CHAPTER TWELVE

RED HEIFER AND GOLDEN CALF:
DATING TARGUM PSEUDO-JONATHAN

Every student of the Aramaic Targum is aware of the problems and pitfalls which beset any effort to offer even an approximate date for the pentateuchal targum conventionally named Pseudo-Jonathan (hereinafter, PJ). The editor of this collection of essays, in a private communication to the writer, has stressed the growing need in targumic research for contributions which might attempt to offer a positive solution to the question of PJ’s date; and he is surely correct to suggest that scholarly attention now focus on items which might afford solid evidence to decide that question. Yet it would seem that many modern scholars feel, in fact, that there is sufficient evidence already to justify a reasonably confident dating of PJ in the Islamic period. It is because he is convinced that critical examination of this same evidence does not support the theories of these scholars, that the present writer has had, of necessity, to argue in some detail that they have yet to prove their case. Thus the question of PJ’s date presses more acutely upon us. If indeed it was not actually composed in the Islamic period, but by that time already existed as a complete text subject to the minor, random additions and alterations of copyists which have given it an Islamic


veneer, when did it come into existence? Can we begin to discover traces, at the very least, of its origins in the period before the rise of Islam?

One way of beginning to answer this query might be to try to determine the exact position of the targum in relation to a major halakic matter. It has long been known that PJ at times diverges quite sharply from accepted rabbinic rulings. If we can explain its peculiar interpretations of a difficult, disputed, and much debated matter like the red heifer (Num. 19:1–10), then we may discover fixed points from which to chart the targum’s relationship to other rabbinic writings. The red heifer was of cardinal importance when the Temple stood, and continued to occupy the finest minds among the tannaim and amoraim. PJ’s interpretation of the heifer, which was clearly of central importance to Jewish scholars, may lead us part of the way towards discovering the secret of its origins. This paper examines the targum’s treatment of the red heifer, and attempts to show how PJ’s individual understanding of this much debated yet vitally important ritual may yield pointers to the date of that targum’s origins.

As is well known, the Bible’s regulations about the heifer are only superficially straightforward. Close scrutiny of the text discloses a host of problems, many of which had long been under discussion before the Mishnah and talmuds sought to provide authoritative guidance in the shape of tractate Parah. We shall examine PJ verse by verse, noting in our translation its divergences from the original hebrew text by means of italics. It will be apparent that its solutions to the problems of the text many times correspond to those of the Mishnah and other authoritative sources; on many other occasions, however, the targum is startling in its individuality. God’s communication with Moses and Aaron at Num. 19:2 is presented thus by PJ:

This is the decree of the instruction of the law which the Lord has commanded, saying: Speak with the sons of Israel, that they take for you, from the heave-offering of the chamber, a red heifer, two years old, in which is no blemish nor trace of any other (color of) hair; on which there has not come up a male; and which has not been wearied by any burden

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4 So much is evident from the two volumes devoted to the subject by J. Neusner, *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Purities: Part 9, Parah Commentary, and Part 10, Parah Literary and Historical Problems* (Brill: Leiden, 1976). His description of the targumic handling of the heifer is to be found in Part 10, pp. 212–216, and will feature in our discussions below.