CHAPTER ELEVEN

INCONSISTENCIES AND CONTRADICTIONS IN TARGUM PSEUDO-JONATHAN: THE CASE OF ELIEZER AND NIMROD

Since critical study of the Aramaic Targumim began, scholars have debated the date of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (hereafter PJ) and its relationship to the other Targumim of the Pentateuch. Those who consider this Targum an essentially ancient composition dating from Talmudic times or earlier have consistently been challenged by others, who regard PJ as having originated in the Islamic period.\(^1\) Scrutiny of the arguments adduced in support of an Islamic (or later) date for PJ, however, reveals them as not entirely convincing. So, for example, the alleged dependence of the Targum on *Pirqe de R. Eliezer* (= PRE) and other late midrashim is open to serious question; there are no solid grounds for believing that the Targum is aware of the Islamic conquests; and in places where its exegesis is very much *sui generis*, the Targum reveals concerns of the Talmudic period, or earlier.\(^2\) On the other hand, PJ displays apparent inconsistencies and contradictions which are cited as evidence of its Islamic or medieval date.\(^3\) Thus the Targum seems to offer inconsistent, contradictory, and even blatantly

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\(^3\) See A. Shinan, 'The “Palestinian” Targums—Repetitions, Internal Unity, Contradictions', *JJS* 36 (1985), pp. 72–87, and the discussions of this matter which follow.
mistaken accounts of Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, and Nimrod the wicked tyrant; whether this is truly the result of its alleged lateness, or whether other explanations are more probable, is the subject of this essay.

The difficulty and complexity of the verses which we have to discuss are themselves good reasons for dealing with these passages, and serve to indicate that oversimple solutions to questions which the Targum raises are unlikely to tell the whole story. So much, we believe, will become clear as we proceed.

1. The Story of Eliezer

The Targum first speaks of Eliezer in its rendering of Gen. 14:14. The Hebrew text, which has no reference to him, reads as follows:

And when Abram heard that his brother had been taken captive, he led forth (wyrq) his trained men, those born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued as far as Dan.

Difficulties here include the word wyrq, which may be translated in different ways. Furthermore, this is the only verse which refers to three hundred and eighteen servants of Abraham: there has been no preceding record of their birth, and they take no further part in the narrative of Genesis. Their appearance was bound to arouse comment, given that Abram’s household at this time was not renowned for its high birth rate.4 PJ has the following interpretation: deviations from the Hebrew text are italicized.

And when Abram heard that his brother had been taken captive, then he armed his young men [wzzyn yl ʿwlmy] whom he had trained for war out of those who had been reared in his house; but they were unwilling to go with him. So he chose from them Eliezer, the son of Nimrod, who in strength was likened to all of them, three hundred and eighteen; and he pursued as far as Dan.5

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4 See Gen. 15:2–3, with specific reference to Eliezer, and 18:11–15. The childlessness of Abraham and Sarah laid them open to Gentile taunts, according to the midrashim: see, e.g., Ber. Rab. 53:10; Deb. Rab. 1:25; and PJ of Numb. 21:34.
5 The following editions of Targumim of the Pentateuch have been used: E.G. Clarke, in collaboration with W.G. Aufrecht, J.C. Hurd and E. Spitzer, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance (New Jersey 1984); A. Sperber, The Bible in Aramaic, 1: The Pentateuch according to Targum Onkelos (Leiden 1959); A. Diez Macho, MS Neophyti I, 1, Genesis (Madrid-Barcelona 1968); M.L. Klein, The