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Targums As Guides to Hebrew Syntax
— Michael B. Shepherd —

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Abstract: The Targums were not translations for the Aramaic-speaking masses who were ignorant of Hebrew. Rather, they were translations/commentaries for bilingual (Hebrew-Aramaic) audiences. The Targums preserved an older understanding of the Hebrew text and guarded against innovations now attested in sources such as the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Dead Sea Scrolls. In their written form, the Targums provided a guide to the reading of the Hebrew Bible in the period between the making of its purely consonantal text and the later written systems of vocalization and accentuation in the Masoretic Text. The present article offers demonstrable examples of such guidance.

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The Masoretic Text (MT) includes three features designed to ensure transmission of an authoritative tradition of reading the grammar and syntax of the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible: (1) a written system of vocalization or vowel pointing, (2) a written system of accentuation, and (3) Masora—abbreviated notes in the side margins (Masora parva), full notes in the upper and lower margins (Masora magna), and final Masora.1 With the loss of biblical Hebrew as a living language spoken by native speakers, the need for such features only increased with the passage of time, as oral tradition from one generation to the next could only do so much. The introduction of these features in the second half of the first millennium CE raises the question of how the traditional understanding of the Hebrew text might have been preserved apart from oral tradition in the centuries after biblical Hebrew became a dead language and prior to the paratextual features of the MT.

Translations of the Hebrew Bible into other languages such as Greek and Syriac certainly aided in this to some degree, but the purpose of such translations was not primarily to guide readers of the Hebrew text in their understanding of the grammar and syntax. Rather, it was to render the content of the Hebrew Bible into the language of the target audience, even if the translation technique in many cases suggests more of an effort to bring the audience to the Hebrew text rather than to bring the Hebrew text to the audience.2 Synagogue readings and expositions of the Hebrew Bible, as well as early...


2 “The aim of the LXX translators was to bring the reader close to the Hebrew original rather than to bring the Hebrew original to the Greek speaking reader. According to NETS the relation of the Greek to the Hebrew...
rabbinic commentary in the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Midrashim, also functioned to preserve a way of reading the biblical Hebrew text, but such preservation was done only indirectly since the goal of this reading and exegesis was homiletical, halakhic, and haggadic.

The Aramaic Targums may fill a gap here in a way that has not hitherto been fully appreciated. The formerly accepted narrative for the origin of the Targums was that they began in the synagogues as extemporaneous oral renderings designed to translate readings from the Hebrew Bible for Aramaic-speaking Jewish communities that no longer understood biblical Hebrew well enough to comprehend the readings. These renderings became standardized over time and subsequently received their written form. Despite the emergence of Aramaic as a common language, however, Hebrew did persist in Jewish communities as a living language, albeit not in the form of biblical Hebrew but as Mishnaic Hebrew and Qumran Hebrew. The evidence suggests that this was not merely a survival of the language in literary form but a continued existence of the spoken language at a later stage of development. Chaim Rabin has offered an alternative explanation of the Targums that better accounts for this evidence. Rabin notes that the extant written Targums often presuppose knowledge of Hebrew on the part of their readers. This would seem to suggest that the primary purpose of the Targums was not to translate the Hebrew Bible for Aramaic speakers but to comment on the Bible for a bilingual audience in a way that would keep the commentary distinct from the biblical text itself. The Targum is thus a “guide to the correct text has to play a prominent role. In consequence the practical aim of the NETS project is to serve the study of the Hebrew original” (Wolfgang Kraus, “Contemporary Translations of the Septuagint: Problems and Perspectives,” in Septuagint Research: Issues and Challenges in the Study of the Greek Jewish Scriptures, ed. Wolfgang Kraus and R. Glenn Wooden, SCS 53 [Atlanta: SBL Press, 2005], 69).

Rashi states in his commentary to b. Megillah 21b that the Targum is for women and commoners who do not know Hebrew. Likewise, Aberbach and Grossfeld are confident that Targum Onqelos “was designated for the benefit of the Aramaic-speaking masses, not for scholars who were generally familiar with Hebrew and spoke it among themselves, at least in learned discussions” (Targum Onkelos to Genesis, vol. 1 [Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1982], 9).

