GENESIS IN ARAMAIC: THE EXAMPLE OF CHAPTER 22

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INTRODUCTION

The Aramaic word *targum* by itself denotes “translation” in Aramaic, yet the purpose of the rendering involved in Judaism means the term also refers to a type of literature. We need to appreciate the phenomenon of targum, and the specific documents called Targumim, before we can approach Genesis in Aramaic on a critical basis.

Aramaic survived the demise of the Persian Empire as a *lingua franca* in the Near East. Jews and other peoples, such as Nabateans and Palmyrenes, embraced the language, and the Aramaic portions of the Hebrew Bible attest a significant change in the linguistic constitution of Judaism. The linguistic situation in Judea and Galilee demanded translation of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic, for purposes of popular use and worship among the majority of Jews. Although fragments of Leviticus and Job in Aramaic, which have been discovered at Qumran, are technically *targumim*, in that they are translations, they are unrepresentative of the genre targum in literary terms. They are reasonably “literal” renderings; that is, there is a formal correspondence between the Hebrew rendered and the Aramaic that is presented, and a programmatic commitment to interpretation does not appear. The *Targumim* that Rabbinic Judaism produced are of a different character.

The aim of targumic production was to give the sense of the Hebrew Scriptures, not just their wording, so paraphrase is characteristic of the Targumim and interpretations are typically embedded in their renderings. Theoretically, a passage of Scripture was to be rendered orally and from memory in the synagogue by an interpreter (a *meturgeman*) after the reading in Hebrew from a scroll; the *meturgeman* was not to be confused with the reader, lest the congregation mistake the Aramaic interpretation with the original text (see Mishnah *Meg.* 4:4–10 and Talmud *Meg.* 23b–25b). Regulations that specify the precise number of verses that may be read prior to the delivery of a targum probably date from the third century CE and later. The same may be said of cycles of specified lectionary readings. Although the renderings so delivered were oral in principle, over the course
of time, traditions in important centers of learning became fixed, and coalescence became possible.

The emergence of the Rabbis as the shapers of Judaism after 70 CE provided a centralizing tendency without which literary Targumim could never have been produced. Yet it is quite clear that the Rabbis never exerted complete control over Targumic production. The Targums preserved by the rabbis are paraphrases, yet the theological ideas conveyed are not always consistent, even within a given Targum. Although the Rabbis attempted to regulate targumic activity, the extant Targumim sometimes even contradict rabbinic rules directly. For example, *m. Meg. 4:9* insists that Lev 18:21 (“You must not give of your seed, to deliver it to Moloch”) should not be interpreted in respect of sexual intercourse with Gentiles; the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan—a late work, produced well after rabbinic authority had been established—takes just that line.

The Targumim evince such oddities because they are the products of a dialectical interaction between folk practice and rabbinic supervision—sometimes mediated through a love of dramatic and inventive speculation, and this dynamic tension continued over centuries. Each of the extant Targumim crystallizes that complex relationship synagogue and academy at a given moment, focalizing that encounter within the biblical text. The Aqedah—the story of Abraham’s near or actual sacrifice of Isaac in Gen 22—is an especially interesting moment in interpretation, because popular practice, rabbinic teaching, and biblical tradition met and influenced one another.1 The result was a sometimes stunning transformation of a familiar text.

The Targumim divide themselves up among those of the Torah (the Pentateuch), those of the Prophets (both “Former Prophets,” or the so-called historical works in the English Bible, and the “Latter Prophets,” or the Prophets as commonly designated in English), and those of the Writings (or Hagiographa), following the conventional designations of the Hebrew Bible in Judaism. The Targumim are irreducibly complex in dates, origins, purposes, and dialects of Aramaic. They cannot be assigned to a single epoch of Rabbinic Judaism, although we shall encounter clear evidence of their composition under the influence of Tannaitic and Amoraic interpretation.

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