Targum Jonathan to the Prophets

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TARGUM JONATHAN TO THE PROPHETS

BY

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TO MY HONORED TEACHER

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AS A TOKEN OF DEVOTION AND RESPECT
THIS BOOK IS CONSECRATED
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THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF
TARGUM JONATHAN

The Aramaic rendering of the Prophets belongs to the earliest translations of the Bible which have come down to us. Its importance for the textual investigation and early Biblical interpretation cannot be overestimated. While the targumist makes little display of critical study in rendering intricate passages, and while he does not pretend to present a minutely literal translation of the Hebrew text, his reverence for the letter and transmitted reading of the text must be far have exceeded that of the Greek and Syriac translators. At the same time his translation is doubtlessly based on a sounder and exacter understanding of both the etymology and usages of the Hebrew language. Again, its value may be said to rest in the fact that, forming a distinct and independent rendering of the text, it presents a helpful source in establishing the principles pursued in the early translations. A good many emendations and assumed violations of the Hebrew text on the sole basis of the translations, so eagerly sought by the modern Biblical scholar, would thus be completely done away with. It is also a mine of Agadic exegesis, to which, in most instances, parallels are preserved in the extant sources. It cannot fail to be of considerable importance for the history of that vast literature, giving in this connection new and vivid emphasis to the religious, national and political state of mind of that age in Palestine.

The authorship of the Targum to the Prophets has been the object of protracted and diverse discussion. Tradition ascribes it to Jonathan b. Uziel, the most prominent disciple of Hillel, of the first century. This single mention in the Talmud of the authorship of Jonathan and the mystic manner in which it is related, can hardly help solve the problem. There is, furthermore, the astounding fact that in the parallel passage in the
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Yerushalmi\(^1\) there is complete silence of this tradition of the Babli.\(^2\) Had this tradition been common, there could have been no possible reason for the Yerushalmi to ignore the work of the distinguished and holy Jonathan, who “when he discussed the law, a bird flying near him would be burned”.\(^3\)

The Talmudic tradition mentions Aquila’s translation. Both Talmudim have set monuments to the Seventy. Is it because the Targum was originated on Palestinian soil, extensively used and known in Palestine, forming even a necessary part in the worship, that they failed to be impressed by it?

So the inference was drawn that the Aramaic version of the Bible fell in disfavor with the authorities in Palestine who, however, were distinctly pleased with the Greek translation, particularly the Greek version of Aquila.\(^4\) The alleged reasons for

1) Y. Megilla I, 9.

2) Babli Meg. 3b. Blau’s contention (J. Q. R., v. 9, p. 738) has no foundation. Cases of disagreement in assigning the author of a saying are numerous. It needs no explanation and consequently cannot be made a basis for a new theory.

3) Suk. 28a: Baba Bathra 134a; Y. Nedarim 5, 6.

4) Berliner (Onkelos 108-110) has even the idea of a complete suppression of the official Targumim in Palestine. Weiss (Dor Dor etc., v. 1, 200) even knows exactly the time when this suppression took place and its author. It was Rabban Gamliel, of whom it is said (Shab. 115a; Tosef. 13 (14) and with some changes in Sof. 5, 15; Y. Shab. 16, 1) that he hid the Targum to Job. So then it was he who put the ban also on the official Targumim. And it was not until the time of R. Akiba that the ban was lifted. This conjecture is read by Weiss into the phrase בַּאָלֵת הַמָּאן לֵבָנַי אֶלְּהוֹן: It is evident that the whole supposition hinges on the mere finding that Rabban Gamliel forbade the use of a certain particular Targum. That the express mention of the Targum should be taken to indicate that the other Targumim were spared this interdiction seems to have escaped their observation. Furthermore, their theory is exposed to a dangerous contradiction. If the Targum was restored in the time of R. Akiba, what sense could there have been to the contention of R. Chalafta with Gamliel the younger, a contemporary of R. Akiba, with regard to his license with the Targum, and his reminder of R. Gamliel the Elder? They should not have overlooked the remarkable coincidence presented in the story of Gamliel the Elder and his grandchild. In both instances it was the Targum to Job that evoked disfavor.