“In the synagogue, explanations had to be brief and clear, and closely linked to each verse; they also had to be complete, as no dialogue between teacher and taught was possible. A paraphrase into Hebrew was impossible, because the uninstructed could easily take the paraphrase as part of the sacred text. The difference between mixed language and pure biblical Hebrew was hardly such that it would assure the clear distinction, at speaking speed, between the two kinds of text. It was therefore an almost ideal way out of the difficulty to provide the explanations in a literary language, transitional Aramaic, which was no doubt widely understood, resembling both spoken mishnaic Hebrew and spoken Aramaic, but almost word for word clearly set off from its Hebrew equivalents” (Chaim Rabin, “Hebrew and Aramaic in the First Century,” in The Jewish People in the First Century, Volume 2, ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern, CRINT [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976], 1030). The Targum was further distinguished from the Hebrew by the fact that it was given orally by a meturgeman (“translator”) who was separate from the reader of the written biblical text (see m. Megillah 4:4). On the other hand, Étan Levine believes that “there is no evidence that the extant targums originated in association with the liturgical reading of Scripture, or that, as a genre, targum derived from the synagogue and was originally oral” (“The Targums: Their Interpretive Character and Their Place in Jewish Text Tradition,” in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation, Volume 1, ed. Magne Sæbø [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996], 324).


Note that the biblical books of Daniel and Ezra-Nehemiah both presuppose a bilingual (Hebrew and Aramaic) readership.
understanding of a Hebrew text for those who already understood the words.” This would certainly explain the distinctive character of the Targums as translations/commentaries as compared with other ancient versions of the Bible. What appears to be rather straightforward translation of the Hebrew text at one moment can suddenly transform into expansive paraphrase without warning.

Abraham Tal has suggested that the Targums were not designed to make Scripture accessible to the masses but to protect Scripture from the masses. According to Tal, the main concern of those who produced the Targums was to prevent modernization of the biblical text and any attempt to adapt it to current linguistic habits. Tal demonstrates that such modernization was a real threat. On the one hand, the Samaritan Pentateuch shows evidence of adaptation to the linguistic changes of Mishnaic Hebrew such that modernization apparently became the norm in the Samaritan community. On the other hand, the Dead Sea Scrolls provide ample evidence of updated Hebrew texts (e.g., 1QIsa) co-existing with more conservative texts. Such modernized texts did not survive and develop into lasting traditions primarily because the community (or communities) that preserved them did not survive. Tal does not provide specific examples of the ways in which the Targums helped to resist change.

Once the Targums began to make the transition from their presumed oral beginnings to their presently known written form, there was also a shift in their design. No longer were they primarily or exclusively to be heard aurally by the masses in the synagogue for the purpose of protection from modernization, nor did those who produced the written Targums simply aim to record the oral tradition. Rather, the written Targums were made for a new audience—the scribal elite who could not only understand but also read both Hebrew and Aramaic and study the Targums for their insight into how the text of the Hebrew Bible should be read and interpreted (grammar, syntax, and semantics). The written Targums of the Pentateuch and the Prophets were produced during the first half of the first millennium CE at a time when such a guide was becoming increasingly necessary. Biblical Hebrew was a dead language, and the written aids of the later Masoretic Text were not yet available. The Targums continued to serve this purpose in the medieval period as evidenced by their use in the rabbinic commentaries of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Redak among others.

Modern introductions to the Targums tend to focus on the concepts introduced into the biblical text from the time perspective of those who produced the Targums. Such concepts are then aligned with other early biblical interpreters such as the New Testament authors or those responsible for the

7 Rabin, “Hebrew and Aramaic,” 1032. “There is clear evidence that the Rabbis viewed the targum as more than translation in any narrow sense: its purpose was to exegete and to interpret Scripture” (Philip S. Alexander, “Jewish Aramaic Translations of Hebrew Scriptures,” in Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, ed. Martin Jan Mulder and Harry Sysling, reprint ed. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004], 239).

8 Of course, this sort of thing also happens to some extent in other early versions such as the LXX and the Syriac, but it is the degree to which it occurs in the Targums that makes them unique. For a helpful taxonomy of different types of Targum renderings, see Alexander, “Jewish Aramaic Translations,” 225–37.


11 It goes without saying that the written vocalization of the Targums was also not present at this time. The examples discussed in the present article do not depend upon the written vocalization for their validity.

