CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE MESSIAH “THAT LEADETH UPON A CLOUD,” IN THE FRAGMENT-TARGUM TO THE PENTATEUCH?

The image of the Messiah arriving with the clouds of heaven is not uncommon in rabbinic literature, and can be traced directly to Dan 7:13–14. For example, in the Midrash Tanhuma¹ we find: “Who is Anani [1 Chron 3:24]? He is the king the Messiah, as it is said: ‘with the clouds of heaven’ [Dan 7:13].”² Likewise, the Babylonian Talmud (b. Sanhedrin 98a) discusses the coming of the Messiah as follows:

R. Joshua b. Levi [3rd cent] pointed out the apparent contradiction: It is written “with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man” [Dan 7:13], and it is written [elsewhere] “humble and riding on an ass” [Zech 9:9]? [Answer:] If they are meritorious, “with the clouds of heaven”; if they are not meritorious, “humble and riding on an ass.”

It was, therefore, not considered at all unusual to find an apparent reference to this well-attested messianic image in one of the Palestinian Fragment-Targums of the Pentateuch. In fact, that source was considered so well founded in the tradition that other differing Palestinian Targums were often “corrected” on its authority. The following is the text as it appears in the first Biblia Rabbinica³ which contains the first printed edition of any Fragment-Targum. All subsequent editions of this targum in the various rabbinic Bibles are based upon this editio princeps.

Recently translated:

Moses shall go forth from the wilderness and the King Messiah from Rome. The one shall lead the way on top of a cloud and the other shall

¹ Ed. S. Buber (reprinted Jerusalem, 1964), Vol 1, p. 140 [Toledot, par. 20].
³ Venice, 1517–18 [Exod 12:42].
lead the way on top of a cloud, and the memra of the Lord shall lead the way between the two of them, and they shall proceed together. 4

When M. Ginsburger published another recension of the Fragment-Targum, according to MS Paris-Bibliothèque nationale Hébr. 110, he added the “preferred variant reading” in square brackets:

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One shall lead at the head of the flock [cloud] and the other shall lead at the head of the flock.

The Palestinian Targum according to MS. Neofiti I reads:

This is accurately transmitted in the recent edition by A. Diez Macho, and is literally translated in all three languages (Spanish: “a la cabeza del ganado”; French: “à la tête du troupeau”; and English: “at the head of the flock”). 7 However, on the basis of the printed editions of the Fragment-Targum, the following notes are appended to these translations: Sp.: “O: ‘encima de la nube’”; Fr.: “Ou bein [sic] ‘au sommet d’une nuée’”; Eng.: “Or: ‘on top of the cloud.’” But again, aside from

4 S. H. Levey, The Messiah: An Aramaic Interpretation (Monographs of the Hebrew Union College, 2: Cincinnati, 1974), pp. 12–13. This translation is to be preferred over that of J. W. Etheridge, The Targum of Onkelos and Jonathan ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch with the Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum (London, 1862; reprinted New York, 1968), Vol. 1, p. 481: “Mosheh came forth from the midst of the desert; but the King Meshiha (comes) from the midst of Roma. The cloud preceded that, and the cloud will go before this one; and the Word of the Lord will lead between both, and they shall proceed together.” This older translation is inaccurate both grammatically and stylistically.

Still another translation has been offered by G. Vermes in Scripture and Tradition (Studia Post-Biblica 4; Leiden, 1961), p. 217: “The one shall be led upon a cloud and the other shall be led upon a cloud.” Vermes denies the authenticity of this text on syntactical grounds. He believes that MS Neofiti 1 preserves the original version of this targumic passage [see below for that text]. The syntactical difficulty pointed out by Vermes exists, however, only if the word יִדְּבַר is vocalized in this manner (passive “will be led”). Needless to say, other vocalizations are possible—or even to be preferred.

5 M. Ginsburger, Das Fragmententhargum (Berlin, 1899; reprinted Jerusalem, 1969), p. 37 [Exod 15:18]. The midrashic expansion (tosefta) on the four Nights of Vigil, which originated at Exod 12:42, was inserted by the redactor of this Fragment-Targum in Exod 15 (the Song of the Sea), which is part of the synagogal Torah reading for the Seventh Day of Passover.

6 Folio 135a [Exod 12:42].