

## **The Coptic and Old Slavonic versions of the *Ascension of Isaiah*: Some text-critical observations**

In this paper I want to contribute to the discussion about the relation of the textual witnesses of the *Ascension of Isaiah*. I will begin with a survey of the extant witnesses, and then study a number of test cases, which, I hope, provide us with new insights with regard to the textual problems of the book. I will use the names Martyrdom and Vision to differentiate between the two major parts of the *Ascension of Isaiah*: the Martyrdom consists of chapters 1–5 and the Vision contains chapters 6–11.

The Armherst Papyrus, the only remnant of the Greek text, contains a part of the Martyrdom, 2.4b–4.4a, and is dated to the end of the sixth century<sup>1</sup>. An approximate picture of the dates of the extant translations can be gained on the basis of their respective languages or with the help of codicological evidence. One of the Coptic versions, in Sahidic dialect, contains 3.3–6, 9–12 and 11.24–32, 35–40. The other Coptic version contains short fragments of the whole text. We can situate these two witnesses among the dialects of the Coptic language. Literary Coptic developed from Old Coptic from the end of the second century. In the third and fourth centuries, one can distinguish not less than a dozen dialects in the manuscripts. Since the valley of the Nile was populated in a thin strip, most of the dialects can be identified with a particular position on an axis directed from the north to the south. The dialect of one of our manuscripts, Sahidic, was located approximately at the middle of that axis, which was probably the main reason it became later the literary standard. The northernmost dialect (that of the Nile Delta) was Boharaic, the southernmost was Achmimic. The dialect between the central Sahidic and the southern Achmimic was Subachmimic. The language of the second manuscript has been classified as a peculiar form of Achmimic or Subachmimic. It is difficult to say which of the two Coptic translations was earlier. On the

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<sup>1</sup> Norelli, p. 135.

one hand, we cannot yet precisely locate the dialect of the Subachmimic translation; on the other hand, although we know that the Sahidic text comes from the fourth century, it cannot be excluded that it preserved an earlier Sahidic version. The Ethiopic translation is later than the Coptic ones; it was made between the fourth and sixth centuries. The early Latin fragments of the Martyrdom (2.14–3.13, called Latin 1) and the Vision (7.1–19) originate from fifth to sixth centuries<sup>2</sup>. Although the earliest witness of the Old Slavonic text is dated to the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, the version preserved in it cannot be later than the eleventh century, when Old Church Slavonic gave way to the Middle Slavonic languages. Finally, there is a Latin text (Latin 2) of the Vision probably from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which was published by Antonio de Fantis in 1522<sup>3</sup>. The survey of the extant texts and translations shows that the Coptic fragments are the earliest extant witnesses to the *Ascension of Isaiah*, followed by Latin 1 and the Ethiopic translation. Since of all these witnesses predate the Armherst Papyrus, special attention must be paid to them at the interpretation of the texts, even where the Greek is extant. The Old Slavonic is important because it is earlier than Latin 2, although the relation of these two very similar versions is rather complex.

Since all of the extant texts, except the Ethiopic, are fragmentary, the evaluation of the textual evidence is a complicated procedure. The methodology that I suggest for the comparison of the textual witnesses is as follows. First, the Martyrdom offers possibilities to compare the ancient witnesses (fourth to sixth centuries) with each other. Once we have evaluated the witnesses from antiquity, we can use them also for the comparison of the medieval ones, Latin 2 and the Old Slavonic. There is a synopsis of the versions in Norelli's edition (pp. 353–441), which provides an excellent point of departure for the text-critical work. Finally, one must not to forget the lesson of the so-called eclectic method of textual criticism, advocated, among others, by J.K. Elliott and Barbara Aland in New Testament scholarship. The eclectic method is based on the principle that any witness, may it be a late one, could have preserved an original reading, relying on an earlier witness that is not available to us any more.

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<sup>2</sup> Norelli, p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> Norelli, p. 213.

