Adam, Dust, and the Breath of Life according to the Targumim of Gen 2:7

Robert Hayward

The Aramaic translators of the books of Moses knew their Hebrew Bible intimately. Whether they were providing Aramaic versions of the Hebrew text for the synagogue service, for the Beth ha-Midrash, or for the use of students investigating the Torah in private, they were acutely aware of the potential relationship of each verse of the Bible to its wider context in Scripture and tradition.1 The composition of the human creature is mentioned by several biblical verses, among them Gen 2:7, which represents a very particular account of Adam’s formation. Four Aramaic versions of this verse are extant, namely Targum Onqelos, Targum Neofiti, and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, along with the Fragment Targum of MS Vatican 440, which preserves a translation of only the last four words of the verse.2 Each displays its own concerns, which appear to be formulated with an eye to biblical information about Adam recorded not only in Genesis, but also in the Prophets and the Writings. The Hebrew of Gen 2:7 is immediately preceded by a note that , a word usually translated as “a mist,” was going up


2 For the text of the Targumim, the following critical editions have been used (translations are mine): Targum Onqelos is quoted from A. Sperber, The Pentateuch according to Targum Onkelos (vol. 1 of The Bible in Aramaic: Based on Old Manuscripts and Printed Texts; ed. A. Sperber; Leiden 1959); Targum Neofiti from A. Diez Macho, Neophyti 1 (Madrid 1968); Targum Pseudo-Jonathan from E.G. Clarke et al., Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch (Hoboken 1984); Fragment Targum according to MS Vatican 440 from M.L. Klein, The Fragment Targums of the Pentateuch according to Their Extant Sources (2 vols.; Rome 1980). A translation of the extant text of the Targumim on Gen 2:7 can be found in the appendix to this article.
from the land and was watering all the surface of the ground (המדאה). Genesis 2:7 itself then declares: וְיָשָׁנָוָא אֵלֶֽהוּ וַאֲדָמָֽה לַעֲפָר מִהָֽדָאָה יָכְבָּשׁ שְׁמַחְבָּשׁ רְחִי וַאֲדָמָּה לַעֲפָר תְּרֵי. This may be rendered into English as “and the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”

Commenting on this verse, Sarna notes that an earlier report of the man’s formation in Gen 1:27 says nothing of the material from which he was made; here we learn that it was dust out of which God fashioned him in the manner of a potter, for such is one of the implications of the Hebrew verb רָצוּר. 4 Mention of the “mist” and “watering” in Gen 2:6 allow the reader to infer furthermore that God had mixed dust and water to produce clay, the raw material of the potter’s art. This is an important observation, for Gen 1:27 declares that God created the man (ברא אֵלֶֽהוּ וַאֲדָמָֽה לַאָדָם) not that he formed or fashioned him; and that he had created the man in his image, and as male and female. In this respect, Gen 1 asserted that human beings, like everything else brought into existence before the first Sabbath, had been created by the Almighty. Significantly, all the Targumim of Gen 2:7 represent the Hebrew verb רָצוּר by means of “and he created” (ברא). 5

The effect of this translation on Targum Onqelos and Targum Neofiti is striking: all reference to the formation or fashioning of Adam disappears from the verse they are expounding. As we shall see, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan manages to retain a particular aspect of the original Hebrew רָצוּר, but not before he too has insisted that God created Adam. One reasonable explanation of this state of affairs would be the Targumists’ desire to present Scripture and God’s activities as consistent: since Gen 1 tells how God created everything, Gen 2:7, with its talk of the formation or fashioning of Adam, does not contradict Gen 1, but must be regarded as another way of speaking about God’s creative power. This was no doubt a powerful factor in the Targumists’ decision to translate as they did;

---

3 Cf. A. Berlin and M.Z. Brettler, eds., The Jewish Study Bible (Oxford 1999), 15, which has: “The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.”

4 See N. Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary Genesis (Philadelphia 5749/1989), 17, where he alludes to similar ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Greek accounts of man’s origins from the earth and his being moulded and fashioned by the gods. The “formation” or “moulding” of the first human being is not neglected by Jewish tradition: LXX, Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion, and the Vulgate versions all interpret Gen 2:7 as meaning that God “fashioned” Adam; and human formation from clay is explicitly mentioned at Isa 64:7; Job 33:6. Note also the description of Adam as the “protoplast” at, e.g., Wis 7:1; 10:1; L.A.B. 13:8; 26:5; 32:15; 37:3.

5 See the appendix for a translation of the targumim on Gen 2:7.