

## **Does the Peshitta stem from the Old Syriac?**

The original Peshitta is the most authoritative of the Aramaic versions. The Church of the East (COE) maintains its tradition that they were given the original books by the Apostles themselves. Internal and external evidence has not been able to contradict this; rather, it supports the COE stance that the Peshitta books are the originals. There is another major Aramaic version, but it is a fraud.

### The “Old Syriac”

The very name of this version is a slap in the face to Peshitta primacists. It is modeled after the name of the Old Latin, the alleged precursor to the Latin Vulgate. It is generally accepted by most Bible scholars that this version precedes the Peshitta and the Peshitto. As you will soon discover, this notion is completely false and illogical.

The Old Syriac contains the four Gospels only. It consists of two main documents, the Old Syriac Sinaiticus, and the Old Syriac Curetonianus. These two manuscripts disagree with each other to such an extent, that it is highly questionable why they are considered to be “one version”. Furthermore, the Old Syriac agrees very closely with the Greek Codex Bezae, considered by many Greek scholars to be the “original Greek”. This is one of the main reasons why Greek primacists rate the Old Syriac as the “best Aramaic”.

To add insult to injury, scholarly consensus holds that the Peshitta (and the Peshitto along with it – it seems that most Greek primacists are unaware that there are differences between the Peshitta and the Peshitto, however slight) was translated from the Greek by Rabulla, the bishop of Edessa from 412-435 AD. One of the main proponents of this belief has been noted textual critic, F.C. Burkitt. Scholarly consensus says that it was the “Byzantine Greek”. The irony of this belief is that from the many split words discussed earlier in this series, sometimes the Peshitta agrees with the Byzantine Greek, and sometimes with the Alexandrian Greek, heavily implying that both Greek traditions actually stem from the Peshitta.

That Rabulla created the Peshitta is a completely irrational belief, to those who are familiar with the history of the two big Aramaic-speaking Churches. The problem with this belief is that the Peshitta/Peshitto (keep in mind that these versions are almost identical) was used by both the COE and the SOC, even long after Rabulla’s death. When the big Church split into the COE and SOC in 431 AD, Rabulla sided with the SOC and heavily persecuted the COE, which led to them naming him, “the tyrant of Edessa”. It is not reasonable to assume that the COE would use a version of the Bible created by their biggest enemy, while they believed that they already possessed the original Aramaic Bible. It is even more incredible that this “Rabulla-Peshitta” theory remains so strong, despite not a single shred of evidence to support it. It seems that the Greek primacy movement will do anything to suppress the Aramaic.

Syriac historian, Dr. Arthur Voobus on Burkitt’s claims:

“This kind of reconstruction of textual history is pure fiction without a shred of evidence to support it” – Early Versions of the New Testament, Estonian Theological Society, 1954, pp. 90-97

Famous textual critic, Dr. Bruce Metzger adds:

“The question who it was that produced the Peshitta version of the New Testament will perhaps never be answered. That it was not Rabulla has been proved by Voobus's researches. . . In any case, however, in view of the adoption of the same version of the Scriptures by both the Eastern (Nestorian) and Western (Jacobite) branches of Syrian Christendom, we must conclude that it had attained a considerable degree of status before the division of the Syrian Church in AD 431.” – Early Versions of the New Testament, New York: Claredon, 1977, p. 36

Burkitt's theory is all the more illogical when you consider that the COE and SOC were practically mortal enemies, yet were using the same Aramaic tradition. Clearly, the Peshitta must have gained much respect and reverence by the COE and SOC, long before they split.

Now that we have cast aside the notion that Rabulla created the Peshitta from the Greek translation, we yet do not cast aside the idea that Rabulla did in fact make an Aramaic version from the Greek. A colleague of his wrote the following after Rabulla's death:

“By the wisdom of God that was in him he translated the New Testament from Greek into Syriac because of its variations, exactly as it was.” – Rabul episcopi Edesseni, Baleei, aliorumque opera selecta, Oxford 1865, ed. J. J. Overbeck

Rabulla himself stated:

“The presbyters and deacons shall see to it that in all the churches a copy of the **Evangelion de Mepharreshe** shall be available and read.” – Zahn, Forschungen zur Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons, i. (1881), p. 105

Clearly, Rabulla did make an Aramaic version using the Greek. And we have its name: Evangelion de Mepharreshe.