In the rest of my paper I want to illustrate the possibilities of textual criticism in the *Ascension of Isaiah*. I will concentrate mainly on the Coptic fragments, containing parts of the whole book, and the Slavonic text of the Vision. Let us begin with the Martyrdom. From this part of the book, I have selected passages, where at least two ancient texts are extant in addition to the Ethiopic. In the study of the Ethiopic text, I had to rely on the available translations.

The first example is 2.15–6. The episode is set to the days of Ahaziah, who sat on the throne of Israel only for one year (c. 853–852 BC). The time of Ahaziah predates the reign of Manasseh (c. 687–642 BC) by two centuries. When the *Ascension of Isaiah* traces back the genealogy of Belchira to the false prophets under Ahaziah and his father Ahab, it connects the two negative figures of Deuteronomic history (Manasseh of Juda and Ahab of Israel) with each other. The passage in question reports the death of the prophet Micah (Micaiah). I quote the translation of Müller (607):

And when the false prophets who were with Ahaziah, the son of Ahab, and their teacher Jallarias from Mount Joel heard – now he was a brother of Zedekiah – when they heard, they prevailed upon Ahaziah, king of Gomorrah, and slew Micaiah.  
(*Ascension of Isaiah* 2.15–6)

The passage is contained in the Ethiopic, Latin 1, and the Greek text of the Armherst Papyrus. The three witnesses depart from each other at several points. The Greek agrees with the Ethiopic against the Latin when the latter claims Ahaziah was the teacher of the false prophets. They both identify the leader of the false prophets as Belchira in verse 16. Further, both of them affirm that the false prophets convinced (μετέπεισαν, in plural) the king, rather than their leader alone. The Greek and the Latin agree against the Ethiopic when they call Ahaziah king of Gomorrah. The Ethiopic has ‘king of Aguaron’ and also omits the verb ‘kill’ at the end of the passage. The Latin and the Ethiopic also show agreements against the Greek. They identify the prophets related to Ahaziah as false prophets, whereas the Greek has only προφήτης. They call the king Ahab, while the Greek calls him Alam (as it did in verse 13).

Finally, the name of the hill where the leader of the false prophets comes from is different in all three texts: Efrem in the Latin, Israel in the Greek, and Joel in the Ethiopic.

How can we interpret these agreements and differences? I suggest that we can reconstruct an earlier Greek text as follows. Verse 15 had ‘prophets’ rather than ‘false prophets’; probably the name of the king was ‘Alam’, the ‘teacher’ was called ‘Jallarias’, and the mount was called ‘Israel’<sup>4</sup>. Verse 16 did not contain the gloss ‘Belchira’ and the word ἀκούσαντες, and it was somewhat difficult to understand. From that hypothetical text, two expanded versions developed: one contained the readings ‘false prophets’, ‘Ahab’, and ‘mount Efrem’, as well as it developed its own interpretation of the somewhat cryptic verse 16. The other version added instead of this the gloss Belchira and the subsequent ἀκούσαντες. The copyist did not understand the Old Testament context of the narrative, and placed the negative protagonist of the book into the flashback that plays two centuries earlier. The Latin translation was made from the first version. The second version is basically identical with the Greek of the Armherst Papyrus, with the exception of ‘mount Israel’ in verse 15. The Ethiopic offers a synthesis of the hypothetical early Greek text and the expanded versions. As we will see below, it probably relies on an eclectic Greek text. In sum, the text-critical analysis of these verses shows that all of the extant variants rely on expanded versions of an earlier and shorter Greek text that can be approximately reconstructed by comparing the extant versions. The hypothetical genealogy of the versions has to be tested against the rest of the Martyrdom.

Now let us turn our attention to 3.3–6 and 3.9–11, where in addition to the versions examined above, we can find a fragment of the Sahidic in a relatively good condition. The section relates the activity of the negative protagonist Belchira, and his accusations against Isaiah. In verse 5, we read that the sons of Hezekiah accused Belchira, and he fled therefore to Bethlehem. The Greek adds a cryptic clause to the verse: καὶ ἔπεισαν (and they accused). The Ethiopic and the Sahidic, however, use the singular: he persuaded. The Latin omits the word altogether. In this case, I intend to follow the *lectio difficilior* of the Ethiopic and the Sahidic.

