CHAPTER NINE

JACOB’S SECOND VISIT TO BETHEL
IN TARGUM PSEUDO-JONATHAN*

The contribution which Geza Vermes has made to the study of the Aramaic Targumim needs no documentation. Indeed, he has been intimately associated with the revival of scholarly interest in these texts which began over forty years ago, and which shows few signs of losing its impetus. In considering the relationships of the various Pentateuchal Targumim to one another, Vermes has for long suggested the possibility that Ps-Jon., either in its present or some earlier form, constitutes the basis of Targum Onqelos: Ps-Jon. would thus, in essence, preserve material of great antiquity, even though its final redaction took place in the Islamic period. In recent years, however, it has become fashionable amongst students of the Targumim to regard Ps-Jon. as a late, literary composition, produced in the Islamic period as an anti-Islamic polemic. It is seen as depending on the Palestinian Targumim and late midrashic collections like the Pirqe deRabbi Eliezer (PRE) for much of its exegetical paraphrase, its language having been modified under the influence of the ‘official’ and authoritative Targum Onqelos.1

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In two articles which have been published elsewhere, we have argued that the case for a post-Islamic date for Ps-Jon. rests on very shaky foundations, and that the simple dependence of Ps-Jon. on late works like PRE is open to question. In this essay we shall attempt a different kind of exercise, undertaking an analysis of a chapter in which the Targum’s exegesis is, in places, very much sui generis. Ps-Jon. Gen. 35.1–15 has no points of contact with PRE, and Islam is nowhere in view. Even though this is the case, certain features in the text might seem, superficially, to indicate a late date. Whether such a view may be sustained can only be determined by careful comparison of Ps-Jon. with the other Targumim of Gen. 35 and with other interpretations of the chapter. We shall attempt to relate Ps-Jon.’s exegesis to that found in other sources, seeking, wherever possible, to uncover its particular purpose. Only then will the character of the Targum of this chapter begin to emerge, and some possible hints as to its relative dating.

We begin with a close investigation of those verses which show significant addition to, and alterations of, the Hebrew original, which we indicate in our translations by the use of italics.

Verse 2

And Jacob said to the men of his house and to all who were with him: Remove entirely the idols of the nations which are among you, which you took from the idols’ house of Shechem, and purify yourselves from the impurities of the slaughtered men whom you have touched, and change your garments.

Following God’s command that he go to Bethel and build an altar to the One who appeared to him when he fled from his brother (Gen. 35.1), Jacob orders his entourage to dispose of foreign gods and to purify themselves. The Bible clearly links Jacob’s second visit to Bethel with his previous journey recorded in Gen. 28 and, as we shall see, Ps-Jon. of Gen. 35.7 is keen to do the same. The Bible gives as a reason for this second visit Jacob’s desire to build the altar to the God
