

# The Origins of Reading the Aramaic Targum in Synagogue

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Modern research has devoted much time and effort to the origins of targumic literature. A number of studies have provided basic summaries of the research on this question.<sup>1</sup> Three focal questions regarding targumic literature have emerged, although the degree of connection among them is still unclear.

First, when were clear-cut formulations of targumic compositions written or edited? Early evidence of the existence of targumic material is now available.<sup>2</sup> Less clear, however, is the question of whether there were any set formulations of such material.

Second, when were the extant targumic collections composed? It is likely that even the earliest works so far known are not necessarily the original versions of such works. Undoubtedly some later material has been incorporated into them.

Third, when did the custom originate of reciting the Targum of the Torah in synagogue during the reading of the Torah portion? When did it become a regular part of the liturgy of the synagogue? On the one hand, it might seem that this custom could become prevalent only after the formulation of targumic literature. On the other hand, it is possible that this custom itself brought about the development of these very Targumim into the form that we possess, or at the very least initiated the process of development.

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1. The literature is extensive. For a basic summary, see A.D. York, "The Dating of Targumic Literature," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 5 (1974), 49–62.

2. Fragments of a Targum on Leviticus have been discovered in the caves of the Judean desert. See P. Benoit et al., *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* (Oxford, 1972), vol. 6, pp. 86–89. On a Targum of the Book of Job, see M. Sokoloff, *The Targum of Job from Qumran Cave XI* (Ramat Gan, 1974), and the bibliography there. Rabbinic sources also mention a Targum on Job from the end of the Second Temple period. See *Shabbat* 151a; *Ta'ate Sofetim*, addendum 2, Rieger ed., p. 577.

The Targumim of the Torah were used in the synagogue, and it might appear that they were initially composed in that connection. The Targum of the Prophets, however, could not have been composed exclusively for synagogue use, since only selections from the Prophets were included in the liturgy. Yet Targumim on these books were composed rather early — at the latest by the end of the Second Temple period.<sup>3</sup>

The present article will be concerned only with the third question, which is somewhat neglected in current targumic research. In dealing with the question of the use of the Targum in the synagogue, many scholars are content to cite the following teaching in the Jerusalem Talmud (jMegillah 4:74d) on “From whence is the Targum?”

[What is the biblical source for this custom?] Rabbi Zeirah [said] in the name of Rav Hananel — “And they read from the Book of the Law of God” [Neh. 8:8], this is the Bible; “clearly” — this is the Targum; “and they gave the sense” — these are the diacritical marks; “so that the people understood the reading” — this is tradition. Others say that these are the [halakhic] decisions. Others say that these are the beginnings of the verses.

Rav Hananel was of the opinion, then, that when Ezra (Neh. 8:8) read the Torah, the procedure was already that of a synagogue in the amoraic period. According to this tradition, the custom of reading the Torah together with its Targum belongs to the list of decrees and innovations supposedly dating from the period of Ezra the Scribe and the Restoration of Zion. Modern scholarship, of course, would hesitate to treat this tradition as real history regarding the origins of the custom. Certainly, the ascription to Ezra is not historically correct. Nevertheless, we might conclude from this source that the custom was rather ancient.

However, examination of a parallel to this tradition forces us to reconsider that conclusion. Genesis Rabbah 36:8 (Albeck ed., p. 342) contains the following comment on the verse “May God enlarge Japhet...” (Gen. 9:27):

From here [Neh. 8:8] we learn that a translation of the Bible is permitted. Thus the verse states, “And they read from the book of the law of God” — this is the Bible. “Clearly” — this is the Targum. “And they gave the sense” — these are the punctuation accents. “So that the people understood the reading” — these are the beginnings of the verses.

Obviously this is another version of the same teaching, but probably a version that — like Genesis Rabbah itself — was transmitted in the Land of Israel. On the other hand, the version in the Jerusalem Talmud is a Babylonian tradition which is mentioned in two additional sources. In the Babylonian Talmud,<sup>4</sup> the tradition is in the name of R. Ika bar Avin in the name of Rav Hananel in the name of Rav. Thus it is clear that the tradition is Babylonian in origin,

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3. See the literature mentioned in note 2. The tradition in bMegillah 3a considers the Targum of the Hagiographa to be late and not composed by Jonathan ben Uzziel.

