discussion to have some sense of quotations of the Peshitta OT in early Syriac literature. Weitzman asserts that Aphrahat and Ephrem (early and late 4th century Christian writers, respectively) cite passages from the Peshitta OT.⁴ In a section subtitled "Citations of P" he relies on Sebastian Brock's chapter "Limitations of Syriac in Representing Greek" in Bruce Metzger's 1977 edition of *The Early Versions of the New Testament*. [See file named "forSBL2006-Weitzman.doc" for extended specifics on this point—to include in a later paper.] If we knew on other grounds that

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such a community existed, this would be supportive evidence; if, on the other hand, we do not have any major indicators of a Christian community that valued and incorporated Jewish scriptures, before Aphrahat in the fourth century, one instance of Matthew [in the Diatessaron, which doesn't exist in Syriac] citing Zechariah according to the Peshitta translation does not provide the proof we need.

Aphrahat (early fourth century, to 344-5 c.e.) did know the Peshitta OT, however.

Regarding Aphrahat, Weitzman states

In the early fourth century, P is cited by Aphrahat in all canonical books of the Old Testament, except for a few short enough to have been excluded by chance. A little later, Ephrem's commentaries on Genesis and Exodus cite these books extensively. Significantly, however, Ephrem no longer understood the particle <Syr>YT</Syr> in Gen. 1:1, as his comment shows. . . . The fact that the particle had become obsolete suggests that Genesis was translated no later than c. 200 CE.

Now this sort of evidence, for fourth century Syriac-speaking Christianity, together with evidence of the earlier existence of the Peshitta, is abundant and undeniable.

What seems to be lacking is any direct connection between earlier forms of Christianity--identified with Marcion, Bardaisan, Tatian, Acts of Thomas, and Mani--that demonstrates interest in and valuation of Jewish scriptures.

That is, Weitzman's assumption that a Christian community existed in the late second century milieu that would not devalue or dismiss the work of the translators of the Peshitta OT is hardly tenable. In other words, if late second century Edessene-milieu Christianity attracted and converted individual Jews, it is unlikely that the converts would have maintained a relationship with Jewish scriptures. To infer that Aphrahat's interest in Jewish scripture was simply a continuation of a Judaeo-Christian variety of

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Christianity of the Edessene milieu—the converted community posited by Weitzman—so therefore such a community must have existed, is anachronistic.

We do know from fourth century Syriac Christian sources not only that a) Jewish scriptures were used, as noted above, but also that b) Christians frequented the Jewish synagogue(s) in sufficient numbers to need to be warned away from them by the *Doctrina Addai*, Aphrahat, and Ephrem, among Syriac sources, and by John Chrysostom in Greek. This continuing attestation of Judaism in Syriac suggests not that the Jewish community converted, or withered, or died, beginning at the end of the second century--before the completion of the Peshitta OT as Weitzman suggests--but rather that Jewish Communities (in the plural) remained active and attractive at least until the last quarter of the fourth century.⁵

Additional evidence for continued existence of Jewish communities in the Edessene milieu is provided by the existence of Syriac material that is entirely, or almost entirely, Jewish in subject matter and expression. In addition to my work on 6 Macc, which will be one of the pieces in the forthcoming More Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, other examples include the History of Joseph⁶ and another anonymous memra in Syriac, now called 7 Macc. These works were transmitted in Christian milieux, and have identifiable Christian inserts. Their Jewish origins seem unmistakable, however.⁷

It is simpler to suppose that the Jewish community continued from an early date in the Edessene milieu, without significant numbers converting to forms of Christianity that did not depend on Jewish scriptures, and that SyrMacc was composed in this community. We now have a number of authors who have worked on the text of the Leiden Peshitta, and published commentaries on their work on particular books, among them . . . <list from Erbes>. . . In reviewing individual books of the Peshitta,

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they have not found, any more than Weitzman did, clear evidence either for Christian translators or for dependence on the LXX/OG.⁸ The extent to which an hypothesis of Jewish community as origin for the Peshitta OT is confirmed varies from author to author, and perhaps from book to book. Weitzman, however, in viewing the Peshitta as a whole, is able to take advantage of this work and develop the evidence for a common approach to certain translation problems.⁹ The internal evidence of the Peshitta OT is corroborated by grave inscriptions¹⁰ and, perhaps, by the translation of the Psalms of Solomon from Hebrew into Syriac.¹¹ Against this evidence stands years of unquestioning acceptance of the doctrine that Syriac Christianity spread with the language of Syriac from the focal point of Edessa, beginning in the second century. The pillars of this wisdom are as follows:

Syriac is a Christian language (at least as old as Wright, *A short history of Syriac*, 1892)
If heresies exist, there must be an orthodox version of Christianity from which they have broken.

