

Psalm 29 as a poetological example of Peshitta Psalms translation

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The existing research on Peshitta has mostly overlooked the translation techniques used in Peshitta Psalms. Prior studies have primarily focused on comparing Peshitta Psalms with the Masoretic Text (MT), the Septuagint and Targum, leaving a gap in the analysis of Peshitta Psalms within the context of Classical Syriac Poetry. This study will delve into how adeptly the Syriac translator employed poetic elements to construct strophic structures and poetic style within the Peshitta Psalm. This article presents an analysis of strophic structure, word repetition, sound figures and versification in the Syriac translation of Psalm 29, comparing them with their Hebrew counterparts. In this study, the utilisation of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) is employed for the MT, while the 'Leiden edition' is employed for the Peshitta. The findings from this analysis reveal that the Syriac rendition of Psalm 29 within the Peshitta incorporates numerous poetic elements. This suggests the translator's familiarity with the strophic arrangement, word repetition, alliteration and various other poetic characteristics utilised by Hebrew scribes. The Peshitta translation of Psalm 29 closely resembles the MT Hebrew text, resulting in a balance of fidelity and aesthetic elegance. The Syriac rendition incorporates poetic elements like strophic arrangement, word repetition and alliteration but employs these features in a distinct manner. The Syriac text has a lower frequency of alliteration and word repetition but still possesses appealing poetic characteristics. The Syriac approach to verse composition closely resembles the Hebrew method, with some exceptions.

Contribution: This study explores the Syriac translator's use of poetic elements in Peshitta Psalms, revealing their familiarity with Hebrew techniques and the unique incorporation of elements. It provides insights into the evolution of Classical Syriac Poetry and contributes to our understanding of Biblical and Syriac poetry.

Keywords: Peshitta; Syriac Psalm poetry; strophic structure; translation technique; Biblical Hebrew poetry; sound figures.

Introduction

The Psalter, found in both the Masoretic Text (MT) and the Peshitta (P), is recognised as having been received in the form of manuscripts written by the final scribes who concluded the book (Carbajosa 2008:1). The term 'Peshitta' refers to the Syriac rendition of the Old Testament, which was labelled as the 'simple or plain version' by the Syriac church at a later stage (Carbajosa 2016:262; Fischer 2014:136; Tov 2012:151; Weitzman 1999:2; Würthwein 1988:85). In the 2nd century AD, the Psalms were translated from their original Hebrew source into the Syriac vernacular as part of the broader Syriac translation of the Bible (Carbajosa 2008:22; Dirksen 1993:23–25; Joosten 2013:76; Weitzman 1999:1–2).

It is widely assumed that the Syriac Bible Peshitta (P) draws its origins from the pre-Masoretic Hebrew text, which is characterised by its absence of vocalisation and its tendency to be somewhat erratic (Carbajosa 2008:2; Gelston 1987:192–193; Haefeli 1927:7). Bloch (1922:104) believes that the consensus reached by scholars who have meticulously examined the Peshitta of the Old Testament is that it unequivocally represents a direct rendition from the Hebrew source, albeit not consistently aligning with the contemporary MT in every aspect.

The observation that deserves particular attention is the limited and insufficient scholarly focus on the ancient Syriac rendition of the Bible, despite its significant historical value. This version, because of its profound age, stands as one of the most invaluable resources in the pursuit of ascertaining the original Bible text that has not been changed or added to.

Note: Historical Thought and Source Interpretation.

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Recently, a large number of studies on the Peshitta translation have been conducted, among which the Peshitta Psalms (P-Ps) has been largely disregarded. The first comparative analysis of P-Ps was conducted by F. Baethgen (1878–1882), comparing P-Ps with the MT and other versions.¹ B. Oppenheim (1982) examined Psalms 107–150 and compared P-Ps with MT, Septuagint (LXX) and Targum (Tg).² J.F. Berg (1895) studied the influence of LXX on P-Ps and found a lack of uniformity. A. Vogel (1951) conducted a comprehensive analysis and found that P-Ps may reflect a Hebrew *Vorlage* different from MT but common to both.³ J.A. Lund (1988) disproved the theory that P-Ps displays a high degree of LXX influence. J.E. Eriksson (1989) compared only the Hebrew and Syriac texts and found discrepancies because of word order, copula addition and grammatical and syntactical reasons.⁴ Other scholars, such as Zimmerman, Barnes, Weitzman, Oliver and David, also contributed to the study of P-Ps. According to Carbajosa (2008:12), there are a few works that are primarily concerned with the influence of the Septuagint on the P-Ps (Berg 1895; Lund 1988; Rowlands 1939).