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<sup>4</sup> Abbreviated as ΙΑ and mistakenly solved as Joel by the Ethiopic translator. Note that Joel and Israel can be also mixed up the other way around in case of a minuscule: Ισηλ can be misread as an abbreviation of Ισορηλ. However, the dating of the Ethiopic translation excludes that it was made from a minuscule.

The original Greek may have contained *καὶ ἔπεισαν καὶ κατηγορήσεν*, with *πεῖθω* in the intransitive sense: ‘and Belchira argued and accused Isaiah’. The Greek version of the Latin translator, or the translator himself, omitted the first verb to simplify the difficult structure, whereas the copyist of the Greek of the Armherst Papyrus inflected the verb in the plural under the influence of the previous sentence, as if ‘sons of Hezekiah’ were the subject. (This resembles the logic of the Coptic, which has no passive, and uses the third person plural instead.) In this case, the Ethopic and the Sahidic retained the original reading, although they could not really insert it into their sentence structures. This also shows that the Sahidic is close to the Ethiopic, and we can hypothesize an eclectic Greek text that served as a basis of those translations (see above).

Another verse (3.10) in this section may confirm this observation. This passage describes Belchira’s accusations against Isaiah. In the Greek text the verse concludes: ‘He brought many accusations against Manasseh and the prophets’ (*καὶ πολλὰ κατηγορεῖ ἐπὶ τοῦ Μανασση καὶ τῶν προφητῶν*). In the Latin we find ‘Then he spoke much against Isaiah and the prophets’ (*Et tum [ms. cum] in multis contradixit [ms. dextradixit] Eseaiae et profetis*). The Ethopic reads ‘He brought many accusations against Isaiah and the prophets before Manasseh’. The Sahidic, as far as it can be judged from its fragmentary text, probably contained the same. Although the original cannot be precisely reconstructed, I intend to omit both Isaiah and Manasseh from it: ‘He brought many accusations against the prophets’. This sentence, however, does not make it clear whether it belongs still to the speech of Belchira or to the words of the narrator. If it still reports the words of Belchira, it is to be understood as a complaint: He, Isaiah, brought accusations against the prophets related to Belchira, who, as we have seen above, were not consistently called ‘false prophets’ in the original. The tradition of the Armherst papyrus amplified the sentence in this sense, adding that Isaiah also accused Manasseh. The tradition of the Latin translation, however, understood the sentence as the words of the narrator, summarizing the speech of Belchira. Therefore, the copyist added for the sake of clarity that Isaiah was among the accused prophets. Finally, the synthesizing tradition restructured the sentence so that the names of both Isaiah and Manasseh make sense in it: Belchira accused Isaiah and the prophets before Manasseh.

Let us draw some preliminary conclusions now. From our examples we can conclude that the Latin fragments of the Martyrdom often contain short readings that probably reflect the Greek original. The Greek of the Armherst Papyrus relies on a more amplified textual tradition. The Greek original behind the Ethiopic and the Sahidic shows an influence of both types, but it is usually closer to the amplified text. From the three traditions it is often possible to approach a more archaic text of the *Ascension of Isaiah*.

