CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DATE OF TARGUM PSEUDO-JONATHAN:
SOME COMMENTS*

Of the Targums of the Pentateuch, Pseudo-Jonathan (hereafter Ps-Jon) is most famous for its rich aggadic traditions and remarkable consistency and internal unity. It occupies a special place in Targumic studies, not least because it seems to bear a special relationship to Targum Onqelos (hereafter TO), the ‘official’ Targum of the Pentateuch sanctioned by Rabbinic authority. The nature and significance of that relationship have often been discussed; so, too, the character of Ps-Jon’s exegesis has occasioned important studies.1 In recent years, there has been a growing tendency for students to argue that this Targum is a very late text, produced in the eighth, ninth, or tenth centuries, or even later, probably as the work of a single author-compiler who drew heavily upon the Palestinian Targumim (PTgg), TO, and the traditions now preserved in late midrashim like the Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer (PRE).2 Some argue that Ps-Jon is dependent on PRE, and possibly also on other later works; and they attempt to discern an engagement with and polemic against Islam in many of its aggadic traditions.3

* The following editions of Targumim of the Pentateuch have been used: E.G. Clarke, in collaboration with W.E. Aufrecht, J.C. Hurd and F. Spitzer, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance (Ktav, 1984); A. Sperber, The Bible in Aramaic, vol. 1: The Pentateuch according to Targum Onkelos (Leiden, 1959); A. Díez Macho, Ms. Neophyti I, 5 vols. (Madrid and Barcelona, 1968–1978); M.L. Klein, The Fragment Targums of the Pentateuch according to their Extant Sources, 2 vols. (Rome, 1980).


Many different arguments and interpretations of the evidence are deployed in support of what seems to be a growing consensus of opinion. Most impressive is the detailed analysis of Ps-Jon’s traditions by Avigdor Shinan, whose major study of the Pentateuchal Targumim against their social, religious, and political background leads him to suggest that Ps-Jon is less of a Targum, more of an Aramaic ‘re-written Bible’.\(^4\) Among Shinan’s many important conclusions, his understanding of Ps-Jon as primarily a literary construction stands out clearly. In Shinan’s opinion, Ps-Jon lacks the characteristic features of oral transmission which, he argues, may be detected in the other PTgg: it is the work of a single author-compiler, who has systematically reworked a Targum whose text was akin to the other PTgg, expanding that text with aggadic traditions drawn very often from late midrashic works like PRE, and reworking the whole document in the light of TO. Ps-Jon’s internal consistency and occasional internal contradictions are further evidence of the author-compiler’s single-minded approach. Shinan adduces examples of folk elements and vulgarisms in the Targum: these, surely distasteful to the Rabbis, further serve to indicate the Sitz im Leben of our text, not in the public worship of the synagogue, but in the library of the collector of aggadah.\(^5\)

Other appreciations of Ps-Jon’s character and origins are, however, by no means impossible. Twenty-five years ago, Geza Vermes argued that much of Ps-Jon’s aggadic tradition was essentially ancient, even though there were indications that the text had been ‘modernized’ with the passage of time.\(^6\) He suggested that TO itself might have been based on an original Targum very similar to, or possibly identical with, the fore-runner of Ps-Jon. To some degree his argument was based upon Ps-Jon’s language, which by turns agrees now with TO against the PTgg, now with one or other of the PTgg against TO, now with no other Targum. After thorough analysis of the language, Vermes felt

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