

# A Brief Introduction to the Targums (*Targumim*)

## Description of Documents

- I. Targums to Pentateuch
  - A. Babylonian
    1. **TARGUM ONKELOS** (Onqelos) - This targum was composed in Palestine sometime between 70 and 200 CE (perhaps more closely, 80-135 CE) but was later reedited and vocalized in Babylonia. It was in use there before the end of the third century CE and became the 'official' pentateuchal targum of the synagogue.
  - B. Palestinian
    1. **NEOFITI I** - One of the Palestinian targum recensions which is less literal than Onkelos but less full than Pseudo-Jonathan. Its dating is disputed; AD Macho and his followers place it in the first century CE, but others (e.g., Bowker, Le Deaut, McNamara, Shinan) place it in the third century CE though not necessarily denying that it preserves pre-135 CE traditions.
    2. **FRAGMENT(ARY) TARGUM** (=Yerushalmi II) - Targum of selected portions of the Pentateuch reflecting an early recension of the Palestinian targum tradition. It is disputed whether these selections are fragments of a complete targum or merely a collection of glosses.
    3. **CAIRO GENIZA FRAGMENTS** - Fragments of a targum of the Pentateuch reflecting early Palestinian targum tradition.
    4. **TARGUM PSEUDO-JONATHAN** (= Yerushalmi [I]) - A Babylonian version of the Palestinian targum tradition in its latest and most developed form characterized by many aggadic expansions.
- II. Targum to Former and Latter Prophets
  - A. **TARGUM JONATHAN** (Do not confuse with Pseudo-Jonathan) - This targum gained acceptance in Babylonia during the third or fourth century CE, and though it contains Amoraic material, much of it was possibly written as early as 70-135 CE and perhaps even pre-70 CE. (This statement is more accurate in the case of the Former Prophets than of the Latter Prophets.)
  - B. **TARGUM YERUSHALMI** - Extant in only a few fragments which probably date to the latter part of the seventh century CE.
- III. Targums to the rest of the Hebrew Scripture exist except for Ezra-Nehemiah and Daniel. Most are from a relatively late date, though fragments of a targum to Job and Leviticus (11QTgJob, 4TgJob, and 4QTgLev) were found at Qumran. In the case of Esther, there are three targums of which two are **RISHON** (rather literal) and **SHENI** (from seventh or eighth century CE with much aggadic material).

(Also remember that there are other targums = translations of the Hebrew text. The Greek versions sometimes gives hints about the directions taken by the targums listed above. Other versions which reflect at least an indirect contact with the Aramaic targums or rabbinic traditions include Jerome's Latin Vulgate, the Syriac Peshitta, and the Samaritan Targum to the Pentateuch. For this last targum, see the works by A. Brill and A. Tal.)

### *Survey of Critical Issues Involved in the Use of the Targums*

One of the biggest problems is establishing a date for the targums, since the earliest manuscripts (other than Qumran fragments) are from the seventh century at best. Paul Kahle provided a focus for the discussion in 1930 when, in publishing the Cairo Geniza fragments, he claimed that the Palestinian Targum (i.e., the Vorlage of the various Palestinian targum recensions) was older than Onkelos and was in fact pre-Mishnaic and perhaps even pre-Christian. A number of issues have arisen in the subsequent discussion.

- A) The relationship of Onkelos to the Palestinian targums: Is Onkelos a later rabbinic 'tightening' of the fuller and more paraphrastic Palestinian targums, or is Pseudo-Jonathan a later expansion incorporating much aggadic material into the more literally translated Onkelos?
- B) The language of the Targums: Dialectal differences in the Aramaic of the targums have been used to try to establish dates. While such dateable finds as the Qumran material have helped, there still are problems due to claims made regarding the oral or written character of the targums' Aramaic.
- C) Relationship to other rabbinic literature: Kahle claimed that anti-Mishnaic readings were pre-Mishnaic. In view of the variety within early Rabbinic Judaism and other rabbinic writings, this position has been discredited. The targums have been found to be valuable in the study of the history of Jewish traditions, especially of rabbinic midrash.
- D) Text and tradition: The presence of an early tradition does not mean that the text (i.e., a fixed text) is early. The late date of a fixed text, however, does not preclude the possibility of fixed early traditions. It seems clear that we must reckon with some flexibility in the development of the targums. Interpretative paraphrases could be readily changed to accommodate changing situations, and written texts not possessing the same kind of sacred and authoritative character as the Hebrew text could more easily be edited. Thus the material within a targum reflects a variety of dates and places, and the dating of traditions remains problematic. Those who have used parallels between the NT and the targums to claim the antiquity of the targums and then claimed the NT's dependence upon them have been charged with circular reasoning, but McNamara has called this a "convergence of evidence" and would put the burden of proof on those maintaining a late date. Thus McNamara gives as a rule of thumb for dating material in the Palestinian targums: "Unless there is specific proof to the contrary, the haggadah of the Palestinian Targums is likely to be tannaitic and to antedate the outbreak of the Second Jewish Revolt in AD 132." (*IDBS* article) This claim remains disputed, and we are able to work with greater security about dating with Targum Onkelos and Targum Jonathan to the Former Prophets.
- E) Targums in the history of Bible interpretation: The targums were heard and studied within the synagogue and the school. As paraphrastic translations, the targums fit somewhere in the spectrum of literal translation, paraphrase, commentary, midrash, homily, and other forms of Biblical interpretation. How it fits in this spectrum requires further study.

MGVHoffman