If the Peshitta OT exists, there must be Christian communities which used it in the second and third centuries.

If there is evidence for a fairly orthodox Christianity, dependent on the Peshitta OT, with an NT canon of sorts, in the fourth century we must expect it was there in the third century.

If there is orthodox Christianity elsewhere, then by the "great church" doctrine it must exist in the Edessene milieu.

It is probably the first and last of these suppositions that have the most influence on the perception that somehow there was early (Jewish) Christianity in the Edessene

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milieu, the Syriac-using variants of Christianity as well as a Syriac-using Jewish community.

Am I also arguing from relative silence about Jewish communities using and writing Syriac literature? Well, yes, in those limited terms; however, for more information about Jewish communities in Mesopotamia (more simply, in the Sassanian Empire 224-642) we return to Widengren, and Neusner, who added maps of the communities. These are shown in the slide/illustration, whatever.

The list is as follows: (I'll show a map instead)

Mesopotamian provinces of Babylonia, centered in the north

Mesopotamian province of Mesene in the south, a vassal kingdom

Armenia

Adiabene (Hadyab)

The cities of Media, Ragae, and Media Atropatene

The province of Gurgan (Hyrcania, Parthian Wirkan)

The province (satrapy) of Parthia with the province of Media;

Parthia probably the most eastern place of Jewish settlement.

The province of Spahan (Ispahan) in the south

The satrapy of Elmais (corresponding to Sujsiana (Sassanian Xuzistan)—

but this might be the much smaller satrapy of Allonitis (see Geo

Widengren 120 note 3).

City of Xwarizm, east of the province of Parthia, said to have been

founded by a Jew—Jews would thus have “reached the northeastern part

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of countries inhabited by Iranian tribes” (120). No information about Jewish settlement of Sogdia, though(120).

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Adiabene, further, quoting pp 124-125 of Widengren

3. The status of the Jews in the Parthian empire on the whole was a very favourable one. The political relations of Jews and Parthians were sometimes very intimate and had the point directed against the Romans whom both of them repeatedly were fighting. 6) An especially close association existed between the Jews of Palestine and Mesopotamia on the one hand and the Parthian vassal kingdom of Adiabene on the other hand where the royal house, represented by the two [[125]] brothers Izates and Monobazos and their mother Helena, was converted to the Jewish religion. 1) The active interest taken by the Parthian princes in Jewish affairs is shown also by the fact that the Parthian auxiliary troops were sent from Adiabene to the Jews to assist them in their defense of Jerusalem during the siege of Titus, Josephus, Bellum II 520; VI 356. 2) But even the members of the house of Arsak, the overlords of all the vassal kingdoms of the Parthian empire, true to their well-known spirit of tolerance, shew themselves favourably disposed to the Jewish inhabitants of Iran. This fact is demonstrated above all by the sentiments of sorrow with which the news of the downfall of the Arsacidian dynasty was received by them. It is known that Rab (died 247), the leading teacher of Babylonia, was a personal friend of the last Parthian king Ardavan IV (209-226). When he heard of the defeat and death of the

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prince he exclaimed: “The bond (of friendship) is snapped” Aboda Zara 10 b. 3)

It has rightly been said that “it can . . . be inferred from the fear and apprehension felt by the Rabbis on the rise of the Sassanids power in 226 that they knew that they had everything to lose and nothing to gain from the fall of the Parthians. (125n4)

[In 125 n 1, Widengren further notes

For the high Jewish percentage of the population” see an indistinct citation to one of his other works. “From a later period, mid-sixth century A.D., we possess the information that a Nestorian bishop, an ex-Magian, called Titus (. . . [comment on the name]) converted many Jewish inhabitants of Ḥeḏattā, under the jurisdiction of the metropolitan of Adiabene, cf. *Histoire Nestorienne inédite*, ed. Scher, II, p. 153.

Accordingly the Jews must still have been strong there toward the end of the Sassanian period.

Returning to Rav (247 c.E.), he was the founder of one of the two foremost Babylonian schools studying the mishnah, located at Nehardea. According to Widengren he was also recorded as saying “The Persians too are destroying synagogues” in Yoma BT 10a (128). However this may have been meant, whenever it was written, are both problematic, so Widengren is “just saying,” just saying that it’s been written down. Otherwise, we have a number of references in the BT to the reign of Shapur I, which generally paint an irenic picture, according to Widengren (128, 128n5, 128n6). Mar Judah (d 299) was the pupil of the other founder of Babylonian rabbinics, Samuel; the BT records that

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Shapur I showed great consideration for his dietary requirements (129, 129n2). After the death of Shapur I, the Zoroastrian priest Kartir exercised more destructive power than before. He boasts in one famous inscription that

The doctrines of Ahriman and the dēvs departed from the empire and there fell into desuetude.