12 See, for example, Paul V. M. Flesher and Bruce Chilton, The Targums: A Critical Introduction (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011).
rabbinic literature. This often gives the impression that the Targums are little more than products of their own time. They are considered valuable as indirect commentaries on the period(s) of Judaism from which they come and as witnesses to the history of interpretation that they represent but not as guides to the Bible itself. While there are certainly features of the Targums that might be dubbed anachronistic or fanciful, the Targums rarely do anything without at least the perception of exegetical warrant. Those who produced the Targums knew the biblical text quite well, and it would be a mistake to dismiss them entirely for their insight into very old traditions that they have preserved concerning how the biblical text should be read and understood, traditions that predate the Targums by a considerable period of time.

If Tal is correct that the Targums served to protect against modernization of the Hebrew text, then this would presumably have applied to preservation of certain kinds of syntactical constructions. According to James Barr, “For those who knew Hebrew, the Aramaic version functioned as a more or less authoritative interpretation, which both elucidated the linguistic obscurities of the original and smoothed out its religious difficulties.” The present article is devoted to examples of such linguistic elucidation where the Targums appear to have maintained an older understanding of the Hebrew syntax, one which was then preserved in many cases at a later time by the vocalization and accentuation of the Masoretic Text.

1. Genesis 1:2

Interpretation of תָּהוּ וּבָּהוּ in Genesis 1:2 depends in part upon whether these words are two coordinated nouns with separate meanings or an example of hendiadys whereby one meaning is expressed through two words. The common modern English translation “formless and void” (e.g., NIV) assumes the former option. This translation has its origin in the ancient Greek translation of these words in Genesis 1:2 (see also Vulgate, Luther): ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος (‘unseen and unformed’). Such a rendering does not have its basis in the meaning of the Hebrew text but in the Hellenistic philosophy that influenced the Greek translator’s view of creation. According to Plato’s Timaeus, the creation of the world is the product of order brought out of chaos.

The noun תָּהוּ (“emptiness”) often occurs without בָּהוּ (BDB 1062). In fact, it is used alone in Isaiah 45:18 with reference to Genesis 1:2 to say that God did not create the land תָּהוּ. Rather, he fashioned it “to be inhabited” (לֹ֥שֶׁב). This strongly suggests that תָּהוּ is understood here to mean “uninhabited”

15 The term “syntax” is used here to mean the orderly arrangement of two or more words. Any exegetical rendering of the Targums that serves to disambiguate an otherwise ambiguous syntactical construction in the consonantal Hebrew text is considered a guide to its reading. Such exegesis reflects an understanding of the syntax whether or not the translator intended to address a purely syntactical issue.
16 The Syriac version simply transliterates the Hebrew words.
17 “As the Platonic influences on the translation of Gen 1–2 demonstrate, the translators of the Septuagint were familiar with Plato” (Siegfried Kreuzer, The Bible in Greek: Translation, Transmission, and Theology of the Septuagint, SCS 63 [Atlanta: SBL, 2015], 20).
or “uninhabitable” (i.e., a wilderness; see Deut 32:10). On the other hand, the noun בהו ("emptiness") never occurs apart from תָּהוּ (see Isa 34:11; Jer 4:23). This hints at the possibility that the combination חֶרֶם בהו may be a fixed expression with a single meaning that must be rendered more idiomatically. In other words, it does not mean “emptiness and emptiness” but “uninhabitable.” This is precisely the way the expression is used in Jeremiah 4:23 where the judgment of the land is depicted in terms of an un-creation, a return to the wilderness-like state of the land in Genesis 1:2 before its preparation as a place of blessing for humanity. Such a land is not chaos but a dark place in the real world, yet without people and without animal life (Jer 4:23, 25, 29). This is exactly how Targum Neofiti understands בהו תָּהוּ in Genesis 1:2a (cf. Targum Onqelos, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan): “And the land was תָּהוּ בָּהוּ, desolate of humanity and animals, and empty of all work of plants and of trees, and darkness was spread over the surface of the deep/ocean.” The land was an uninhabitable place covered with water, and it was nighttime. Therefore, God called forth the morning sunrise (Gen 1:3) to begin his work of clearing and preparing the land for habitation. The word for the acceptable state of habitation in Genesis 1 is טוב ("good"), which is likely a play on the sound of בהו תָּהוּ ("uninhabitable") and makes it טוב (“habitable”).