4. Also in bMegillah 3a and bNedarim 37b.

since Rav and Rav Hananel are Babylonian sages.<sup>5</sup> This Babylonian tradition, then, was included in the Jerusalem Talmud.

As is well known, the tradition preserved in the Land of Israel was usually more dependable and closer in meaning to a source's original context than the Babylonian tradition, which had usually undergone some degree of embellishment and subjective development.<sup>6</sup> In any case, the context of Genesis Rabbah makes it clear that the reference is to the language of Japhet, i.e., Greek. The tradition does not, therefore, refer to the Aramaic Targum as part of the liturgy of the synagogue, but to the Greek version of the Bible used during study and homilies. Indeed, the passage in Nehemiah refers to a homily and not to the reading of the Torah. Thus, it is now clear that the ascription of the liturgical reading of the Targum to Ezra is far from certain. It could well be that originally the verse in Nehemiah was understood in an entirely different context.

The first sure references to the reading of the Targum in the Synagogue, as well as to details of the custom, actually date only to the period when the sages who had survived the Bar Kokhba revolt and the subsequent persecutions regrouped at Usha in Lower Galilee. The laws of the Targum in the Mishnah are for the most part found in Tractate Megillah 4:4–10. This chapter in general dates basically from the Usha period, as can be seen from the fact that the Ushan sage R. Judah b. Ilai is mentioned a number of times (4:6, 7, 10). (The tradition of the Yavneh sage R. Eliezer at the end of the chapter is not an integral part of it and seems to be an addendum.) The Ushan nature of the traditions found in this and related chapters is further indicated by tMegillah 4:27, which gives the comments of the Ushan sage and Patriarch Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel regarding "one whose clothes are ragged who may recite the Shema with its benediction." There is also a tradition relating to the use of the Targum at Kavul in Western Galilee,<sup>7</sup> connected to R. Haninah b. Gamaliel.<sup>8</sup>

An important rule regarding the manner in which a verse is to be translated in the Targum is related by the same Ushan sage R. Judah: "He who translates a verse in a literal manner lies, and he who adds [in his translation] blasphemes" (tMegillah 4(3):41). This reflects a period in which there was as yet no set or established text of the Targum. In bKiddushin 49a, the sages have difficulty with R. Judah's view, since they hold that there is an established text. This indicates the situation in Babylonia at the time in which the discussion of

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5. On Rav Hananel, see M. Margoliot, *Encyclopaedia on the Sages of the Talmud and the Geonim* (Jerusalem, 1943), p. 355 (Hebrew); *Yehusei Tannaim wa-Amoraim*, Maimon ed. (Jerusalem, 1963), pp. 382–385.

6. The preferability of the tradition of the Land of Israel has been discussed by many scholars. See, for example, S. Safrai, "Tales of the Sages in the Palestinian Tradition and the Babylonian Talmud," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971), 209–232. Its preferability, however, should not automatically be taken for granted and each individual case should be examined. This is also the case regarding the sources and traditions mentioned below.

7. tMegillah 4(3):35; bMegillah 25b. A.D. York, "The Targum in the Synagogue and in School," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 10 (1979), 74–86.

8. bNida 8b; mBava Batra 10:1; mKiddushin 3:4; mBekhorot 6:9 and additional sources. See also *Yehusei Tannaim*, Maimon ed., pp. 434–437.

this issue was edited, but does little to facilitate understanding of R. Judah's statement. Also in another place in bKiddushin 49a is a statement of R. Judah on the Targum and the reading of the Torah, indicating once again the Ushan basis for the custom of reading the Targum in the synagogue.

There are no clear-cut or realistic traditions or laws regarding the actual procedure of the reading of the Targum in the first century. At first glance it would appear that the Targum was mentioned in a tradition from the Second Temple period.

R. Eleazar b. R. Zadok said: "Thus would the people of Jerusalem act: he would enter the synagogue with the *lulav* in his hand. He would stand to translate [say the Targum] or to take his place before the ark; the *lulav* would still be in his hands. When he would stand to read the Torah or to bless the congregation, he would place it on the ground." (tSukkah 2:10)

This tradition, however, also appears in the Jerusalem Talmud and in the Babylonian Talmud,<sup>9</sup> but without mention of the translation or Targum.

