Reassessing the Scholarly Case Against the Cochin Hebrew New Testament Manuscripts

Jeff Brannon

The Way Remnant

Preprint: Part I of two. Draft posted for comment; not yet submitted for formal review. The detailed source-collation of Revelation is reserved for a companion study (Part II, in preparation). Comments and corrections are welcome.

Abstract

This paper reassesses recent scholarly critiques of the Cochin Hebrew New Testament manuscripts (Cambridge University Library MSS Oo.1.16 and Oo.1.32) and argues that the prevailing conclusion, that the entire collection consists of eighteenth-century translations from European and Syriac sources, rests on a methodological overreach: it treats a textually composite collection as a single literary witness. This paper does not claim that any book in the collection preserves an apostolic Hebrew autograph, nor that the collection as a whole escapes the charge of translation. It advances the narrower and more defensible claim that translation dependence must be demonstrated book by book with positive, source-specific evidence, and that for at least one book, Revelation, such a demonstration has not yet been completed. Preliminary collation suggests that the Cochin Revelation is textually mixed; a full reading-by-reading study is reserved for a companion paper. The strongest available position is that the corpus is textually mixed and that the case against its entirety remains, at present, unproven.

Introduction

Recent scholarship increasingly argues that the Hebrew New Testament manuscripts recovered from Cochin, India, are eighteenth-century translations derived from European and Syriac sources. The authorities most frequently cited for this conclusion include Franz Delitzsch (1813–1890), Mascha van Dort (2023, 2025), and researchers associated with the Van Rensburg position. These scholars have made substantial contributions, and the present paper does not dispute that some portions of the collection are demonstrably late translations. Van Dort's reconstruction in particular, that the manuscripts were produced in mid-eighteenth-century Cochin for Ezekiel Raḥabi, with Leopold Immanuel Jacob van Dort drawing on Luther's German Bible and the Dutch *Statenvertaling*, is well supported for the books to which it has been applied.

The disagreement is therefore not about whether translation activity occurred in the eighteenth century; it plainly did. The disagreement is about the *scope* of that conclusion. A careful reading of the evidence supports a more cautious result than the critical literature generally states: some books within the Cochin collection show clear signs of translation dependence, while others have not been shown to share that origin. That distinction is not

a defense of authenticity; it is a demand that each book be weighed on its own evidence rather than absorbed into a verdict reached about the collection as a whole.

Two clarifications frame what follows. First, the mainstream presumption of Greek priority for the New Testament is not an arbitrary axiom; it is an inference from a very large body of evidence, including the Greek manuscript tradition from the second century onward and the citations of the Greek Fathers. Any argument that resists that presumption for particular books must do so with positive evidence, not merely by labeling the presumption a bias. Second, the conclusion that the Cochin books are translations is not the property of a single camp committed to Greek priority; it has also been reached from explicitly Hebraic-priority commitments, a line of argument examined in the companion study. An honest reassessment must engage that fact rather than characterize all opposition as the product of a single assumption.

I. The Methodological Problem: Treating the Collection as a Single Witness

The central weakness in many critiques of the Cochin manuscripts is the inference that because portions of the collection exhibit translation dependence, all portions must share that origin. Van Dort argues that the Hebrew New Testament was translated using both Luther's German Bible and the *Statenvertaling*, that Leopold Immanuel Jacob van Dort played a significant role in producing it, and that the work was commissioned by Ezekiel Raḥabi in the eighteenth century. Even granting these conclusions in full, they establish only that *the books to which the analysis was applied* were translated in that period from those sources. They do not establish that every textual unit bound within the same codices originated at that time or from those exemplars.

This is not special pleading; it is ordinary text-critical practice. Critics routinely evaluate individual books, sections, and readings independently, precisely because a single codex can transmit materials of different ages and ancestries. The discovery that one section reflects eighteenth-century translation activity does not settle the history of every section preserved alongside it. The burden, therefore, remains on the critic to demonstrate translation dependence book by book, rather than to assume it for the corpus on the strength of a result obtained for part of it.