2. Genesis 1:14a

The third masculine singular jussive verb יהי at the beginning of YHWH’s discourse in Genesis 1:14a (MT, Samaritan Pentateuch, 4QGen b, k) is usually understood to be impersonal (“Let there be”) due to the fact that the following noun מַמְרוֹת ("lights") is plural (see GKC §144b): “And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse to divide between the day and the night.’” This translation gives the impression that the luminaries (sun, moon, and stars) were created on the fourth day despite the background information provided in Genesis 1:1, which says that God created the whole world (“the sky and the land”) in the beginning, and despite the start of the narrative in Genesis 1:3: “And God said, ‘Let there be a morning sunrise [אור],’ and there was a morning sunrise” (see BDB, 21). Such difficulty with the above translation of Genesis 1:14a is typically resolved by an awkward appeal to the existence of some unknown light source prior to the creation of the sun, moon, and stars, or it is resolved by an appeal to the suggestion that these luminaries were obscured by the clouds before the fourth day.

The syntax of Genesis 1:14a, however, differs markedly from that of Genesis 1:6: “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, and let it divide [or, that it may divide] water from water.” The text of Genesis 1:6 requires the reader to see a “making” of an expanse (i.e., the sky) with the separation of the water below from the water above. The lifting of the foggy mist from the water-covered land to become

18 It is generally accepted that the early sixteenth-century Neofiti manuscript is a copy of a Targum whose origins go back over a millennium earlier. Most extant Targum manuscripts are substantially later than their ancestor copies from which they come. Furthermore, Targums typically preserve individual renderings that span from a very early period all the way to the time of their final form.

19 Genesis 1:1 is not a title or a heading, nor is it a dependent, temporal clause (cf. Gen 2:4b). The “x + qatal” clauses of 1:1–2 establish the background for the narrative, which begins in Genesis 1:3 with wayyiqtol (cf. Gen 3:1; 4:1; et al.; see GKC §11a). See also Alviero Niccacci, Syntax of the Verb in Classical Hebrew Prose, trans. W. G. E. Watson, JSOTSup 86 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 35–41. The creation of the whole world in the beginning sets the stage for the preparation of a particular land of blessing for humanity (see Gen 2:11–14; 15:18; see also Gen 2:3b; Isa 45:18). See John H. Sailhamer, Genesis Unbound (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996).

clouds in the sky not only allows the expanse to appear but also assigns a function to it at the same time (Gen 1:6–8). On the other hand, the “making” of the lights in Genesis 1:14–19 seems to consist entirely of giving them their purpose. This is the way Targum Onqelos has translated Genesis 1:14a: “And the Lord said, ‘Let lights in the expanse of the sky be [יהי] for dividing between the day and the night’” (cf. Targum Neofiti, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan). Despite the lack of grammatical concord, the Targums of the Pentateuch interpret the “lights” (מארת) to be the subject of the singular verb (יהי) (see GKC §145o), and they indicate this by translating מארת with a plural verb in Aramaic (יהון), which agrees with the Aramaic noun for “lights” (נהורין). This understanding of Genesis 1:14a works well with the clauses in Genesis 1:14b–15a, which employ plural verbs with “lights” as the assumed grammatical subject and further explain the purpose of the lights: “and let them be [יהיו] for signs and for appointed times and for days and years, and let them be [יהיו] for lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the land.” Thus, the lights were created “in the beginning” (Gen 1:1), and a morning sunrise was summoned to begin day one of the week (1:3–5), but on the fourth day the purpose of the lights was assigned to them.

This particular understanding of the text of Genesis 1:14a found in the Targums is also preserved in the other early versions, which is not always the case with other examples found elsewhere. The LXX, Syriac, and Latin Vulgate all employ plural verbs to translate מארת. The accentuation system of the MT, which uses the atnach (א) to divide a verse between topic and discussion, also preserves this ancient interpretation. Genesis 1:14a provides the topic, which is the general purpose of the lights; and Genesis 1:14b provides the discussion, which is about the specific purpose of the lights. The lights are designed to mark the “appointed times” (מועדים) found in Leviticus 23 (see Sir 43:6–7). The translation of מארת in Genesis 1:14a as “Let there be” only began with Luther’s German rendering (Es werden) and continued with Tyndale’s English translation, the KJV, and modern English translations.