The Targum is not mentioned in instances of communal gatherings where it would be expected. The following examples all predate the Usha period. The first example is the public or communal fast. The ritual included prayer, the reading of the Torah and a homily (*derashah*). Thus in Mishnah Ta'anit 2:1, it is related that the "eldest among them uttered before them words of admonition" and afterwards they "stood in prayer."<sup>10</sup> The reading of the Torah is not actually described, but was clearly an integral part of the ceremony. It would appear that the Torah was read in this instance without the Targum. Indeed, the Jerusalem Talmud even cites this as a precedent to show that the Targum need not be read on festivals, although the practice is recommended.<sup>11</sup>

The ritual described here is quite ancient, certainly from when the Second Temple still stood. For when the sages of Yavneh wanted to reintroduce certain aspects into the ritual, such as the blowing of the *shofar*, the opponents of this proposal answered: "Such was our custom only at the Eastern Gate and the Temple Mount" (mTa'anit 2:5). The custom of taking the ark into the city streets during the fast ritual (mTa'anit 2:1) also refers to an early period before there was an ark of the law in the synagogue, as would particularly be the case in the Second Temple period.<sup>12</sup>

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9. jSukkah 3:53a; bSukkah 41b and thus in all MSS that I have examined. The Jerusalem Talmud brings the *baraitot*. See S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshutah: Moed*, p. 865.

10. On the rituals and customs associated with the fasts, see I. Elbogen, *Prayer in Israel* (Tel Aviv 1977) p. 96. The custom of reciting the Haftarah on the fast days was introduced only at a very late period. See Elbogen, p. 132.

11. jMegillah 4:74d. See the comments of the amoraim there for the archaic nature of the halakhic ruling. They required repetition of the Targum in the case of mistakes, even in matters not necessarily of importance. It is difficult to determine, however, whether the reference is to legitimate mistakes or to a different tradition of the Targum.

12. The practice of carrying out the ark requires further study. In any event, it seems clear that this part of the ritual continued even after the ark became a permanent fixture of the synagogue.

Another public gathering where one would expect the Targum to be mentioned was the *baqbel* (“assembly”). This was the reading of the Torah by the king in the Temple on the evening that concluded the festival of Sukkot. The Targum is not mentioned in this instance either.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the ritual of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement included the reading of chapters from the Torah, but apparently not the Targum.<sup>14</sup>

Further evidence of practice in the Second Temple period is found in the New Testament. Luke 4:16–31 describes Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth. The passage mentions the reading of the Torah (v. 16), the selection from the Prophets or Haftarah (v. 17), the rolling of the scroll (v. 20) and the homily (v. 21). The Targum, however, is not mentioned or even hinted at. (The parallels in the other Gospels are somewhat fragmentary in this respect.) There is no reason to doubt that the description in Luke is “live” and reliable regarding its description of the manner of prayer and Torah reading in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

Acts 13:15 also describes the reading of the Torah, in this case in Antioch of Pisidia: “After the reading of the Law [Torah] and Prophets [Haftarah], the rulers of the synagogue sent to them saying — ‘Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.’” Thus the guests were invited to address the congregation in the form of a homily, after the reading of the Torah and the Haftarah. The mentions of the reading of the Torah and Haftarah are not necessarily in context and may be included only to present a more realistic description. Nevertheless, if the Targum was also known to be read in such a case, there is no reason for it not to have been mentioned. Thus, it would appear that it was not read in the synagogue at this time, whether in Nazareth (in the Land of Israel) or in Antioch of Pisidia (in the Diaspora) or probably anywhere else.

The homily and the Haftarah are often mentioned in the sources and traditions of the Second Temple and Mishnaic periods. Thus, it would seem that the fact that the custom of reading the Targum is not mentioned in sources of these periods cannot be simply a coincidence. With some caution I should like to propose that this custom began only in the Usha period.