Could this be the Old Syriac? We shall let the Old Syriac itself answer that one!

The header to OS Matthew reads: “**Evangelion de Mepharreshe**”.

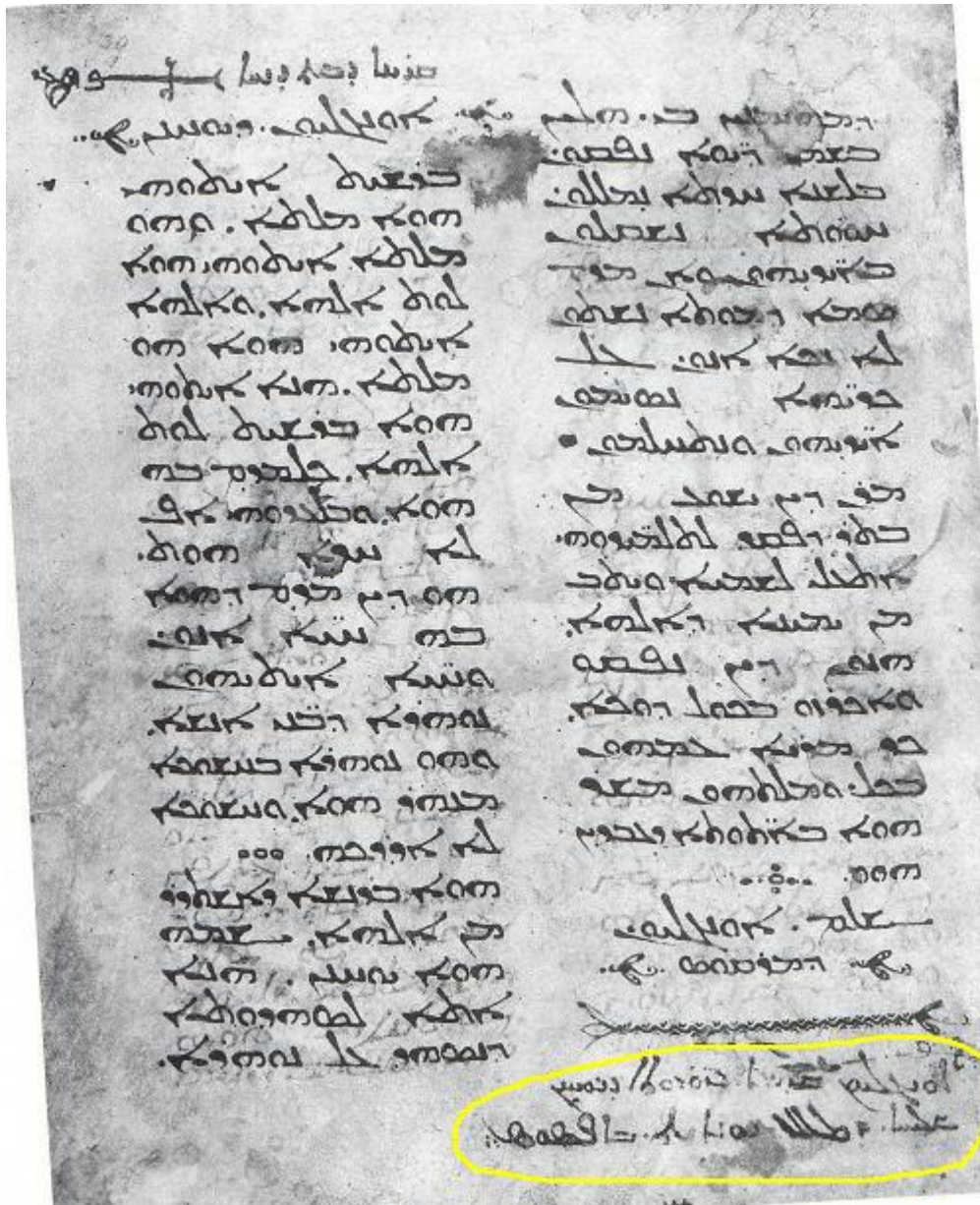


Old Syriac John (the last of the four Gospels) ends with:

ܐܘܢ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܡܦܗܪܪܫܐ

“Shlam Evangelion de Mepharreshe”

“Here ends the **Evangelion de Mepharreshe**”



Clearly, Rabulla's version was the Old Syriac, not the Peshitta. Besides this blatant proof, the "Evangelion de Mepharreshe" has little in common with the Peshitta, even though they are apparently "the same version".