3. Exodus 39:32; 40:2, 6, 29; 1 Chronicles 6:17

There is a combination of three words (משכן אהל מועד) that occurs five times in the Hebrew Bible:

1. And all (the) work of (the) measchen ahel moon was finished. (Exod 39:32a)
2. On day one of the first month, you will raise up the measchen ahel moon. (Exod 40:2)
3. And you will put the altar of burnt offering before (the) entrance of (the) measchen ahel moon. (Exod 40:6)
4. And the altar of burnt offering he put [Samaritan Pentateuch adds: before] (the) entrance of (the) measchen ahel moon. (Exod 40:29)
5. And they were serving before (the) measchen ahel moon with song until Solomon built the house of YHWH in Jerusalem. (1 Chr 6:17a)

The exact syntactical relationship of these words in the MT’s consonantal text is not immediately evident. The noun measchen “(dwelling place)” is normally translated “tabernacle” and often has the definite article when it is by itself in the absolute state (see Exod 39:33a); and the construct phrase אהל מועד (“tent of meeting”), whose noun in the absolute state lacks definiteness, is nevertheless translated “the tent of meeting” as if the whole phrase constituted a proper noun.21 One possibility for these words is that the entire combination should be treated as a single construct chain (משכן אהל מועד). The MT

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21 This tent is sometimes simply called האהל (“the tent”; see Exod 39:33a).
vocalizes the text this way in all five occurrences. If אהל מועד is a proper noun, then the entire chain is definite: “the tabernacle of the tent of meeting” (see ESV). This is important because the phrase in Exodus 40:2 has the definite direct object marker (את) in front of it. With the exception of a passage like Exodus 33:7–11 where אהל מועד appears to be a temporary tent outside the camp prior to the construction of the tabernacle, the terms משכן and אהל מועד seem to be used interchangeably for the tabernacle (see BDB 14). Thus, in the phrase אהל מועד משכן, the term אהל מועד is likely to be epexegetical (see GKC §128k, 130e): “the tabernacle, the tent of meeting” (or, “the tabernacle, that is, the tent of meeting”; see NET; cf. Exod 39:33a). It is worth noting that משכן in the first two examples (Exod 39:32a; 40:2) has a disjunctive accent in the MT, perhaps indicating the appositional relationship of the two terms. Words in the construct state normally have conjunctive accents (see Exod 40:6, 29a; 1 Chr 6:17).

The update of the proto-MT’s consonantal text found in the Samaritan Pentateuch has disambiguated the sense of the syntactical construction by placing an article on המשכן אהל מועד ("the tabernacle, the tent of meeting"). This occurs in all four examples in the Pentateuch. Despite the helpfulness of such a clarification, this updated Hebrew text was preserved only in the Samaritan community, not in the Jewish community. The early versions (LXX and Syriac) do little to aid the understanding of the text. The LXX renders the entire phrase as “the tent of testimony” (τὴν σκηνὴν τοῦ μαρτυρίου and τῆς σκηνῆς τοῦ μαρτυρίου) in Exodus 40:2, 6 (no equivalent in Exod 39:32). In Exodus 40:29, Rahlfs’s text simply has “the tent” (τῆς σκηνῆς); Ziegler’s is the same as Exodus 40:6. In 1 Chronicles 6:17, the LXX has “the tent of the house of the testimony” (τῆς σκηνῆς οἴκου μαρτυρίου). The Syriac has “the dwelling place [or, tabernacle] of time” (ܡܫܟܢܐ) in Exodus 39:32; 40:2, 6, 29. In 1 Chronicles 6:17, it has “the dwelling place [or, tabernacle] in the dwelling place [or, tabernacle] of time” (ܡܫܟܢܐ. ܒܡܫܟܢ ܙܒܢܐ). With the exception of 1 Chronicles 6:17, these translations at least give the impression that a single referent is in view. Nevertheless, these versions were preserved primarily in Christian communities, even though they both had Jewish origins. Therefore, neither the LXX nor the Syriac could have been the main source for understanding the consonantal text of the proto-MT during the first half of the first millennium CE prior to the MT’s introduction of written systems of vocalization and accentuation.

The Targums bridged the gap between the proto-MT and the MT and preserved for the Jewish community the understanding of המשכן אהל מועד that the tabernacle is not something separable from the tent of meeting. Targum Onqelos (cf. Targum Neofiti, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan) renders the phrase in Exodus 39:32; 40:2, 6, 29 as משכן אהל מועד ("the dwelling place" [or, "tabernacle"], “the dwelling place [or, tabernacle/tent] of time” [i.e., appointed time (or, meeting)]). Targum 1 Chronicles 6:17 follows suit. By placing the article on the first noun (cf. Samaritan Pentateuch), the Targums indicate that the proper understanding of המשכן אהל מועד is “the tabernacle, the tent of meeting.”