And Jews and (Buddhist) śramans and Bra(h)mins and Naṣōraeans and Christians and Muktiks and Zandiks became smitten in the empire, and by destruction of idols and scattering of the holes of the dēvs and god-seats and nests, fell into desuetude (130).

Widengren has located most of the external references to Jews in the areas of modern Iraq and Iran; he also cites the 20 or 30 references in the Bavli to rulers of Iraq, Iran, and Armenia. There are rulers in the Sassanian line who are friendly to Jews, and rulers who are unfriendly. There is rarely enough agreement between external sources and internal characterizations to be able to say anything with certainty about the Jews in the area.

Except, one can say with certainty that in the same period covered by the rise of Christianity in Syriac-speaking lands, there were also Jews. Perhaps more Jews than Christians (Armenian depopulation example). Widengren traces a pattern of three recurring elements; a Sassanian ruler, a Talmudic characterization of the ruler or his period, and any available references in Persian or Armenian or Syriac or Aramaic to the people known as Jews.

By this juxtaposition of three elements, one comes away with the impression that all of the Jews, from Antioch to the Sogdian border, from the Persian Gulf to the north

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of Armenia, were subject to the rabbis. We could only speak of something different if we had material that was obviously, in its language, or location, or material representation, a product of Jews who were clearly not rabbinic Jews.

We do have a few examples:

Syriac poetry about the Maccabean martyrdoms (6 Maccabees)

A Syriac piece about the Maccabean martyrdoms in Second Sophistic rhetorical style (7 Maccabees).

A cycle of stories about Joseph (ed. by Rodrigues Pereira)

The Psalms of Solomon (translated from Greek/Hebrew)

The final of my three topics is a brief and general review of people who have done work on Judaism as expressed in Syriac literature. This is not the time or place for a critical review of the literature on Syriac-speaking Judaism. People with some knowledge of both Judaism and the Syriac language have taken a variety of methodological perspectives on Syriac-language materials that seem to express aspects of Judaism. These people include:

The translators of the Leiden Peshitta project, almost all of whom have concluded that the Syriac translators of the HB/OT Peshitta were Jews who read and wrote Hebrew, and that their translation of the HB/OT (The Peshitta OT) came directly from a Hebrew original. (Johannes Erbes has a summary).

Jacob Neusner. His curious book on *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran* opposes Babylonian rabbinic interpretation of Jewish Scriptures with Aphrahat's Christian interpretation, while acknowledging that the Jews that Aphrahat knew probably were not rabbinic Jews and did not have the oral law.

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Naomi Koltun-Fromm has countered Jacob Neusner's emphasis on non-rabbinic Jews in the book just mentioned. Instead, she finds value in constructing dialogues between the Christian expectations of Jews and the polemical response of Talmudic rabbis.

Conclusion of some sort goes here.

¹Endnotes

Michael P. Weitzman *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament: An Introduction* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 56; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999),

². Such as Odes of Solomon or Acts of Thomas.

³. Drijvers estimates that 12 per cent of the population of Edessa was Jewish-- extrapolated from the names used in burial inscriptions in Edessa at the end of the second and beginning of the third century. Drijvers's edition of the *Acts of Thomas* (ATh) in Schneemelcher notes a few instances where comparison might be made to books of the Jewish scriptures, namely Gen, Ex, and Num, as well as Psalms. Proverbial references are even less certain to indicate knowledge of Jewish scriptures. The Drijvers notes to ATh pick up on instances of allusion, rather than direct quotation. In contrast, SyrMacc or the Syriac *Didascalia* (Didsc) quote passages from Jewish scripture much more closely, although Didsc in Syriac translates quotations of the LXX/OG rather than substituting passages from the Peshitta OT (Vööbus ed. @@). In its two scriptural quotations, of Dt 32.30 at line 10 and of Ps 115 at line 97, SyrMacc uses the vocabulary of the Peshitta OT at both places, while reorganizing the verses to fit the poetic context. In the Dt 32.30 passage, reorganizing amounts to paraphrasing, and the paraphrase imports a word found only in the LXX.

⁴. Weitzman, *Syriac Version*, 7.

⁵. Documentation needed here @@.

⁶. Link, in A. Hyman *Festschrift*, ed. by Ruth Link, has edited the second half of an existing MS. He cites ?? as the editor of the first half. @@

⁷. Bensly-Barnes @@.

⁸. See Johann Erbes, review of the literature. @@

9. Find reference in Weitzman 1999 @@.

10. Drijvers, @@

11. See Trafton, @@