How Old is the Targumic Tradition? Traces of the Jewish Targum in the Second Temple Period, and Vice Versa

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The earliest manuscripts of the Targums come from the same general period as the earliest manuscripts of the Masoretic Text. There can be little doubt, however, that the text of the Targums is for the most part much older. On the basis of their language, the earliest Jewish Targums – Onkelos to the Torah and Jonathan to the Prophets – can be dated, roughly, to a period starting between the two Jewish wars and ending a century or so thereafter. From that period onward, the Targumic tradition develops into a great variety of writings, exemplifying many different approaches to the project of biblical interpretation. Targums exist for all the books of the Hebrew Bible except the ones that were written partly in Aramaic, namely Ezra-Nehemiah, and Daniel. Several biblical books have two or three Targums, and in the Pentateuch a passage may exist in up to five or six different Targumic renderings. The latest translations in this tradition date to the late Middle Ages.

Many Targum specialists today prefer to relate the texts strictly to the time during which they were put into writing. Other scholars continue nevertheless to search the Targumic tradition for traces of interpretations that crystallized

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1 The term Targum will in this essay be used only in reference to the Rabbinic Targums of biblical books.
4 This tendency is visible, for instance, in the work of Willem Smelik and in that of Steven Fraade.
during the Second Temple period.\textsuperscript{5} New Testament scholars use the Targums as a way to access Jewish readings of scripture in the time of Jesus and the apostles.\textsuperscript{6} Old Testament scholars use the Targums in textual criticism, hoping to find in them snippets of the original text. The motivation for the “archeological” approach is, of course, tied up with the research programme of the scholars who practice it. It is not born purely from wishful thinking, however. Scientific justification is sought in the idea that the extant Targums are the written sediment of traditions that were circulating orally much earlier.

The idea that Targumic renderings were fixed orally early on, at some point during the Second Temple period is attractive. It provides a frame of reference for explaining the manifold points of contact among the different Targums of the Pentateuch.\textsuperscript{7} It also fits a broader picture. Much Jewish literature written down in the wake of the Jewish wars reposes on oral tradition reaching back to Second Temple period. This is certainly true of the Mishnah and the earliest Halachic Midrashim. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the consequent decentralization of Jewish learning and authority, early traditions were put into writing in order to protect them from local changes. It stands to reason that the writing down of the earliest Targums implied the same type of process.

The problem is to find evidence that will support this supposition. Demonstrating that any of the existing Targums are rooted in an earlier practice of oral translation is hard to do.

\textbf{Inconclusive Arguments for the Antiquity of the Targum Tradition}

Several lines of argument developed in recent times, although rich and suggestive, have proved incapable of settling the matter.

\textit{Explicit Reference to Oral Aramaic Translation of the Torah}

An explicit reference to oral Aramaic translation of scripture during the Second Temple period may be found in Neh 8:8:\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{5} See e.g. Legrand & Joosten, \textit{The Targums in the Light of Traditions of the Second Temple} (above, n. 1).

\textsuperscript{6} See e.g. Flesher & Chilton, \textit{The Targums}, 383–436.

\textsuperscript{7} The Old Testament Peshitta manifests many connections with the Targumic tradition, see the review of the question in J. Joosten, “La Peshitta de l’Ancien Testament et les Targums,” in \textit{L’Ancien Testament en syriaque} (eds. F. Briquel Chatonnet and Ph. Le Moigne; Études syriaques 5; Paris: Geuthner, 2008), 91–100 (with references to earlier literature).

\textsuperscript{8} See A. van der Kooij, “Nehemiah 8:8 and the Question of the ‘Targum’ Tradition,” in \textit{Tradition}