Carbajosa (2008) conducted a meticulous examination of 61 psalms. The analysis of the verbal systems in Psalms 73–89 in Biblical Hebrew and Classical Syriac was conducted by Moretsi (2018). Additionally, the researcher of this study authored a doctoral dissertation that examined a group of nine chosen Psalms with respect to their poetic translation approach. This investigation concentrated on analysing the strophic arrangements and poetic devices used in these Psalms (Vasheghanifarahani 2023).

In light of these previous studies, it is evident that the translation technique of P-Ps from a poetic standpoint has been disregarded. Hence, this survey aims to scrutinise Psalm 29 from this perspective.

This article presents an analysis of strophic structure, word repetition, sound figures and versification in the Syriac translation of Psalm 29, comparing them with their Hebrew counterparts. The study highlights the impact of these literary elements on the structure and poetic form employed in the Syriac text. The findings reveal similarities and differences in the use of word repetition, alliteration and versification between the two versions, shedding light on the translator's approach and the distinct characteristics of the Syriac interpretation.

1. Baethgen conducted a pair of research papers. The first focused on analysing the Peshitta Psalms, while the second examined their significance in terms of critiquing the Psalter's text. Baethgen's studies delve into the disparities between the Peshitta Psalms and both the Masoretic text in isolation and other historic translations.

2. This concise piece presents the unique characteristics of the P-Ps (Peshitta Psalms) when compared to the MT, Septuagint and Targum on a verse-by-verse basis. The author offers interpretations for each verse without drawing a final conclusion from the analysis.

3. This work comprises two distinct sections. The initial part investigates the correlation between the P text (Peshitta Psalms) and the MT, while the subsequent part delves into the connection between the P text and the Septuagint.

4. As stated by Eriksson, the majority of inconsistencies stem from variations in word order, the utilisation of the waw copula, elements that bear no impact on precision or alterations in semantic substance.

In this study, the utilisation of the BHS is employed for the MT, while the 'Leiden edition' is employed for the Peshitta (Peshitta Institute 1980). This investigation primarily examines four parts:

1. **Strophic structure:** The study's discoveries have identified specific indicators that effectively delineate strophes within the psalms. These indicators become apparent within the elaborate structure of the psalms, the core of their content and the uniqueness of their artistic expression. Providing such invaluable insights not only enhances one's comprehension of the psalms but also simultaneously offers a profound understanding of their intricate composition and multifaceted roles within psalmody. An examination of strophes in Syriac psalm indicates that elements such as word repetition, alliteration, inclusion, chiasmus, closure, syntactic arrangement, word pairs, thematic and semantic connections and parallelism all play pivotal roles in influencing the formation of psalm strophes.
2. **Word repetition:** This section explores the occurrence of word repetition in the Syriac translation and its parallelism with the Hebrew text. It highlights specific examples of repeated words and their impact on the overall structure and poetic devices employed. The analysis also includes a comparative table illustrating the frequency of word repetition in both languages.
3. **Sound figures:** The section delves into the use of sound figures, particularly alliteration,⁵ in the Syriac translation and its relationship to the Hebrew text. It examines the prevalence of alliteration in verses and different strophes, drawing attention to specific consonant sounds utilised by the Syriac translator and their potential significance in conveying poetic nuances. Comparative examples are provided to illustrate the variations between the two versions.
4. **Versification:** This section discusses the distinctive versification patterns employed in the Hebrew and Syriac texts. It highlights variations in the arrangement of cola within specific verses, emphasising the translator's deviation from strict adherence to the Hebrew versification rules.

The Syriac text

The text of Ps 29, according to the Leiden edition and its translation into English, is as follows:⁶ The Roman numbers refer to the strophes, which will be explained further in Figure 1.

5. Watson (1984:225). Watson differentiates between consonant alliteration and vowel alliteration. However, it is important to note that this study does not encompass the entirety of alliteration, as Watson suggests. Instead, it focuses solely on the initial consonants that are identical or similar in the word. Additionally, Margalit (1979:57–80) identifies two variations of alliteration: constitutive and ornamental. The former is considered essential in poetry, while the latter is not obligatory. Alonso Schökel (1988:22) defines alliteration as the repetition of consonantal sounds at the start of words.

