PALESTINIAN TARGUM AND SYNAGOGUE MOSAICS

by MICHAEL L. KLEIN*

THE PALESTINIAN TARGUMS

The Targums—or early Aramaic translations of the Bible—have their origin in the synagogue, in a period when the Aramaic-speaking masses of Jewish people no longer understood biblical Hebrew, and had to have the weekly Pentateuchal reading translated into their vernacular. This is similar to the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Bible) which originated in the Greek-speaking Alexandrian Jewish community of the early Hellenistic period (3rd Century BCE).

The need for the Bible to be understood by the people continued to be felt throughout the centuries, in the advent of new conquests and shifts of Jewish population; and this found expression in Saadia Gaon's (882–942 CE) Arabic version, the popular Judeo-Persian translation, and even a late Yiddish (Judeo-German) rendition.

For biblical scholarship, the ancient Aramaic Targums are of particular interest, for a number of reasons:

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^{1.} For an introduction to the Targums and a general bibliography see M. McNamara, "Targums," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), pp. 856-861.

1) Theological. The various targums were never intended to be mere literal renditions of Hebrew scripture. Rather they were explanatory and interpretive—even to the extent of occasionally contradicting the original meaning of the Scripture.² The Palestinian Targums are particularly expansive in theological matters such as God's providence and direct intervention in the world,³ sin and the Day of Judgement,⁴ reward and retribution,⁵ God's "daily work schedule",⁶ the Messiah and End of Days,⁷

ארבע מפתחן דאינון מסירין ביד רבון כל עלמ[י]א ייי ולא מסרן לא למלאכא ולא לשרף מפתחא דמטרא ומפתחא דפרנסתא ומפתחי דקבריה ופתחא דעקרתא

"There are four keys retained in the hand of the Master of All Worlds, the Lord: which He has not given over neither to an angel nor to a seraph: the key to the rainfall, the key to sustenance, the key to the tombs (for resurrection) and the key to the childless woman (to bear children)."

4. Gen. 4:7.

הלא אן תטיב עובדך בעלמא הדין ישתרי וישתבק לך בעלמ[א] דאתי ואין לא תיטב עובדך בעלמא הדין ליום דינא רבה חטאך נטיר...

"If you improve your deeds in this world it will be released and forgiven to you in the world to come; but if you do not improve your deeds in this world, then your sin will be kept for the Day of Great Judgement..."

5. Gen. 4:8.

ענה קין ואמר להבל לית דין ולית דיין ולית עולם חורן לית מתן אגר טב לצדיקיא ולית מתפרעה מן רשיעיא עני הבל ואמר לקין אית דין ואית דיין ...

"... Cain said to Abel: 'There is no Judge and there is no Justice; nor is there another world. There is no good reward for the righteous nor retribution for the wicked.' And Abel answered: 'There is a Judge and there is Justice....'"

6. Deut. 32:4.

אמר משה נבייא אנה חמית לרבון כל עלמייה ייי מפלג יומא ועבד יתה לארבע חלקין תלת שעין לעי באוריתה ותלת שעין יתב בדינה ותלת שעין מזווג זוגין בין גבר לאתתה ומרים וממך ותלת שעין מפרנס כל עלמא

"Said Moses the prophet: I saw the Master of All Worlds, the Lord, divide His day into four portions: three hours His toils in the study of the Torah (Law); three hours He sits in justice; three hours He makes matches between man and woman, raising and lowering the status of man; and three hours He provides sustenance for the entire world."

7. Exod. 12:42.

לילי רביעיא כד ישלם עלמא קציה למתפרקא נירי פרולא יתברון ודרי רשיעא ישתיצון ומשה יסוק מן גו מדברא [ומלכא משיחא מן גו רומא] דן ידבר בריש ענא ודין ידבר בריש ענא ודין ידבר בריש ענא ודין ידבר בריש ענה ומימריה מדבר ביני תריהון...

^{2.} This is not to give the impression that the translators were capricious. They generally fulfilled their task with great fidelity; see my article "Converse Translation: A Targumic Technique," Biblica 57 (1976), pp. 515-537.

^{3.} In the following notes (3-8 I shall give examples taken from the complete Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch, according to MS Neofiti 1. E.g., Gen. 30:22.