### 4. 1 Samuel 3:3

English translations typically ignore the Masoretic accentuation of 1 Samuel 3:3, specifically the placement of the major disjunctive accent athnach under the participle שוכב (“lying down”): “and the

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22 The tabernacle or tent of time is the tent of appointed time or meeting.

23 The revised Greek translations (Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion) have “the tent of the covering of the testimony” in Exodus 40:2, 6 (see also Theodotion’s version of Exod 40:29).
lamp of God had not yet been extinguished. Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD as well; the ark of God was also there” (NET). Such a rendering of the syntax gives the rather odd circumstance of Samuel (and Eli [1 Sam 3:2]) sleeping overnight in the most holy place of the tabernacle where the ark of God was. One very important exception to this trend is the KJV: “And ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was, and Samuel was laid down to sleep; That the LORD called Samuel: and he answered, Here am I” (1 Sam 3:3–4; see also Luther). This translation attempts to avoid the difficulty by moving the phrase “in the temple of the LORD” to an earlier place in the syntax, but this hardly produces an acceptable result. The ancient versions (LXX, Syriac, Vulgate) also give the impression that Samuel was lying down in the most holy place.

The Masoretic accentuation, however, suggests the following translation: “And the lamp of God was yet to be extinguished, and Samuel was lying down. In the temple of the LORD where the ark of God was, the LORD called to Samuel, and he said, ‘Here am I’” (1 Sam 3:3–4). According to this understanding, the place where Samuel was lying down is not stated, and it is not necessary to read the text as if it were indicating that Samuel was lying down in the most holy place of the tabernacle. Samuel was lying down prior to the extinguishing of the lamp, and the LORD called to Samuel from the tabernacle where the ark was (cf. Exod 25:22). Targum Jonathan is the only ancient version to preserve this interpretation of the syntax from the time of the proto-Masoretic text to the time of the written system of accentuation included within the MT: “And the lamp of the sanctuary of the Lord had not yet died out, and Samuel was sleeping in the court of the Levites, and a voice was heard from the temple of the Lord where the ark of the Lord was” (see Rashi’s commentary).

Even a modern interpreter as careful and attentive to the details of the primary sources as S. R. Driver overlooks the witness of Targum Jonathan and the Masoretic accentuation: “Evidently Samuel was sleeping in close proximity to the ark—perhaps, in a chamber contiguous to the ולכאר ביהלמ which it was, if not, as the Hebrew text taken strictly would imply, actually in the הלל itself.” Likewise, P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. comments, “[The ark] was kept in an inner sanctuary at the back of the nave or temple proper, where Samuel slept. Why Samuel’s bed was here we are not told, but presumably he needed to be nearby in order to discharge some cultic responsibility.” It is important to note that these commentators are not overtly disagreeing with Targum Jonathan or the Masoretic accentuation. Rather, they appear to be unaware of them.

5. 2 Samuel 7:14

The Hebrew text of 2 Samuel 7:14b features an ambiguous construction (אשר בعناוות), which modern English translations render either as a temporal clause (“when he commits iniquity”) or as a conditional clause (“if he commits iniquity”). In context, this is part of the covenant with David and a

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24 “Samuel neither slept in the holy place by the side of the candlestick and table of shew-bread, nor in the most holy place in front of the ark of the covenant, but in the court, where cells were built for the priests and Levites to live in when serving at the sanctuary” (C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, The Books of Samuel, trans. James Martin, Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament 2, reprint ed. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001], 394).


description of the son of David who will build the temple and reign over an everlasting kingdom and whose relationship with YHWH will be like that of a son to a father (cf. Ps 2:7): “I will be his father, and he will be my son, whom, in his committing iniquity, I will correct with a rod of men and with blows of sons of men.” While it is true that the combination of the preposition ב and an infinitive construct often yields a temporal clause in translation, such a translation here would presuppose that this son of David with such a unique relationship to YHWH will commit iniquity. In actual fact, the image of correcting the son with a rod appears only to illustrate the closeness of the father-son relationship (cf. Prov 13:24), and it does not occur at all in the Chronicler’s account of the covenant with David (1 Chr 17:13).