If we now turn our attention to the second part of the book, the actual Vision of Isaiah, we can see that among the ancient witnesses the Ethiopic provides a continuous text, the Latin is represented in one section (7.1–19), and there are fragments of both Coptic versions. As a rule, the Latin and the Old Slavonic are close to each other, whereas the ancient witnesses usually agree against them. Nevertheless, these rules cannot be regarded as absolute. The first example that we will quote is *Ascension of Isaiah* 11.36. This passage already belongs to the closing narrative frame of the Vision. The Ethiopic text reads: ‘And Isaiah told it to all who stood before him, and they sang praise’. However, the Latin reads: ‘On seeing these things (*hec videns*), Isaiah told it to all who stood around him. And when they heard the miraculous things, all of them sang and praised the Lord, who showed such a mercy to people’. The Old Slavonic is similar to the Latin: ‘I saw these. Isaiah told it to those who stood around him; and when they heard these miraculous things, they praised God and sang to him, who showed such a mercy to people’. There are a number of minor differences between the Latin and the Slavonic. Instead of ‘on seeing this’ (*hec videns*) the Slavonic has ‘I saw these’ (си видѣхъ); to miraculous things (*mirabilia*) it attaches a demonstrative pronoun (си прѣдивьнага); further, it omits ‘all’ (*omnia*), inverts the order of praise and sing, and reads ‘God’ (Богъ) rather than Lord (*Dominus*). In sum, the originals of both the Latin and the Old Slavonic translators contained a text that was longer than the Ethiopic at this point; the contents of the two texts were similar, yet they did not use exactly the same words. We have a fragment of both Coptic versions to this passage, and it is clear that they contained the longer version. In the Sahidic text, only the verbal form ‘they heard and...’ (etswtM auw...) can be read, whereas the Subachmimic contains ‘to those who stood and heard these, and...’ (nnetaxe aretou ... nnetswtme anel aou...). From the amount of the lost contents of both texts, as

it can be judged from the papyri, it is also clear that they could not contain the whole clause about singing and praising, but rather they had a single word like ‘they praised’ (αὐσμου)<sup>5</sup>. In sum, the Coptic versions seem to amplify the Ethiopic basically with the clause ‘they heard’, and they occupy a middle position between the shorter Ethiopic and the longer Latin and Slavonic.

The last example to be discussed is *Ascension of Isaiah* 11.40, which is the closing verse of the Latin. The passage reports how Isaiah made king Hezekiah swear that he would not speak about the vision to the people of Israel. In the Ethiopic the oath concludes: ‘and then they shall read them’. This clause belongs to the warning, ‘do not permit any man to write down the words’. The Latin has a whole sentence here: ‘But as much as the king shall understand, was also said by the prophets’ (*sed quanta intelligentur a rege et dicta in prophetis*). The Slavonic gives an even longer version: ‘But as much as you understand of what the king says about the prophets, you shall understand’ (НѢ КЛИКО АЩЕ РАЗОУМѢЮТЕ УТ ЦѢСАРА РЕЧЕНАГА ВЪ ПРОРОЦЕХЪ, ТАКОВАГА РАЗДѢЛИТЕ). We also have the passage in Sahidic, but in a very fragmentary shape, again: ‘if not ... in parables ... then he shall...’ (eimhti ... Nparabol h ... fna...). It is difficult to make conjectures about the lost contents of the Sahidic, but the length of the passage is comparable to the Old Slavonic; the words in the two texts are, however, different. Perhaps the text concluded with the same clause as the Ethiopic, ‘then they shall read’. As was the case in the previous passage, the Coptic preserved here a longer version than the Ethiopic, with readings that are close to the Old Slavonic – but the exact words in the two longer versions are different. What we can conclude from this test case is that the amplifications found in the medieval versions could rely on variants that already existed in the fourth century.

It is time to draw some conclusions. The ancient witnesses of the *Ascension of Isaiah* from the fourth to sixth centuries provide various possibilities for text-critical investigation. Although the Ethiopic text is often preferred because it is complete, and the Greek of the Armherst Papyrus because it contains the text in the original language, the other extant

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<sup>5</sup> Norelli, p. 187.

versions can occasionally contain more plausible readings, or provide clues to reconstruct an earlier form of the text. The ancient versions, among which we dealt especially with the Coptic texts, also help us toward a better understanding of the textual traditions contained in the Latin and Old Slavonic translations. The very fragmentary Coptic texts clearly bear witness to variants that were already existing in Late Antiquity, and exerted an influence on the medieval tradition of the *Ascension of Isaiah*. The Latin and the Slavonic translators had somewhat different textual forms before them. There is at least some indication that the text from which the Slavonic translation was made contained similar readings as the ancient Sahidic translation.