- 2) Textual-Biblical. With the discovery of fragments of three targumic texts at Qumran (4QtgLev, 4QtgJob, 11QtgJob) there is no longer any doubt about the existence of written targums as early as the 1st Century CE.8 Applying linguistic criteria, scholars have dated the composition of the Qumran targums to the middle of the 2nd Century BCE.9 Likewise, other scholars have dated passages in certain Palestinian Targums to that same period on the basis of allusions to historical events.¹⁰ Some of the Targums were composed in the pre-Masoretic period, i.e., before the rabbis made their final decision regarding the exact text to be authorized and transmitted, and before the suppression of all deviant mss. This was a period during which variant Hebrew texts of the Bible circulated freely and legitimately. Some of these non-Masoretic texts served as the Vorlagen (underlying originals) for translations; and while the deviant Hebrew texts were suppressed and eventually lost (some of which have been rediscovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls), their translations often survived in the Greek, Syriac, Samaritan and Aramaic Targum versions.
- 3) Linguistic. The Palestinian Targums are extremely important for the study of Western Aramaic. Some of the mss. from the Cairo Genizah¹¹ date back to the 8th-11th Centuries CE, and preserve a relatively pure dialect of Western (Galilean) Aramaic.¹² For some Christian scholars these texts have had special significance for although removed

[&]quot;... The fourth night (of vigil) shall be when the world reaches its fixed time to be redeemed. The iron yoke shall be broken and the generations of the wicked destroyed. Moses shall go forth from the wilderness and the King Messiah from the midst of Rome. This one will lead at the head of the flock, and that one will lead at the head of the flock; and His memra [i.e., the word of the Lord—a common targumic substitute for God Himself] shall lead between both of them...."

Note: All of the targumic references to the Messiah have been conveniently collected in S. H. Levey, *The Messiah*: An Aramaic Interpretation, (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1974).

^{8.} These finds confirmed the Talmudic statement about a written Targum of Job having been brought before Rabban Gamliel (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 115a).
9. E.g., M. Sokoloff, The Targum to Job from Qumran Cave XI, (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1974), p. 9.

^{10.} J. Heinemann, Aggadah and its Development (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), pp. 143-162 (Hebrew); and Idem. "Early Halakha in the Palestinian Targumim," Journal of Jewish Studies 25 (1974), pp. 114-122.

^{11.} A "genizah" is a room or a bin in a synagogue, which serves as a repository for old and worn holy books and documents. This was to prevent their being disposed of in a disrespectful way.

^{12.} E. Y. Kutscher, Studies in Galilean Aramaic, tr. M. Sokoloff, (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1976), pp. 3-4.

several centuries from the period of Jesus, their dialect may be closer to the *spoken* Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the 1st Century CE than that of the earlier Aramaic texts from Qumran that are written in a stylized *literary* dialect.¹³

In the general context of Semitic languages, the Palestinian Targums are important for completing the picture of Western Aramaic dialects which include Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Samaritan Aramaic.

4) Historical. I have already mentioned the historical allusions in the Targums to events of the Hasmonean period, which according to many scholars must have been recorded contemporaneously. On the other hand, some targums make reference to later events, such as the Destruction of the Temple (70 CE), in the past tense.¹⁴ Whereas some targums foretell the fall of Rome in a prophetic style,¹⁵ others refer to Constantinople by that name.¹⁶ One particularly late recension of the Palestinian

עידן דתתדכר, לן זמן קרבנינן דהוינן מקרבין קודמך בכל שנה ושנה והוון קורבנינן ... מכפרין לן על חובינן וכדון די גרמו חובייה לית לן מה נקרבה מן עדרי ענינן ... "When You recall for us the orders of sacrifices that we would offer before You, annually — our sacrifices atoning for our sins. But, alas, our sins have caused (the present situation, i.e. the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the cult) and we can no longer make offerings from our flocks of sheep."

15. Fragment Targums of Gen. 15:12,

דא היא אדום רשיעה היא מלכותא רביעיתא דעתידין למיפל ולא תהוי לה תקומה לעלמי צלמיו:

"That is the wicked Edom (= Rome), the fourth Kingdom that is destined to fall, and not to rise forever."

The first three kingdoms were Babylonia, Media and Greece.

Another similar passage is found in the Fragment Targums of Num. 24:19,

עתיד מלך למיקום מן דבית יעקב וישיצי כל מאן דמשתייר מן כרכא חייבא דא היא רומי:

"A King shall arise from the house of Jacob and he will destroy the remnants of the guilty city, which is Rome."