The inner-biblical readings of 2 Samuel 7:14b interpret the text to be an if-then construction: “If [דָּנוּ] his sons forsake my instruction and in my judgments they do not walk, if [דָּנוּ] my statutes they profane and my commands they do not keep, (then) I will visit with a rod their transgression and with blows their iniquity” (Ps 89:31–33 MT [Eng., 89:30–32]). This text reapplies the words for the one son of David to the multiple sons of David who reign in the meantime.27 For them, the terms of the covenant with David are conditional, and this is clearly marked by the conjunction אַמּ (”if”) (see also 1 Kgs 2:4; 3:14; 6:12; 8:25; 9:4; 1 Chr 22:13). This is also the reading of Psalm 132:12: “If [דָּנוּ] your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies that I teach them, (then) their sons too will sit on your throne forever.” These inner-biblical readings of 2 Samuel 7:14b must be taken seriously because they reveal native Hebrew understanding of the infinitive construction.28

The LXX translates 2 Samuel 7:14b as an if-then construction: καὶ ἐὰν ἔλθῃ ἡ ἀδικία αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐλέγξω αὐτὸν ἐν ῥάβδῳ ἀνδρῶν καὶ ἐν ἁφαῖς υἱῶν ἀνθρώπων (“and if his injustice comes, then I will reprove him with a rod of men and with wounds of sons of men”; see also Vulgate, Luther). But despite the Jewish origins of this translation, it would not have served as the primary guide to the understanding of the Hebrew text during the first half of the first millennium CE in the wake of its adoption by the Christian community. This role would have fallen to the Targum, and it is the Targum that preserves the interpretation of 2 Samuel 7:14b as an if-then construction for readers of the Hebrew text:29 “I will be to him like a father, and he will be before me like a son, whom, if [דָּנוּ] he sins, I will punish him with chastisement of men and with discipline of sons of men” (Targum Jonathan 2 Sam 7:14). This translation ensures that future readings of 2 Samuel 7:14 will be consistent with inner-biblical readings.

6. Isaiah 66:21

In some cases, while the Targum preserves an older way of understanding the Hebrew text, the Masoretic vocalization represents an innovation. Thus, the Targum’s understanding of the text in these situations does not eventually surface in the later written system of vocalization. Jan Joosten points to the secondary vocalization of MT Isaiah 66:21 as an example of midrashic alteration: “And also from them [i.e., from the nations] will I take for the priests, for the Levites [לַלְוִיִּם לַכֹּהֲנִים],”30 says YHWH.”

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27 See Michael B. Shepherd, The Text in the Middle, StBibLit 162 (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 122–29.
28 If it is argued that the direction of dependence runs the opposite way, then the infinitive construction is a way to express the meaning of the conditional clauses.
29 The Syriac version is just as ambiguous as the Hebrew text.
30 A multitude of Masoretic manuscripts and the Syriac version coordinate these two phrases with a waw conjunction: “for the priests and for the Levites.” One manuscript of the LXX does not have the second phrase “for the Levites.”
He comments, “The Tiberian reading, with the article, is probably a midrashic alteration seeking to avoid the suggestion that God would, in the eschaton, choose priests from among the nations.” Joosten suggests that the reading without the article, found in the LXX and the Targum, is more natural: “And also from them will I take to be priests, Levites [לִלְוִיִּם לְכֹֹהֲנִים], says YHWH.” Thus, YHWH will take people from the nations not to serve the needs of the priests, as the MT would have it. Rather, he will take them from the nations to serve as priests (see Exod 19:6; Isa 61:6; 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

7. Code Words

Failure to identify code words in the proto-MT led to significant disruption in the ability of early translators and interpreters to decipher the syntax of the Hebrew text. Two such code words or phrases—ששך (Jer 25:26b; 51:41a) and קמי ל (Jer 51:1)—appear in MT Jeremiah. The first of these, ששך, has no representation in LXX Jeremiah and was likely not in the translator’s Vorlage. It appears on the surface to be a place name (“Sheshach”), but no such place by this name is known. The Syriac translates it as “Arsacid” (a Parthian dynasty) in both occurrences (Jer 25:26b; 51:41a). The Latin Vulgate has the transliterated name as “Sesach” (see also Luther). Among the ancient versions, only the Targum, which renders בבל (“Babylon”) preserves the correct understanding of this code word. The Targum has interpreted ששך according to an early exegetical technique known as atbash whereby the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet can be substituted for one another (א and ת), the second and second to last (ב and ש), and so on. Thus, ששך (“Sheshach”) becomes בבל (“Babylon”). The second example, קמי ל (Jer 51:1) is identified as atbash for כשדים (“Chaldeans”) by both the LXX and the Targum. Other early versions did not fare so well. The Syriac interprets the phrase to mean “hard heart.” The Latin Vulgate translates it literally as “the heart of those who rise up against me” (cf. Luther). Neither of these versions recognizes the phrase as code. It may be asked why such code words or phrases might be used for Babylon or the Chaldeans in a book that otherwise openly refers to Babylon or the Chaldeans as the enemy. Richard Steiner suggests that while code words for Babylon or the Chaldeans likely began in popular usage out of fear of retaliation for any anti-Babylonian speech, they now appear in the book of Jeremiah alongside clear references to Babylon as a way of “flouting the taboo against anti-Babylonian agitation.”