This title, "Evangelion de Mepharreshe" is a combination of Greek and Aramaic, meaning "Separate Gospels". This brings us to a discussion on a minor Aramaic version that has played such a major role in the history of the misunderstandings of the original Aramaic Scriptures. This minor version will also help to explain why Rabulla made his own version of the Gospels in the first place.

## Rabulla, the Old Syriac and Tatian's Diatessaron

Infamous Assyrian apologist, Tatian, created a harmony of the four Peshitta Gospels, in order to have a continuous narrative of the life of Jesus. This Aramaic version is known as the "Diatessaron" (meaning "Gospel harmony") aka "Evangelion da Mehallete". Sound familiar? It should. It basically means, "Mixed Gospels". It is generally accepted by most scholars as being published around 175 AD or earlier. Only fragments remain of the original Aramaic version, but further translations into Arabic, Latin and Armenian still exist.

The Diatessaron became a very popular version in Syria, during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. Even in Edessa, the diocese of Rabulla. When he saw that nearly every Church was using the Diatessaron, Rabulla ordered the priests and deacons to ensure that every church should have a copy of the his "Evangelion da Mepharreshe".

He wanted to replace the "Evangelion da Mehallete" ("Mixed Gospels") with his "Evangelion da Mepharreshe" ("Separate Gospels").

The true story now becomes very clear. Rabulla created the Old Syriac, not the Peshitta! This makes complete sense, after seeing Rabulla's emphasis on the Gospels (to rival the Diatessaron, the harmonised Gospel) and the fact that the Old Syriac consists of the four Gospels only.

Happily enough, internal evidence from the Arabic translation of the Assyrian Diatessaron (the only surviving version translated into a sister Semitic tongue) heavily indicates that the Diatessaron stems from the Peshitta. This would date the Peshitta to around 175 AD at the absolute latest. That's pretty impressive, considering that the New Testament is believed to have been completed around 100 AD.

But why in countering the Diatessaron, did Rabulla create the Old Syriac (from the Greek translation), instead of using the original Peshitta Gospels? The author does not understand, especially since his ally, the SOC, revered the Peshitta tradition. Perhaps he wanted to make a name for himself. Or perhaps he conspired to suppress the Peshitta tradition. Indeed, the SOC did make use of his Old Syriac for a while, before reverting back to their more trustworthy Peshitto.

In any case, this investigation yields some vital facts:

- Rabulla did not create the Peshitta, he created the Old Syriac.
- The Peshitta does not stem from the Old Syriac, the Old Syriac stems from the Peshitta, via the Greek.
- The Peshitta dates back to 175 AD at the very latest.

It all makes sense now. One would expect the COE to reject the version created by Rabulla, their great persecutor. Yet they didn't reject the Peshitta. They rejected the Old Syriac. That the Old Syriac was a poor version (unavoidable seeing as it was an Aramaic translation from a Greek translation of the original Aramaic\*), is evident not only by the COE's rejection, but also the

eventual rejection by the SOC, Rabulla's ally. Both Churches decided to stay with the Peshitta tradition. Yet scholars still are adamant that the Old Syriac is somehow older and superior to the Peshitta and Peshitto.

\* - The Old Syriac shares many similarities with the Western Greek text (aka Codex Bezae, aka Manuscript D) as textual critic Dr. James Trimm demonstrates. And the Western Greek text seems to be an early Greek translation of the Peshitta as indicated by its "Semiticness" (the NT author's were all Semites after all) and its variants with other Greek manuscripts, which stem from mistranslations/misunderstandings of the original Peshitta passages (split words).

After learning the true history of the "Old Syriac", you may loathe to call it by that name. A popular alternative among Peshitta enthusiasts is "Old Scratch", as manuscripts were found where the Old Syriac was scratched off to make way for a priest's biography. No Semite would dare do this to the Peshitta!

Note: More articles regarding the history of the Peshitta and OS comparisons can be found in my book.