Interestingly enough, both of these passages are censored in the Neofiti Targum, which was last copied in Rome, in 1504.

16. Pseudo-Jonathan Targum of the same verse, Num. 24:19,

ויקום שליט מדבית יעקב ויוביד וישיצי שיזבותא דמשתייר מן קושטינטיני קרתא

^{13.} See J. A. Fitzmyer, The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave I, 2nd ed. Biblica et Orientalia 18A, (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971), pp. 19-25. Fitzmyer gives an extensive bibliography on p. 24 n. 61, and more recently, J. C. Greenfield, "Aramaic and Its Dialects," in H. H. Paper, ed., Jewish Languages: Theme and Variation, (Cambridge, Mass.: Association for Jewish Studies, 1978), pp. 34-36; and Idem. "Standard Literary Aramaic," Acts due premier congrès sémitique, (The Hague-Paris: Mouton, 1974), pp. 286-288 (English).

^{14.} Geniza MS F, Neofiti and the Fragment Targums of Lev. 22:27,

Targum (Pseudo-Jonathan) supplies the names of the two anonymous wives ttken by Ishmael, as Adisha and Fatima. Rabbinic tradition had always identified Ishmael with the Arabs; and it is hardly coincidental that these happen to be the names of one of Mohammad's wives and one of his daughters. What we have here, then, is a post-Islamic addition to the Palestinian Targum.¹⁷

5) Sitz im Leben. The birthplace of the Targums was the Synagogue, and there it received its official sanction. As a synagogal institution it enjoyed considerable authority, and the targumic translation of the more learned meturgemanim (translators) were cited as proof texts in legal discussions at the academies. As the targumic phenomenon became widespread, the rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud sought to control certain of its related practices, and also to prevent the public mistranslation of Scripture. They even prohibited certain verses from being translated at all. The rabbis also established strict rules in order to ensure the primacy of the original Hebrew verbum Dei, and to preclude the usurpation of that position by the Aramaic translations. For example, the Hebrew Pentateuch was read from a scroll one verse at a time. It

ויתיב במדברא דפארן ונסיב איתא ית עדישא ותרכה ונסיבת ליה אימיה ית פטימא אתתא מארעא דמצרים.

"And he (Ishmael) dwelled in the wilderness of Paran; and he took Adisha (= Ayesha) as a wife, but divorced her; and his mother (Hagar) then took Fatima as a wife for him, from the Land of Egypt."

[&]quot;A ruler shall arise from the House of Jacob, and he will ruin and destroy the surviving remnant of Constantinople, the guilty city..."

As it is well known, the name of this city was Byzantium until the year 330 CE, when Emperor Constantine I established it as his new capital.

17. Pseudo-Jonathan Targum of Gen. 21:21,

Ayesha, daughter of Abu Bakr, was Muhammad's favorite wife; while Fatima, one of Muhammad's daughters, was the traditional matriarch of the Fatimide dynasty. Once again, it cannot be mere coincidence that Hagar and the wife that she chose are both from Egypt, and that the Fatimides later established their capital in Cairo in the 10th Century CE. We might add that the identification of anonymous biblical characters is a common midrashic practice.

^{18.} E.g., Babylonian Talmud, Baba Qama 3b. ... כדמתרגם ר' יוסף...

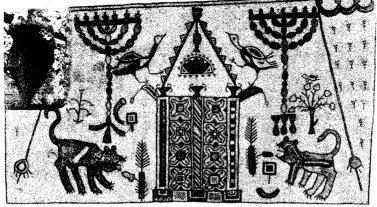
[&]quot;... As Rabbi Joseph translated (into Aramaic)...."

The discussion here revolves around the identification of a particular category of damages.

^{19.} Such as: Genesis 35:22,

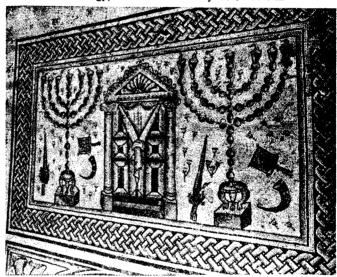
[&]quot;And Israel (= Jacob) dwelled in that land; and Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine; and Israel found out."

Likewise, the story of the Golden Calf in Exodus Chapter 32. These passages reflect poorly on the patriarchs, and were therefore not to be translated in the public reading.



Courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Bet Alpha



Hamat

top: Upper panels of synagogue mosaics with Ark of the Law and parochet (curtain), flanked by seven-branched menorahs and other ritual objects such as shofar, lulav, etrog and incense shovel

Photo Radovan, Jerusalem

right: Central panels of the floors, with Helios the sun-god driving an animaldrawn chariot. The twelve symbols of the zodiac, with Hebrew captions, form the surrounding ring. In the corners of the panels are the four seasons personified as women.

The Na'aran mosaic was defaced, presumably by ancient Jewish iconoclasts, who destroyed the human and animal figures, while leaving the Hebrew captions intact.

Na'aran (north of Jericho) Bet Alpha (in the Bet Shean Valley) Hamat (south of Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee)

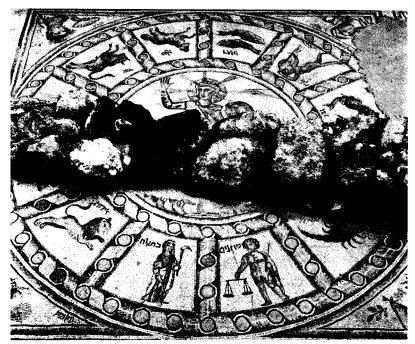


Photo Radovan, Jerusalem

Hamat



Courtesy of the School of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem



Photo Radovan, Jerusalem

Bet Alpha

Na'aran

was then translated *orally*, without reference to a written text, by the *meturgeman*, who had to be someone *other than* the original reader. The translation was to be recited in a lower voice than that of the reader. All these precautions were to ensure that the uneducated public not mistake the Aramaic translation for the original Torah.²⁰

The actual place of all this targumic activity is the many Roman and Byzantine-period synagogues that have been discovered and excavated in Israel during the past 125 years. The nearly 100 synagogues which are spread over the entire country — Mediterranean coast, Mt. Carmel, Galilee, Golan Heights, Yarmuk Valley, Beth Shean Valley, Jordan River Valley, Dead Sea Basin, Hebron Hills, Gaza and the northern Negev — are an indisputable archaeological testimony to the continuous and flourishing existence of Jewish communities in Palestine through at least the 7th Century CE.²¹ It is, no doubt, in these very synagogues, and during these centuries that the Palestinian Targums were recited and ultimately recorded.

THE SYNAGOGUES

The Roman-Byzantine synagogues have been categorized into three architectural types: a) the monumental stone basilica with the flagstone pavement; b) the broadhouse with either flagstone or mosaic pavement, and c) the modest simplified basilica structure with an elaborate mosaic floor.²² That these architectural types correspond to a chronological sequence, as had long been assumed, has recently come under question. The recent discovery of several late 4th Century coins under the flagstone floor of

^{20.} Some of these rules are set out in the Mishnah, Megillah Chapter 4, (corresponds to Ch. 3 in the printed Talmuds), and in greater detail in the Tosefta of Megillah Chapter 4 (3).

^{21.} See S. J. Saller, A Revised Catalogue of the Ancient Synagogues of the Holy Land (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1969). A number of additional synagogues have been discovered during the past decade, and are to be added to Saller's list, e.g. Ein Gedi on the Dead Sea, Sussiya in the Hebron Hills, Gaza on the Mediterranean coast, Magdala on the Sea of Galilee and Sham'a in the Upper Galilee. Professor Joseph Naveh of the Hebrew University has recently published a complete collection of Aramaic and Hebrew inscriptions from the ancient synagogues in his book On Stone and Mosaic, (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1978) (in Hebrew 1978). Also a new book on the subject by Hershel Shanks, entitled Judaism In Stone, has just appeared.

^{22.} For an exposition of this theory with diagrams, see M. Avi-Yonah, "Synagogues", Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society—Massada, 1978), Vol. 4, pp. 1129-1138, and his earlier article in Ariel no. 32.

the synagogue at Capernaum (on the west bank of the Sea of Galilee) has led its excavators to advance its date from the 2nd Century to the 4th Century CE.²³ Be this as it may, for our present purpose, we shall focus on the various synagogues with mosaic floors.

The best preserved and most famous of these mosaic floors were discovered at Hamat on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, just south of Tiberias, and at Beth Alpha in the Beth Shean valley. The synagogue at Hamat has been dated by its excavators to the 4th Century CE, while that of Beth Alpha is dated by its dedicatory inscription to the beginning of the 6th Century.