The place “Beth Aven” east of Bethel (Josh 7:2; 18:12; 1 Sam 13:5; 14:23) occurs several times in Hosea as a substitute for Bethel itself (Hos 4:15; 5:8; 10:5; see also Hos 10:8; Amos 5:5). Due to the prominence of the alternative worship there (1 Kgs 12:29), “Bethel” (“house of God”) has become known as “Beth Aven” (“house of trouble/idolatry”). Among the early versions, only the Targum preserves this understanding of “Beth Aven” in Hosea, clarifying for the reader that this is derogatory code for “Bethel.” The only exception is Hosea 5:8, where the Targum renders “Beth Aven” paraphrastically as “the house of my sanctuary,” which presupposes “house of God” (see Gen 28; 35). The LXX and Syriac have “house of On” for each occurrence of “Beth Aven” (cf. Gen 41:45, 50; 46:20; LXX Exod 1:11; Jer 43:13 [LXX 50:13]). The Latin Vulgate simply transliterates: “Bethaven” (cf. Luther).


32 It is unusual for a Targum and the LXX to agree against the MT, but it does happen (e.g., Jer 11:19; 15:17).

The phrase יتكامل יהושפט ("the valley of Jehoshaphat") in Joel 4:2, 12 MT (Eng., 3:2, 12) has given rise to several different interpretations. This is the place where YHWH will enter into judgment with all the nations. One possibility is that this valley is the valley of berakhah or the valley of blessing where the people blessed YHWH for their victory over Moab, Ammon, and Edom in the days of Jehoshaphat (2 Chr 20:26). According to this view, a past victory over the nations prefigures a future one. Another possibility is that יتكامل is not a reference to King Jehoshaphat. Rather, it signifies “YHWH judges”: “the valley where YHWH judges.” Most of the early versions leave this phrase uninterpreted (LXX, Syriac, Vulgate), but the Targum renders it as “the valley of the decision of judgment,” which is the same phrase that it employs to translation “the valley of decision” in Joel 4:14 (Eng., 3:14). In other words, the Targum identifies the phrase “the valley of decision” in Joel 4:14 (Eng., 3:14) as the built-in interpretation of “the valley of Jehoshaphat” in Joel 4:2, 12 (Eng., 3:2, 12). Thus, the phrase “the valley of Jehoshaphat” is code for “the valley of decision.”

8. Conclusion

The main purpose of the Targums was not to make the Hebrew Bible accessible to Aramaic speakers but to comment on the Bible for a bilingual audience and to provide guidance on the grammar and syntax of the Hebrew text. Those who produced the Targums wanted to preserve a way of reading the Hebrew and to prevent modernization of the biblical text and adaptation of it to current linguistic custom. The written Targums were made for the scribal elite who could not only understand but also read both Hebrew and Aramaic and study the Targums for their insight into how the text of the Hebrew Bible should be read and interpreted. The written Targums of the Pentateuch and the Prophets were produced during the first half of the first millennium CE at a time when biblical Hebrew was a dead language and the written aids of the Masoretic Text were still not available. The guidance found within the Targums often aligns with what later surfaced in the written vocalization and accentuation of the Masoretic Text. Such guidance is still valuable today for readers of the biblical Hebrew text.

34 See Michael B. Shepherd, A Commentary on the Book of the Twelve: The Minor Prophets, KEL (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 137.

35 Douglas Stuart has suggested that an original phrase יتكامل מornings (“valleys of judgment”) may have been altered to יتكامل יהושפט (“the valley of Jehoshaphat”) (Hosea–Jonah, WBC 31 [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987], 264).