The Role of the Targum in Jewish Education in Medieval Europe

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Introduction

In the course of history, the official Targums Onkelos and Jonathan served different purposes. They were used for the preparation of reading Scripture in the synagogue, for private and academic Bible study, and possibly also for language acquisition (Houtman and Sysling 2009, 35–39). But whereas in the Yemenite community the habit of reading Scripture with the accompaniment of an Aramaic translation continues until today, in Europe the custom was gradually abolished due to the dwindling knowledge of Aramaic (Houtman 2012, 7–8). In the Middle Ages only remnants of the tradition survived in the Targum to the seventh day of Pesah and the first day of Shavuot (Zunz 1966, 426). So the first function mentioned, the preparation for the oral translation of Scripture, had largely become extinct in medieval Europe. The study of Targum as Oral Torah of course continued, as becomes clear from the references to Targum in the works of important medieval rabbinic scholars like Maimonides, Rashi, and Samuel of Vitry (Flesher and Chilton 2011, 477). To this end pupils had to learn Aramaic, and possibly the Targums served a purpose there as well.

In this paper I will first give an overview of the place of Targum in the educational system in the talmudic period. Then I will move to the situation in medieval Europe, where halakhic discussions and contemporary descriptions of curricula give us some insight into the status and study of Targum. Finally I will discuss the possible evidence of the Targum manuscripts and round off with a summary and conclusions.

Study of Targum in the Talmudic Period

From numerous references in rabbinic literature it becomes clear that in the rabbinic period the Targum had a well-defined function in the synagogal liturgy, where it served as a translation and elucidation of the scriptural readings (Houtman & Sysling 2009, 36). Since the synagogal service, apart from its character as worship, also had an educational function, there were prescriptions for how to benefit most from the readings. In BT Ber 8ab we find:
R. Huna b. Judah says in the name of R. Ammi: A man should always complete his parashiyot together with the congregation, [reading] twice the Hebrew text and once the [Aramaic] Targum, and even [such verses as] Atarot and Dibon, for if one completes his parashiyot together with the congregation, his days and years are prolonged.

Although a personal obligation is concerned here, it was practical to do this study together with other members of the congregation because books were expensive, and hence scarce, and apart from this practical aspect, studying together in the study house had educational benefits as well. It is unsure whether this obligation stems from a situation in which the reading of Scripture on Shabbat was still actually accompanied by a Targum or not. In the first case it served as a rehearsal of the liturgical readings and their Targums for private study and devotion. However, it has also been suggested that this prescription reflects a period when the habit of translating in Aramaic in the synagogue service had already been abandoned after the annual reading cycle was introduced. In the annual cycle the weekly portions to be read were much larger than they were in the triennial cycle that was used before, an innovation that asked a great deal of patience from the congregants (Millgram 1971, 182). Adding the Targum in that new situation would make the services unbearably long. With the omission of the Targum from the synagogue service the prescription guaranteed that the Targum would at least still be read and memorized. In any case the words of R. Huna reflect a situation in which study of the Targum was considered essential for private study and devotion.

In the situation where the Targum was actually recited in synagogue, the persons responsible for the translation, the meturgemans, had to prepare themselves thoroughly because the translation had to be done by heart. Obviously it needed quite some study and memorization to fulfil this function of meturgeman in the synagogue properly. The shorthand manuscripts discovered in the Cairo Genizah collection by the late Michael Klein may actually have served as crib notes to help the meturgeman perform his task (Klein 1992, x, 85 [no. 1088], 86 [no. 1098]).

This function of the Targum as a translation in synagogal liturgy was quite natural in times and places when and where Aramaic was a common language, as was the case in large parts of western Asia and Egypt before the rise of the Islam, the period in which the great works of rabbinic literature were conceived. It is obvious that in those circumstances Targum was also part of the school curriculum. From the sparse references, it may be assumed that in the rabbinic period the study of the Bible, including the Targum, belonged to the curriculum of the basic education of the Beit ha-Sefer (Alexander 1976,