6. The English translation is according to Taylor, Kiraz and Bali (2020) but has been modified occasionally.

The second strophe comprises verses 3–4 because of the recurrence of קול ‘voice’ in cola 3a, 4a and 4b. Once again, the divine name appears in verses 3a, 3c, 4a and 4b. The repeated phrase קול יהוה ‘the voice of Yhwh’ forms a framing element for the strophe in verses 3a and 4b. Additionally, the repetition of מים [waters] frames verse 3. Furthermore, both verses exhibit synonymous parallelism.

The third strophe, encompassing verses 5–7, draws attention to the phrase יהוה קול ‘the voice of Yhwh’ in verses 5a and 7, establishing an inclusion that highlights the strophe’s significance. Moreover, the phrase שבר ארזים ‘to break cedars’ is reiterated twice in verse 5, while the term לבנון ‘Lebanon’ is repeated in cola 5b and 6b. Like the preceding strophe, this one also displays synonymous parallelism, except for verse 7, which lacks a direct counterpart.

The fourth strophe consists of verses 8–9, primarily because of the reiterated phrase יהוה קול ‘the voice of Yhwh’ at the outset of verses 8 and 9. This repetition is accompanied by the recurrence of מדבר ‘wilderness’ and יחיל ‘he makes tremble’ in cola 8a and 8b. The initial two bicola exhibit synonymous parallelism, although the final colon 9c deviates from the parallel structure, akin to the pattern observed in the preceding strophe.

The fifth strophe, encompassing verses 10–11, is emphasised by the recurring appearance of יהוה in each colon, wherein the divine name forms an inclusive element. The dual usage of עמו ‘his people’ in cola 11a and 11b contributes to the repetitive structure. Both bicola are meticulously crafted synonymous verses.

It is evident that the Syriac translator is well-acquainted with the strophic markers utilised in the Hebrew original. These markers are employed in a distinct manner in the Syriac version, strategically adapting to the context to demarcate the text into strophes.

Word repetition

The investigation reveals that the Syriac translator follows Hebrew choice of vocabulary. Therefore, אָבֹהּ ‘bring’ in verses 1a, 1b and 2a renders הַבּוֹ ‘bring’ with the highest number of occurrences (18 times) in verses 1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, 3a, 3c, 4 (2x), 5a, 5b, 7, 8a, 8b, 9a, 10a, 10b, 11a and 11b. יהוה בְּנֵי, אָבֹהּ (adjective and noun) ‘sons’ in verses 1a and 6b, בְּנֵי בְּנֵי (adjective and noun) ‘honour and, glorious and praise’ in verses 1b, 3b, 4 and 9b, כְּבוֹד מֶלֶךְ ‘voice’ in verses 3a, 4 (2x), 5a, 7, 8a and 9a, קוֹל מַיִם ‘waters’ in verses 3a and 3c, אֲרִזִּים ‘cedars’ in verses 5a and 5b, אֲרִזִּים, לְבָנוֹן ‘Lebanon’ in verses 5b and 6a, לְבָנוֹן מֵדְבָר ‘tremble’ in verses 8a, 8b and 9a, יַחִיל מִדְבָּר ‘desert’ in verses 8a and 8b, מְדַבֵּר עַמּוֹ ‘his people’ in verses 11a and 11b.

Although the Syriac text follows the Hebrew word order and provides Syriac equivalents, in some cases it deviates from repetition. For example, this avoidance

TABLE 1: The frequency of repetition.

Hebrew text	Syriac text
הבו (1a, 1b, 2a)	ܐܘܒܗܘܐ (1a, 1b, 2a)
יהוה (1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, 3a, 3c, 4 2x, 5a, 5b, 7, 8a, 8b, 9a, 10a, 10b, 11a, 11b)	ܝܗܘܗܘ (1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, 3a, 3c, 4 2x, 5a, 5b, 7, 8a, 8b, 12 ^{9a} , 10a, 10b, 11a, 11b)
מים (1b, 2a)	ܡܝܢܐ (1b, 2a)
בן (1a, 6b)	ܒܢܐ (1a, 6b)
אל (1a, 3b)	
כבוד (1a, 2b, 3b, 9c)	ܟܒܘܕܐ (1a, 3b, 4, 9b)
עז (1b, 11a)	
הדר (2b, 4b)	
קול (3a, 4a, 4b, 5a, 7, 8a, 9a)	ܩܘܠܐ (3a, 4 2x, 5a, 7, 8a, 9a)
מים (3a, 3c)	ܡܝܢܐ (3a, 3c)
שבר (5a, 5b)	ܫܒܪܐ (4, 11a)
ארזים (5a, 5b)	ܐܪܝܙܐ (5a, b)
לבנון (5b, 6a)	ܠܒܢܘܢܐ (5b, 6a)
יחיל (8a, 8b, 9a)	ܝܚܝܠܐ (8a, 8b, 9a)
מדבר (8a, 8b)	ܡܕܒܪܐ (8a, 8b)
ישב (10a, 10b)	
עמו (11a, 11b)	ܥܡܘܗܘܐ (11a, 11b)
89 words and 57 repetitions of 16 words	88 words and 50 repetitions of 13 words