II. Franz Delitzsch and the Limits of Nineteenth-Century Conclusions

Delitzsch remains an important historical witness, but his conclusions must be read within the limits of nineteenth-century scholarship. He worked before modern digital manuscript comparison, large-scale linguistic databases, computer-assisted textual analysis, and much of the historical information now available about the Cochin Jewish communities, and his work predates the recent provenance investigations by more than a century. His observations retain real value, but they cannot function as the final authority on questions

that require evidence unavailable in his lifetime. To appeal to Delitzsch alone is to argue from authority rather than from the manuscripts.

III. Historical Provenance Does Not Determine Textual Origin

A central claim of the critical literature is that the manuscripts were produced for Ezekiel Raḥabi and that Leopold Immanuel Jacob van Dort participated in their translation. Even if correct, this addresses *provenance* (who produced a copy, when, and why) rather than *textual origin*, the ancestry of the readings the copy transmits. The history of transmission repeatedly shows that later manuscripts can preserve substantially earlier readings; virtually every biblical manuscript now extant is younger than the text it carries. Establishing that a manuscript was copied, edited, or commissioned in the eighteenth century does not, by itself, establish that every reading within it originated then. The date of the artifact and the ancestry of its text are related but distinct questions, and the critical literature often collapses them.

IV. Circularity and Its Limits as a Rebuttal

Some critiques proceed by assuming Greek priority and then reading every divergence from the Greek as a translation error or secondary development. In its crudest form this is circular: (1) assume Greek priority; (2) interpret Hebrew–Greek differences as evidence of translation; (3) conclude that the Hebrew is translated because it differs from the Greek. Stated that baldly, the reasoning demonstrates nothing; it presupposes its conclusion.

Two qualifications keep this observation honest, and the present paper makes them explicitly to avoid overstating its own case. First, the inverse move is equally circular: assuming Hebrew priority and then reading every Semitic feature as a mark of originality assumes precisely what must be shown. Neither presumption can do evidentiary work on its own. Second, and more importantly, the circularity charge does not apply to arguments that do *not* begin from Greek priority. The conclusion that the Cochin books are translations has also been reached from Hebraic- and Semitic-priority commitments, on the view, for instance, that the Gospels render the Syriac Peshitta. Against such an argument the charge of Greek-priority circularity simply misses; its conclusion must be met on the textual evidence actually adduced, a task the companion study undertakes for Revelation.

The constructive form of the point is therefore not “critics assume Greek priority” but rather a demand placed on *both* sides: a claim of translation dependence must rest on positive evidence that specific readings can only be explained as renderings of a particular source language, and a claim of Hebrew originality must rest on positive evidence that specific readings cannot be so explained. The remainder of this paper holds the candidate book to that standard in principle, and illustrates it only preliminarily.

V. Distinguishing Revelation from the Remainder of the Collection

If the collection is to be evaluated book by book, the decisive question is whether any book resists the translation explanation that fits the rest. Revelation is the strongest candidate, and it merits independent examination for a reason that is often overlooked: its place outside the Syriac canon.

V.a The Peshitta-canon consideration

The Peshitta proper is a twenty-two-book New Testament that omits 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. Revelation falls *outside* that canon and therefore cannot be a straightforward rendering of the Peshitta. This cuts in the paper's favor only halfway. It removes the simplest translation hypothesis for Revelation, but it does not establish a Hebrew origin, because live alternative sources remain: the Harklean or Crawford Syriac versions that later augmented the Peshitta, the Greek itself, and the European Bibles (Luther's German, the Dutch *Statenvertaling*) already implicated elsewhere in the collection. A responsible argument for the distinctiveness of Revelation must therefore do more than note its absence from the Peshitta; it must exclude these augmented-Syriac and Greek alternatives by direct comparison, reading by reading.

V.b The standard of positive evidence

The strongest possible evidence for the distinctiveness of Revelation is not a general impression of Hebraic texture but a documented set of readings in which the Cochin text follows a distinctively Hebrew reading *against* every proposed source at once: against the augmented Syriac (Harklean or Crawford), against Luther's German, against the *Statenvertaling*, and against the Greek (Textus Receptus / NA28). A reading that agrees with a Hebrew witness while every candidate source agrees against it cannot easily be explained as a rendering of any of them, and it is exactly the kind of positive, falsifiable evidence that Section IV requires.

