THE TRANSLATION OF ANTHROPOMORPHISMS AND ANTHROPOPATHISMS IN THE TARGUMIM

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE OLD TESTAMENT

Anthropomorphic descriptions of the Deity prevail throughout the entire Old Testament—from the earliest Pentateuchal narratives and the classical prophets through the apocalyptic Book of Daniel. The Lord God moves (walks) about noisily in the Garden of Eden (Gen. iii 8); he smells the pleasant odor of sacrifices (Gen. viii 21); just as incense is placed before his nostril (Deut. xxxiii 10). His feet are supported by the likeness of a sapphire pavement (Exod. xxiv 10); and whereas his palm shields his face from being seen, his back may be seen (Exod. xxxiii 20-23); the Lord is seated on a high and lofty throne and the skirts of his robe fill the Temple (Isa. vi 1); the throne appears to be made of sapphire and the enthroned figure has the semblance of a human being (Ezek. i 26); and finally, the One of ancient days is seated, his garb white as snow, and the hair of his head like lamb’s wool (Dan. vii 9).

This anthropomorphic God was believed to be visible by man in certain circumstances—even though such an experience was fraught with the danger of death. Thus Manoah says to his wife, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God” (Judg. xiii 22, RSV, JPS; but “a divine being” in new JPS). Indeed the statement “you cannot see my face, for man may not see me and live” (Exod. xxxiii 20) is to be understood in the same manner, i.e., not that God is invisible, but that the one who gazes upon him will surely die.²

¹ My sincerest thanks to Professor Menahem Haran and Professor Shlomo Morag for their devoted guidance in an earlier stage of this study at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. The term anthropomorphism is used throughout as an abbreviation for the more cumbersome pair “anthropomorphism and anthropopathism. We shall deal with both human forms and human feelings attributed to the Deity in the O.T.

Moreover, in Gen. i 26, 27 God says: "Let us make man in our image after our likeness", and then "God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him"—indicating a similarity of physical form.

II. RABBINIC AND MEDIEVAL JEWISH LITERATURE

The origins of Jewish anti-anthropomorphism remain shrouded in obscurity. What is clear, however, is that by Mishnaic times (1st-2nd century CE), two distinct schools emerged and crystallized. Whereas the school of R. Aqiba interpreted biblical anthropomorphisms quite literally, the anti-anthropomorphic school of R. Ishmael dismissed them as allegory. What is also clear is that the anti-anthropomorphic tendencies reflect an internal development within Judaism, and are not the result of Hellenistic influence, which they antedate. It is only natural that the targumim, being an integral part of Rabbinic literature, and ultimately deriving from the same schools and the same periods, would reflect rabbinic attitudes towards biblical anthropomorphism. This was to be expected especially in view of the fact that all the targumim are paraphrastic and midrashic to varying degrees, even in matters that are not of theological or doctrinal import.

Indeed, great Jewish medieval scholars such as Sa‘adia Gaon (882-942) and Maimonides (1135-1204) were quick to notice that many of the biblical anthropomorphisms are transformed in Onqelos by paraphrase or circumlocution. Sa‘adiah, being convinced of the pure spirituality and transcendence of God, takes all the human traits attributed to God to be allegorical. Accordingly, he writes that “wherever the ‘faithful interpreters of our Torah’ [i.e., the ancient targumists—and particularly Onqelos] found any of these expressions, distinction between simple anthropomorphic phrases and theophanies in human form, though valid in itself, is, I believe, not germane to the present discussion.

3 A. Marmorstein, Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God 2, Essays in Anthropomorphism (London, 1937; reprinted New York, 1968), pp. 61, 113-22. Marmorstein has collected the characteristic phrases of each school; e.g. “If it were not written in Scripture we would not dare say it” (literalists) versus “The Torah speaks in the language of human beings” (allegorists).


5 We need not enter here into the problematics of dating particular targumim, nor into the distinction between date of composition and date of final redaction.