of repetition occurs in verses (1a, 3b), (1b, 11a), (2b, 4b), (5a, b) and (10a, b). Because of a different reading, the Syriac translation varies in colon 1b (ܐܠܝܡ instead of ܐܠܝܡ), uses ܐܠܝܡ for ܐܠ in colon 3b and renders ܥܘܢ in verses 1b and 11a with two different words ܐܠܝܡ and ܐܠܝܡܐ. In verses 2b and 4, the Syriac translator chooses ܐܠܝܡܐ and ܐܠܝܡܐ for הדר, הדר and ܐܠܝܡܐ in verses 5a and 5b for שבר, and ܐܠܝܡܐ and ܐܠܝܡܐ in verses 10a and 10b. Nonetheless, the Syriac text in verses 4 and 11a interprets two different Hebrew words ܐܠܝܡܐ and ܐܠܝܡܐ with a single word ܐܠܝܡܐ. Likewise, in verses 1b and 2a, the Syriac translator uses ܐܠܝܡܐ for ܥܘܢ and ܐܠܝܡܐ. The Syriac translator carefully considered the Hebrew context. He often selected Syriac words that are more contextually fitting than their literal equivalents in Hebrew to make the translated text as precise and readable as possible. The Syriac text is characterised by a lower frequency of repetitive words as compared to the Hebrew text. Table 1 illustrates the frequency of repetition of Hebrew and Syriac words.

Sound figures

As for the sound figures and especially the alliteration, the five-fold ܐ-alliteration at the beginning of cola 1a, 1b and 2a (ܐܘܒܗܘܐ) and in cola 1b and 2a (ܐܠܝܡܐ) highlights the strophe. Word repetition has a strong impact on the alliteration in this strophe. As for the Hebrew text, five-fold ה alliteration in verses 1a, 1b, 2a and 2b, accompanied by a small alliteration of consonants ܟ in cola 1b and 2a and ܩ in colon 2b, characterises the first strophe. Similar to the Syriac text, the word repetition influences alliteration. The consonant ה occurring 13 times adds vibrancy to the Psalm in the Hebrew strophe, building, unlike in its Syriac counterpart, an inclusion in cola 1a and 2b. The results show that the Hebrew

12. Carbajosa (2008:70) holds that the translation of the divine name exhibits a discernible pattern in P-Ps. Typically, it employs the term ‘יהוה’ to render both ‘יהוה’ (or ‘יהוה’) and ‘יהוה’ (or ‘יהוה’), and it uses ‘ܐܠܝܡܐ’ to translate ‘יהוה’ or ‘יהוה’.

first strophe benefits slightly more from alliterative structure than its Syriac counterpart.

The phenomenon is equally vital in the second strophe where the seven-fold alliteration of \aleph in cola 3a, 3c (2x, 2x), 3b (3x) and 4 (2x) underscores the strophe. Accordingly, the Hebrew strophe draws attention, because of \aleph identically at the beginning of cola 3a, 4a and 4b, altogether with and κ in cola 3b and 4a. Besides, consonant η with the four instances of alliterative use causes the second strophe to be remarkable. A significant feature in the Hebrew and Syriac texts is that both the Hebrew and Syriac texts are characterised by inclusion through the consonants \aleph and μ in vv. 3 and 4. There is no doubt that the Syriac strophe is far less alliterative than the Hebrew text.

The triple \aleph alliteration in cola 5a and 5b (2x, 2x), followed by consonants κ and ν in cola 5a, 5b (2x), 6a and 6b (2x, 2x) represents the sound plays in the third strophe. A triple ν in cola 5b (3x) and 6b (3x) adds more colour to the strophe. As for the Hebrew text, through the specific use of consonant \aleph in cola 5a and 7, the third strophe is characterised by inclusion; the feature is absent from the Syriac strophe. In addition, the four-fold \aleph alliteration in cola 5a (4x), 5b (4x) and 7 (4x) along with ν in colon 6a (4x) emphasises the strophe.