That standard needs one refinement, which the companion study adopts throughout and which is stated here because it bears on how such evidence should be read. An agreement with the Masoretic Text is decisive *only* where the Masoretic reading is not one the source text visibly alludes to. Where Revelation is itself quoting or reworking an Old Testament passage, a learned translator working from any source could reproduce the Masoretic wording deliberately; an MT-agreement at such a point is therefore consistent with both a Hebrew origin and a competent translation and discriminates between them no better than the feature-lists of §V.c. The positive evidence that genuinely discriminates must come from MT-agreements at points where Revelation carries *no* recognizable allusion. Assembling and weighing such readings is the work of the companion study; the present paper does not attempt it and draws no verdict from the single preliminary case noted below.

V.c Why general Hebraic-feature lists are insufficient

Advocates for these books commonly cite features such as the gapping of explicit subjects and objects, Hebrew wordplay, inverted word order, and catchword links between sections. These features are necessary conditions for a Hebrew text, but they are not sufficient to establish a Hebrew *origin*, because they survive translation from any Semitic source. A competent Hebrew rendering of an Aramaic Syriac text will reproduce much of this texture, as will a Hebrew rendering of the famously Semitic Greek of Revelation, whose author's Semitic idiom is widely recognized in mainstream scholarship. A feature that is equally at home in an original and in a good translation cannot discriminate between them. The argument of §V.b is therefore load-bearing in a way that the feature list is not, and the paper foregrounds the former and demotes the latter to corroboration.

V.d Revelation as a test case (preliminary)

The text in question is Revelation as preserved in Cambridge University Library MS Oo.1.16.2, a unit containing Revelation alone, in a semi-cursive hand. It should be distinguished from Oo.1.16.1 (Acts through Ephesians, in a separate block script, without Revelation), from Oo.1.32 (the fuller Cochin New Testament, which holds the Gospels, Acts, and Epistles but not Revelation), and from the later copy in John Rylands Library, Manchester, Gaster Hebrew MS 1616. Within the collection, Revelation survives only in Oo.1.16.2.

A preliminary collation of this manuscript is enough to show that its readings do not all run one way, and that is the only claim drawn here. At Revelation 6:8 the Cochin describes the fourth horse with the terms *barod we-omeṣ* (ברד ואמץ, "dappled and strong"), the vocabulary of the fourth chariot-team in Zechariah 6:3, where every proposed source (the Greek χλωρός, Luther's *fahl*, the Statenvertaling's *vaal*, and the Crawford/Harklean Syriac *yūrāqā*) reads "pale" or "green." Here, the Cochin diverges from all four candidate sources toward the Hebrew. At the three quotations of Psalm 2:9, however (Revelation 2:27, 12:5, and 19:15), the Cochin reads "lead, rule" (ינהג / מנהג), following the Septuagintal Greek that the Greek of Revelation also follows, rather than the Masoretic "break"; here it sits with the Greek tradition against the Hebrew. The textual facts in both directions are standard in the critical literature on Revelation and have been checked against the manuscript itself.

Neither reading is adjudicated here, and neither is offered as proof of anything; the 6:8 case in particular falls at a recognized Old Testament allusion, where, by the refinement of §V.b, agreement with the Hebrew does not by itself establish independence. The point is only the negative one that matters for this paper's thesis: the Cochin Revelation behaves in both directions at once, so no single-source model, neither uniform translation nor uniform Hebrew originality, accounts for it as it stands. That is precisely the result that licenses the reading-by-reading method argued for throughout, and it is the starting point of the companion study, in which the full collation, the candidate-source comparisons, and the contrary readings are treated at length.

VI. The Burden of Proof

The strongest scholarly position is neither that every Cochin book preserves an apostolic Hebrew autograph nor that every book is a late translation. The evidence presently supports a mixed verdict: some books show clear signs of eighteenth-century translation activity; Revelation, which lies outside the Peshitta canon, requires independent examination against the augmented-Syriac and Greek sources that remain once the Peshitta is excluded; and the collection should not be treated as a monolithic witness. The principal weakness in current critiques lies not in the historical data they assemble (much of which this paper accepts) but in the breadth of the conclusion drawn from it. The work of van Dort, Delitzsch, and related researchers may well establish the provenance of much of the collection. It does not, on its own, establish the textual origin of every book bound within these manuscripts. That gap is closed only by the book-by-book demonstration called for in Section V, preliminary indications of which, pointing in both directions, are noted in §V.d and pursued in full in the companion study.