In both of these cases the mosaic of the nave is divided into three panels. The uppermost, nearest the front platform, depicts a Holy Ark flanked by two menorahs (candelabra) and other holy objects such as the palm branch, citron, ram's horn, and incense shovels. The central panel is comprised of a circle within a square. The corners of the square contain the figures of four women representing the four seasons. The outer ring of the circle displays human (some nude) and animal figures, symbolizing the zodiac. The center of the circle contains representations of Helios the sun-god in an animal drawn chariot, flanked by his entourage of moon and stars. In the floor of the Beth Alpha synagogue, the lower panel contains the biblical scene of the Binding of Isaac (Gen. 22); that of Hamat has only dedictory inscriptions and lists of donors. Several of the other synagogue mosaics contain human figures; for example the synagogue in Gaza depicts King David playing the harp and charming wild beasts (like Orpheus).

Most scholars have assumed that these pagan figures had lost their original significance by the time they were adopted as decorative elements in the synagogues. For example, Michael Avi-Yonah believed that:

"...the signs of the Zodiac with Helios in the center and the seasons in the corners, were divested of all idolatrous associations. Instead they were given specifically Jewish significance, so that the Zodiac itself, for instance, stood for the ordering of the Temple services throughout the year." 24

^{23.} V. Corbo, S. Loffreda, et al., La Synagoga di Cafarnao, dopo gli scavi del 1969 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1970); and an attempted defense of the original dating by G. Foerster; "Notes on Recent Excavations at Capernaum", Israel Exploration Journal 21 (1971), pp. 207-211; and Qadmoniot 4 (1971), pp. 126-131 (Hebrew).

^{24. &}quot;Ancient Synagogues," Ariel no. 32 (1973), p. 43. See also E. E. Urbach, "The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in the Light of Archaeological and Historical Facts," Israel Exploration Journal 9 (1959), pp. 296-297;

Edwin R. Goodenough, on the other hand, has argued for the borrowing of the symbols together with their original significance. In the light of the many early rabbinic condemnations of all image-making, Goodenough is led to the conclusion that the floors were commissioned by lay leaders of the community and executed by secular or non-Jewish artisans, without official rabbinic approval or sanction. Goodenough writes off the statements of rabbis who "did not object" to images in synagogues, as hardly a counterbalance to the thunderous denunciations of images in the early rabbinic literature.²⁵ Let us look at some of the literary passages in question:

ביומוי דר׳ יוחנן שרון ציירין על כותלייה ולא מחי בידון ביומוי דר׳ אבון שרון ציירין על פסיפסס ולא מחי בידון

"In the days of Rabbi Yohanan they began drawing figures on the walls (frescoes), and he did not protest against the practice."

"In the days of Rabbi Abin they began depicting figures in mosaic, and he did not protest against it." 26

Rabbi Yohanan was one of the most prominent rabbis of the third century. He lived in Tiberias and Sepphoris in the very period during which the earliest known synagogue frescoes (Dura-Europos) were painted. Likewise, Rabbi Abin II flourished in Tiberias during the 4th Century; and this passage might be a direct reference to the mosaic floor of the synagogue in Hamat. The historical importance of this text can hardly be overestimated. Perhaps the key to these rabbinic innovations lies in another statement by Goodenough:

"Symbols and religious experiences and values have a way of disengaging themselves from their original mythical explanations and going from religion to religion with old forms and values now given new explanations." 27

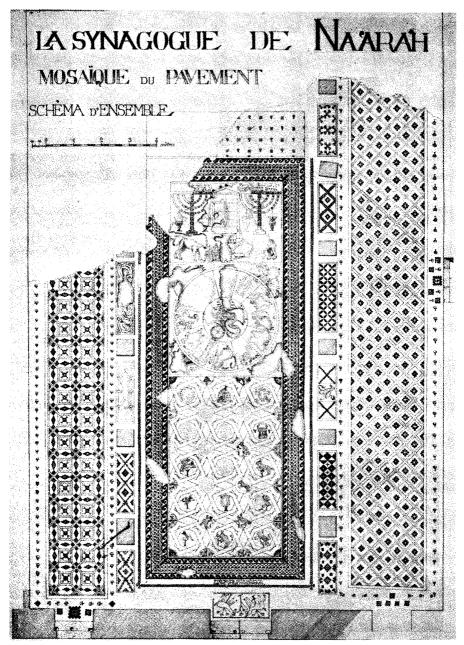
This would seem to be reflected in the following midrashic passages:

