The Targum in Christian Scholarship to 1800*

Stephen G. Burnett

Introduction

The Christian study of Aramaic and the Targums in the Middle Ages and early modern period is a chapter in the larger story of Christian Hebraism. Although church fathers such as Jerome and Augustine believed and taught that the Hebrew text of the Old Testament was worthy of study, very few Christian scholars pursued Hebrew learning until the Middle Ages (Burnett 2012a, 12). Christians who wished to learn biblical Hebrew or Aramaic faced a series of barriers that they had to overcome, above all finding an instructor. Christians justified studying the Targum because of its value for interpreting the text of the Hebrew Bible and for understanding the Hebrew language better by comparing Hebrew words and phrases with Aramaic ones. Since Jews and Christians differed over the interpretation of many passages in the Hebrew Bible, the scholarly quest for Hebrew and Aramaic learning was motivated in part by apologetic and polemical concerns. Scholars sought to distinguish between Jewish interpretations that were acceptable and those that reflected Jewish ‘blindness and superstition’. Targum passages that supported a messianic interpretation of particular passages were of special interest to them, particularly when their Jewish contemporaries rejected such interpretations. Pitting the ‘ancient Jews’ and their understanding of these texts against the ‘newer Jews’ was a rhetorical strategy that would be used time and again throughout these centuries. Christian use of the Targums involved the appropriation and repurposing of Jewish texts for Christian use.

Beginning in the thirteenth century Christians had reasons to study the Targums, but their means to do so were sorely lacking until the early modern period. After 1500, the growth of Hebrew and Aramaic printing, the increased availability of textbooks and scholarly reference works written by Christians, and significant patronage for individuals and institutions involved in Semitic language scholarship meant that Targum studies, like Christian Hebraism,

* I wish to thank Koninklijke Brill NV for permission to reprint excerpts from my book (Burnett 1996) in this article.
grew from the hobby of a few individualists, to an intellectual sub-discipline within the academy. Both the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches supported Targum studies. The first published inventories of Targum manuscripts of the late 17th and 18th centuries made possible manuscript-based studies of individual Targums in the modern period. Johannes Buxtorf the elder and younger played a central role both in forging philological tools for Aramaic and in creating a standard, if not always reliable, text for most of the Targums.

Middle Ages

Christian scholars in medieval Europe who wished to study the Targums faced far greater challenges than their colleagues who read the Hebrew Bible, since the former were not as widely studied among Jews. In talmudic times the Targum had a place both in the synagogue liturgy and in biblical study. By the twelfth century, when medieval Christian Hebraism began to develop, public reading of the Targum during synagogue services in Europe was restricted to the Seventh day of Pesach and during Shavuot (Zunz 1832, 442–443). The talmudic law to prepare the weekly Torah portion (parashah) by reading it twice in Hebrew and once using the Targum (BT Ber 8a–b) preserved a place for the Targums in private study throughout the Middle Ages. Stern notes in his discussion of medieval biblical manuscripts that each of the three types—masoretic Bibles, liturgical Pentateuchs, and study Bibles—could contain Targums (Stern 2011, 94–96). On masoretic Bibles, he writes: ‘In Ashkenaz the biblical verse is sometimes interversed with the Aramaic Targum Onkelos.’ (Stern 2011, 94). Yet already by the thirteenth century Moses b. Jacob of Coucy asserted in Sefer Mizvot Gadol that it was permissible to read Rashi’s commentary on the parashah instead of the Targum (סמ״ג, no. 19, f. 103c). While Moses of Coucy’s position was not universally accepted, it is an indication that Targum study had decreased among European Jews by the time Christian scholars became interested in it.

Hugh of St. Victor (c. 1096–1141) and Andrew of St. Victor (c. 1110–1175) and their students were among the first Christian Hebraists to mention targumic interpretations of biblical passages in their works, probably through the mediation of Rashi’s biblical commentaries or their Jewish informants (cf. Dahan 2000, 231–232). The first significant use that a Christian scholar made of the Targums, however, was polemical rather than exegetical in intent. Raymond Martini presented a sustained argument against the validity of Judaism that used quotations from Jewish works, above all the Talmud, in Pugio fidei to persuade Jews to convert to Christianity. The Targums played a supporting rather