VII. Conclusion

Modern scholarship has not yet demonstrated that every portion of the Cochin Hebrew New Testament originated as an eighteenth-century translation from European or Syriac sources. This paper claims no more than the evidence allows and rests its case on methodology, which is where the strongest rebuttal lies: translation dependence must be shown rather than assumed, each book must be weighed on its own readings, and linguistic evidence must be evaluated independently of prior commitments about the language of composition. For Revelation, that work is incomplete on both sides, and the preliminary collation reported here suggests a text that is mixed rather than uniform, diverging from every proposed source toward the Hebrew at some points and following the Greek tradition against the Hebrew at others. The detailed adjudication of those readings is reserved for the companion study. Until that work is finished, the case against the entirety of the Cochin Hebrew New Testament remains unproven; and, equally, the case for the originality of any single book remains undemonstrated.

References

[1] Mascha van Dort, “Commissioner, Purpose, Translators, Copyist and Age of the Hebrew New Testament of Cochin and the Qur’ān of the Library of Congress.” *Revue des études juives* 182, no. 3–4 (2023): 399–416.

[2] Mascha van Dort, *Analysis of the Hebrew New Testament and the Hebrew Qur’ān of Cochin, India*. ResearchGate, 2025.

[3] Mascha van Dort, *Leopold Immanuel Jacob van Dort, a learned Jewish-Christian Man from Dordrecht*. Zenodo, record 15398803, 2025.

[4] Franz Delitzsch, *The Hebrew New Testament of the British and Foreign Bible Society: A Contribution to Hebrew Philology* (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1883), the likely venue of Delitzsch's survey of earlier Hebrew New Testament attempts. For Delitzsch's specific assessment that the Cochin NT was translated by Raḥabi from the Peshitta, see W. J. Fischel, "Cochin in Jewish History: Prolegomena to a History of the Jews in India," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 30 (1962): 37–59; and Pinchas E. Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church: The Foundations of Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). On Delitzsch's Hebrew-NT project generally, see Eran Shuali, "Why Was the New Testament Translated into Hebrew? An Introduction to the History of Hebrew Translations of the New Testament," *Open Theology* 2 (2016): 511–522; and idem, "The Translation of the New Testament into Hebrew in the Eyes of Franz Delitzsch: Philology, Mission, Theology," *Wrocław Theological Review* 26/1 (2018): 85–96.

[5] Cambridge University Library, catalogue descriptions of MSS Oo.1.16 and Oo.1.32; for the codicological description and foliation see Stefan C. Reif, *Hebrew Manuscripts at Cambridge University Library: A Description and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Primary witnesses and editions referenced in §V.d (treated fully in the companion study):

[6] Cochin Hebrew Revelation, MS Cambridge University Library Oo.1.16.2, transcription and plates in Janice F. Baca, *The Scroll of Mysteries: Cochin Hebrew Revelation*, 2nd ed. (2024). Manuscript images reproduced from Cambridge University Library originals by permission.

[7] Masoretic Text of Zechariah 6:3 and Psalm 2:9 per *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Leningrad Codex, EBP. II B 19A); cf. the Aleppo Codex.

[8] Greek New Testament: Textus Receptus; cf. Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed.

[9] Martin Luther, *Biblia: das ist die gantze Heilige Schrifft Deudsch* (Wittenberg, 1545).

[10] *Statenvertaling* (Leiden, 1637).

[11] Crawford / Harklean Syriac Apocalypse: John Gwynn, ed., *The Apocalypse of St. John in a Syriac Version Hitherto Unknown* (Dublin/London, 1897); and *Remnants of the Later Syriac Versions of the Bible* (London, 1909).

[12] R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920).

[13] David E. Aune, *Revelation*, 3 vols., Word Biblical Commentary 52A–C (Dallas: Word, 1997–1998).

[14] G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).