Fragments of a Targum of Job, which was not even read in the synagogue, as well as fragments of a Targum from Leviticus have been discovered in the caves of the Judean desert. Talmudic traditions also mention a Targum of Job from the end of the Second Temple period.<sup>15</sup> The Targum itself was ascribed to early sages (bMegillah 3a). In describing the virtues of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai, Version B of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan (ch. 28) includes in his list of achievements the mastery of Targum: “It was said of Rabban Johanan ben

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13. mSotah 7:7; tSotah 7:13–16. See also the section dealing with the “king” in mSotah 7:8.

14. mYoma 7:1. The High Priest did not give a homily since the situation did not seem to warrant one. Perhaps he was also not capable of doing it. The Mishnah, however, states that he used to say: “More than what I have read is written here.” This may hint at a homily, or perhaps serves as an apology for the lack of one. It is also possible that there were priests who wished to use this statement as an introduction to a homily.

15. See above, note 2.

Zakkai that he did not leave a single part of the Torah which he did not study, and he studied Bible and Targum, *halakhot* and *aggadot*." The parallel tradition in Version A (ch. 14), however, reads: "It was said of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai that he did not leave Bible and Mishnah, Gemara, *halakhot*, *aggadot* and *toseftaot*." The Targum is missing from this list, according to the good manuscripts, as well as from the Babylonian traditions.<sup>16</sup>

The Targum does appear in the curriculum of R. Akiva: "And he studies Bible and Targum, midrash, *halakhot* and *aggadot*" (Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Version B, ch. 12). Once again, however, the Targum is not mentioned in the parallel tradition (Version A, ch. 6),<sup>17</sup> although the brevity of the parallel may have precluded the inclusion of all the elements of instruction. Most of these traditions are aggadic in nature and were formulated rather late, obviously influenced by the situation of their times. It is unlikely that these traditions reflect the early tannaitic period. It would appear, therefore, that targumic material was known in the Second Temple or early tannaitic period, but not as part of the synagogue liturgy. It served, rather, strictly as commentary on the biblical text. The synagogal usage dates, as suggested above, only from the Usha period.<sup>18</sup>

Kutscher has shown that knowledge of Hebrew was more widespread in Judea than in Galilee.<sup>19</sup> The Usha period marked the shift of spiritual primacy in the Land of Israel from Judea to Galilee, as the established spiritual centers of Judea such as Yavneh, Lod, Betar and Benei Berak were destroyed. There could thus be a connection between that shift and the use of the Targum in the synagogue liturgy, namely for the benefit of those worshippers whose knowledge of Hebrew was limited. Possibly there was limited knowledge of Hebrew in Galilee even before the Usha period, but then it was at this time that the problem was brought to the attention of the rabbinic hierarchy. Women and children, moreover, also frequented the synagogue, and women as well as men were required to hear the reading of the Law (Soferim 18).

This also explains why the custom of reading the Targum did not pertain to the ritual of the public fast days. This ritual seems to have been established at some time during the Second Temple period before the Targum was introduced into the regular synagogue liturgy. Even after it was introduced, the special ritual of the fast days was not changed. The absence of the Haftarah from

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16. Most of the MSS of Tractate Soferim 16:8; bSukkah 28a; bBava Batra 134a.

17. There is no reference to this story in the Babylonian parallels. See S. Safrai, *Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph: His Life and Teachings* (Jerusalem, 1971), pp. 10–11 (Hebrew).

18. It is also possible to claim that the Targum, as an integral part of the cultural and educational life of the people, appeared only in the Usha period. The documents from the Judean desert stem from the Essenes who, not being an intellectual movement, introduced this popular literature at an earlier time. This might explain why rabbinic sources include the — or a — Targum of Job in the list of works forbidden because they come from heretics (*minim*). Perhaps the Targum in question was forbidden as being of Essene origin. It is also possible that there was opposition to the writing of any part of the Oral Law, as has been suggested by a number of scholars, but this is hard to prove.

19. E.Y. Kutscher, *Studies in Galilean Aramaic* (Ramat Gan, 1976).

the latter ritual until a very late date<sup>20</sup> may have the same explanation. It has been suggested that the reason for not including the Haftarah in this ritual was to save time. However, the prayers and ritual of fast days were rather extended and much time was also taken up by the homily.

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20. See note 10 above.