"LEBANON" IN THE TRANSITION FROM DERASH TO PESHAT: SOURCES, ETYMOLOGY AND MEANING (WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE SONG OF SONGS)

Sara Japhet

The name "Lebanon," basically a name of a "wooded mountain-range on the northern border of Israel"¹ is employed already in the Bible, by itself or in compound phrases, in multiple literary tropes: as a simile,² metonymy,³ metaphor,⁴ and allegory.⁵ It is therefore not surprising that this usage continues in the post-biblical literature, either in the same functions (like the Wisdom of Jesus Sirach)⁶ or in further allegorical developments. We find such usage in the writings of the Qumran sect and the Targum literature, and later in the Midrash, in all its literary manifestations.

The dominant allegory for "Lebanon" in later sources, not explicitly found in the biblical texts, is that of "Temple" (םַעַל הַבּ). This understanding of the name is probably already underlying the well-

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¹ BDB, 527.
² As in Ps 92:13: "The righteous bloom like a date-palm, they thrive like a cedar in Lebanon"; or Song 7:5: "your neck is like a tower of ivory . . . Your nose like the Lebanon tower," and more. The English translation of the biblical texts generally follows NJPS.
³ As in Isa 10:34: "And the Lebanon shall fall" (meaning: the trees of Lebanon); or Hos 14:6: "He shall strike roots like the Lebanon"—again, the Lebanon tree (as indeed represented by the NJPS), and more.
⁴ As in Jer 22:6: "You are Gilead to me, the summit of Lebanon" (the NJPS adds twice "as"); or Jer 22:23: "You who dwell in Lebanon, nestled among the cedars," and more.
⁵ As in 2 Kgs 14:9 (= 2 Chr 25:18); Ezek 17:3–24; 31:3, and more.
⁶ See Sir 24:10; 50:8–9; 50:12. Vermès compares the usage here to that of the Targum of the Song of Songs: "in Ecclesiasticus, as in the Targum of the Song of Songs, the word Lebanon is used in relation to the Temple," but I fail to see this connection, either between Sirach and the (late) Targum of the Song of Songs, or of Sirach to the Temple. The use of the simile is similar to its use in the biblical phrases. (See: Géza Vermès, "Lebanon: The Historical Development of an Exegetical Tradition," in Scripture and Tradition in Judaism (StPB 4; (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1961), 26–39. The quotation is from p. 31. The article is a revised and elaborated version of an earlier work; see: Géza Vermès, "The Symbolic Interpretation of Lebanon in the Targums," JTS, N.S. 9 (1958): 1–12.
known statement of Pesher Habakkuk: “The Lebanon is the council of the community (יִהלָם הַמֶּדַק הַאִישָׁהּ).” The route that led to this equation has been correctly illuminated by Géza Vermès as the combining of two interpretative axioms: Lebanon = Temple, and Temple = the Community.8

In the Aramaic Targums some of the representations of “Lebanon” simply spell out the tenor, the signified meaning, of the biblical metaphors,9 such as “those who make war against the land of Israel” (Isa 10:34); “kings” (Ezek 31:15); or “nations” (Zech 11:1). “Cedars of Lebanon” are represented by “leaders of nations” (Isa 2:13), or “those who own much property” (Isa 14:8), and the latter represents also the “good of Lebanon” (Ezek 31:16).10 However, the Temple as the symbolic value of “Lebanon” is the dominant feature in the Aramaic Targums.

The name Lebanon appears three times in the Pentateuch, another twenty-three times in the prose sections of Joshua, Judges, Kings, Ezra, and Chronicles; seven times in the poetic passages of Judges and Kings, and thirty-eight times in the poetry of the Prophets and the Hagiographa: in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zechariah, Psalms, and the Song of Songs.

Targum Onkelos represents the name “Lebanon” by its equivalent Aramaic form לְבֶן in two of its occurrences in the Pentateuch (Deut 1:7; 11:24), while in the third occurrence (Deut 3:25) it is represented by the allegorical meaning, “the Temple.” The words of Moses: “Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon”


8 Ibid, 324–5. Also idem, Scripture and Tradition, 32–33. This evidence refutes the former view that the allegory was first introduced by Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, after the destruction of the second Temple in 70 C.E. See Yehuda Komlosh, The Bible in the Light of the Aramaic Translations (Tel Aviv: Dvir Publishing House, 1973 [Hebrew]), 229, following Wilhelm Bacher, Die Agadah der Tannaiten (Strassburg: K. J. Trubner, 1884), 26, n. 2. According to Vermès, the homily of Johanan ben Zakkai represents a transformation of the tradition rather than its origin (Scripture and Tradition, 34–35).

9 As is the standard procedure in the Targums; see, among others, Komlosh, Aramaic Translations, 230–238.

10 As is the standard procedure in the Targums; see, among others, Komlosh, Aramaic Translations, 230–238.