אמ׳ ליה הקב״ה כשם שהמזלות מקיפין אותי וכבודי באמצע, כך עתידין בניך להתרבות וחונים דגלים דגלים ושכינתי באמצע...

and more recently, J. H. Charlesworth, "Jewish Astrology in the Talmud, Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls and Early Palestinian Synagogues," *Harvard Theological Review* 70 (1977), pp. 195-196. (This issue of the *HTR* appeared in 1979, after the present article was completed).

^{25.} E. R. Goodenough, "Symbolism, Jewish (In the Greco-Roman period)," Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jerusalem, 1971), Vol. 15, columns 568-578; and his monumental work Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period (New York: Pantheon-Bollington Foundation, 1953-1965) 12 vols. + Index Volume 13 (Princeton, 1968). 26. Palestinian Talmud, Abodah Zara Genizah mss. published by J. N. Epstein, "Additional Fragments of the Jerushalmi," Tarbiz 3 (1931-32), p. 20.

^{27.} Encyclopaedia Judaica, Vol. 15, Col. 574.



Courtesy of École Biblique et Archéologique Française, Jérusalem

A schematic diagram of the pavement mosaic of the Na'arah (Na'aran) synagogue.

"The Holy One Blessed-Be-He showed Abraham all of the Zodiac (Hebrew: mazalot) surrounding his shekhina (Divine Presence); ... and said: just as the Zodiac surrounds Me, with My glory in the center, so shall your descendants multiply and camp under many flags, with My shekhina in the center," 28

The Helios figure no longer represents the pagan sun-god; it has been transformed into God's glory (kavod) or His divine presence (shekhina).

Although the problem of the pagan symbolism in the synagogue may have been solved by a transfer of significance, there still remained the more basic prohibition of the second commandment (Exod. 20: 4; Deut. 5: 8):

"You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in the heaven above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth."

Moreover, there is the following prohibition in Leviticus 26:1:

... ואבן משכית לא תתנו בארצכם להשתחות עליה...

"...You shall not place a figured stone in your land upon which to bow down."

These must have been especially troubling to the worshippers who, in praying, bowed down upon the mosaic floors containing forbidden figures.

In fact, there are indications of a Jewish iconoclastic reaction that set in some time after the 7th Century. At Na'arah, just north of Jericho, the human and animal figures of the mosaic Zodiac were removed in early times. Since the Hebrew and Aramaic captions and inscriptions were left untouched, the defacing is most likely to have been by zealous Jewish hands.

Fortunately, the iconoclasm was not universal, and most of the Byzantine-period synagogue figures survived. Rather than the mosaic floors being victim of a strict and literal application of Scripture; the Scripture was reinterpreted and harmonized with synagogal reality. This process is reflected in the Pseudo-Jonathan Targum to Lev. 26:1:

ייואבן מציירא לא תתנון בארעכון למגחן עלה ברם סטיו חקיק בציורין ודיוקנין תשוון... בארעית מקדשיכון ולא למסגוד לה...

28. S. Lieberman, *Midrash Debarim Rabbah* (Genizah ms.) 3rd ed. (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1974), p. 16. My friend and colleague Mr. Marc Bregman brought this reference to my attention.

"...and you shall not place a figured stone in your land, upon which to bow down; however you may place a mosaic pavement²⁹ impressed with figures and images in the floors of your sanctuaries (= synagogues) — but not for kneeling to it."

As mentioned above, the Pseudo-Jonathan Targum contains material that is definitely datable to the Islamic period. It would seem that the Targumic expansion of Leviticus 26:1 is intended to ward off potential iconoclasm, by reassuring the worshippers that as long as the figured stones in the synagogue floor are decorative or symbolic and not objects of worship, they are not in violation of biblical law. It is, no doubt, due to this flexible rabbinic interpretation, that the many magnificent synagogue mosaics survived the perils of religious fanaticism, and were buried in peace—to be retrieved and revived by archaeologists in the present century.

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^{29.} Aramaic: Sateya; from the Greek stoa, see M. Jastrow, Dictionary of the Targumim... (New York: Pardes, 1950), p. 972b.