The fourth strophe stands out for its ten-fold \aleph alliteration in cola 7 (10x), 8a (10x), 8b (10x) and 9a (10x). The four-fold μ alliteration in cola 7, 8a, 9a (4x) and 8b (4x) along with ν in colon 9b (4x) emphasises the fourth strophe. The Hebrew authors also highlight the fourth strophe through five-fold \aleph and κ alliteration. In the Hebrew text, eight-fold ν alliteration in cola 8a, 8b (8x), 9a (8x) and 9b (8x) underscores the strophe. Again, it is clear that alliteration has been influenced by word repetition.

The fifth strophe with a six-fold \aleph alliteration in cola 10a (6x), 10b (6x), 11a and 11b (6x), particularly at the beginning of cola 10a, 11a and 11b highlights the strophe. As for Hebrew, an eight-fold ν alliteration in cola 10a, 10b (8x), 11a (8x) and 11b (8x) underscores the strophe. It is notable that consonants \aleph and ν specifically form inclusion in both the Syriac and Hebrew strophes.

Accordingly, both versions exhibit significant word repetition and alliteration. In both texts, alliteration and word repetitions serve as strophic markers. In both texts, alliteration and word repetition occur at different rates; the Hebrew text generally outperforms the Syriac text. As revealed, the two texts have distinct soundscapes, and the Syriac version is more focused on the \aleph consonant, particularly in the fourth and fifth strophes. The presence of other consonants is minimal in comparison. It should be noted that the Hebrew text also attests to specific soundscapes, among which consonants η

and ν seem to be more prominent. There are some inclusions caused by consonants in both texts, but the Hebrew text is definitively more prominent than the Syriac version.

Versification

The earliest manuscripts of the Bible likely consisted of a basic form of organising meaning, either through straightforward open and closed sections, or potentially without any divisions at all. As interpretive practices evolved over successive generations, the indication of smaller units (verses) gradually emerged. This began with oral transmission and was later solidified in written records. Determining the precise timing and origin of the practice of dividing verses presents a particularly intricate challenge. The origin of verse divisions can be traced back to the ancient tradition of orally reciting scriptures. The scribes responsible for transcribing Hebrew and Aramaic biblical texts from the Judean Desert refrained from marking minute verses, not because the concept was unknown, but because it initially existed solely in oral form (Tov 2015:127–128).

In this study, it was found that the versification often differs between the Hebrew and Syriac psalms. The analysis of P-Ps shows that the Syriac translator did not follow any strict rules in versifying the translated text. As per the experimental setup of the Syriac rendition following the Hebrew versification, the Syriac text will exhibit certain variations evident in verses 4 and 9. If it had been arranged according to the Hebrew text, verses 4 and 9 would have been composed of a bicolon and a tricolon, respectively. It is highly likely that the Syriac translator did not have any accentuated Hebrew manuscript as *Vorlage*, and it was perhaps even not stichometric – this relativises the finding that Syriac verses do not always follow Hebrew text, as we know from MT. According to Tov (2015:325–336), it is his belief that the way poetic manuscripts are laid out in terms of lines (stichographic configurations) reflects how scribes understood the structure of the poetry. However, the extent to which these arrangements truly capture the exact intentions of the original poets remains unclear.

Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that the Peshitta version of Psalm 29 maintains a word order that closely mirrors that of the MT Hebrew text. The translator exhibited a comprehensive grasp of the Hebrew original, resulting in a translation that balanced fidelity to the source while also achieving aesthetic elegance. The Syriac rendition incorporates numerous poetic elements, implying the translator's awareness of strophic arrangement, word repetition, alliteration and various other poetic traits utilised by Hebrew scribes. Nevertheless, it is evident that the Syriac translator employed these features in a slightly distinct and autonomous manner.

This investigation demonstrated that the Syriac text displays a lower frequency of alliteration compared to the Hebrew text. Similarly, despite the prevalence of word repetition in Psalm 29, it is less pronounced in the Syriac version than in

the Hebrew. Nonetheless, the Syriac text still possesses poetic characteristics that readers can find appealing. Overall, the Hebrew text, however, proves more adept at constructing a poetic framework.

When discussing the art of composing verses, it is evident that the Syriac approach to verse composition closely corresponds to the Hebrew method in most instances. However, there are exceptions in verses 4 and 9, where there is a divergence in the pattern. Regarding the arrangement of poetic strophes and their indicators, the Syriac version appears to acknowledge the established strophic arrangement found in the Hebrew text, while adapting the Syriac rendition according to the personal preferences of the author.

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