

*“That night, sleep deserted the king.”
(Esth. 6:1)*

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THE TARGUMS TO ESTHER

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Slide 1: Introduction

Good afternoon everybody and thank you for coming to my presentation. Today I will introduce you to a fascinating, ancient translation of the Book of Esther, the so-called ‘Targum to Esther’. This translation exists in several different versions, and therefore it is better to use the plural and speak of the ‘Targums to Esther’, just like the title on the screen. I will explain the language and function of these targums, I will trace their history, and I will give you some interesting examples that show the specific character of these translations.

Slide 2: Introduction to Targum

The term ‘targum’ means ‘translation, interpretation’. In general it was used to indicate the translation of the Hebrew Bible in any language. So the Greek Septuagint could also be called a Targum, but it became the specific designation for the ancient Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. The Aramaic targums are fascinating because they often combine translation and interpretation. Therefore, verses can be quite long compared to the Hebrew source text. The practice of Targum seems to have originated in the synagogue in the period when Aramaic gradually replaced Hebrew as the spoken language in the Jewish communities of Palestine and Babylonia from the 5th century BCE onward. The Aramaic speaking Jews no longer understood Biblical Hebrew and therefore had difficulty in understanding the Biblical verses that were read in synagogue. During the synagogue service an interpreter, the so-called ‘meturgeman’, would translate and interpret the biblical verses into Aramaic. This all had to be done by heart because never could the impression be given that the Targum was being read from a scroll. Therefore, the reading of the Bible, the *written* Torah, and the recitation of the Targum had to be done by two different persons. Preferably, the meturgeman was blind to make sure that he indeed recited from memory. These oral Aramaic translations of the Bible were in the course of time committed to writing. This process of written transmission seems to have happened from Late Antiquity onwards. The Targum also constituted an important link between the Bible and Rabbinic exegesis. The targums contain material that reflects Rabbinic traditions found in sources such as Talmud and Midrashic literature. However, sometimes we also find unique material that has not been attested elsewhere.

Slide 3: Liturgical function of the Book of Esther

The inclusion of the Book of Esther in the biblical canon is quite remarkable because in it the name of God is not mentioned at all. It rather seems that God works in mysterious ways behind the scenes of the narrative. However, the book featured prominently within the liturgical service of the Jewish community. The festival of Purim was celebrated long before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70CE, and therefore the rabbis could not ignore the book's relevance and included it in the Jewish canon. This may have happened in the course of the 2nd century CE. Despite the rabbinic controversy surrounding the canonization of the Book of Esther, there is evidence of the book's prominence within these early rabbinic circles. The Book of Esther, which Jews call 'The Scroll [= Megillah] of Esther', gave its name ('Megillah') to a tractate of the Mishna, Tosefta and the Talmuds. Amongst others, this tractate deals with the laws of Purim and offers exegetical understanding of the biblical book itself.

Slide 4: Earliest evidence of the targum(s) to Esther

Interestingly, mention is actually made of a targum to Esther in Tosefta Megillah 4 [3]:20,21 and Talmud Yerushalmi Megillah 4:1, and we may infer from these references that a targum to Esther was already in circulation as early as the third or fourth centuries CE. Over the next centuries, the Esther Scroll gave rise to many more Aramaic translations. This was perhaps most vividly described by Rav Hai Gaon, who was the head of one of the Babylonian academies during the 10th-11th centuries. He wrote that at that time there existed in Babylonia several distinct targums to Esther. He once said, in response to a question relating to a targum to Esther:

"Regarding your comment that your targum of Esther does not contain any mention of the End [of Days] ... what is the source of your targum, and who wrote it? ... it can only be a vulgar text! Moreover, there exist here in Babylonia various targums of Esther that are distinct from one another: one with many additional aggadic passages, and another without them."

Rav Hai Gaon's sharp condemnation of that particular targum seems justified, because the targums to Esther do normally contain the concept of the End of Days and the Future World. He must have been dealing with a corrupt version. In addition, it may be useful to explain the term 'aggadic', which is derived from the word 'aggadah'. This word covers a broad spectrum of meanings and applies to passages in rabbinic literature (and in targums) that contain (pseudo-historical) anecdotes, legends; more or less the non-legal material.

Slide 5: Targum Rishon and Targum Sheni

It is evident from the words of Rav Hai Gaon that halfway the Middle Ages there was already a distinction between two major traditions of Targum Esther: commonly called 'Targum Rishon' and 'Targum Sheni', names that stand for the 'First Targum' and the 'Second Targum', respectively. Targum Rishon was the targum with less aggadic additions than Targum Sheni. However, each of these versions comprises of several sub-traditions. And, to make things more complicated, there are passages that are shared, almost literally, by both of these major traditions.

Additional proof for the wide variety of targums may be adduced from the many citations of Targum Esther throughout Rabbinic literature and the medieval commentaries to Esther, which are not in agreement with any of the presently extant Targums. Therefore, it seems that Targum Esther was never subjected to a rigid process of standardization. Even if some widely accepted targumic base text existed, it seems it could be shortened or elaborated upon, in response to the particular needs of a meturgeman and his congregation.

Slide 6: Targum Rishon

The Targum Rishon dates approximately from somewhere between 500-700CE and probably originated in Palestine. In its translation of the Hebrew source text, it varies between being quite literal and being very expansive at times. Sometimes Targum Rishon faithfully translates every word. At other times Targum Rishon introduces all kinds of new material. Usually, these additions consist of a few words in order to clarify the sense and to explain the Hebrew, see for instance

Esther 3:5

Hebrew text: ... Haman became filled with anger

Targum Rishon : ... Haman became filled with anger **against Mordekhai***

Esther 4:7

Hebrew text: ... and the fixed sum of silver ...

Targum Rishon: ... and the fixed sum of silver — **ten thousand talents** ... (cf. Esther 3:9 in Hebrew)

The additions in Targum Rishon, marked in bold and italics, are intended to make the meaning clearer for the people in the synagogue. Everyone present in the synagogue, young and old, should be able to understand the meaning of the Written Torah.

Slide 7: Targum Esther 1:9

Much more telling of the fascinating character of Targum Rishon is the following example, taken from Esther 1:9:

Hebrew text: Furthermore, Queen Vashti made a feast for the women in the palace of King Ahasuerus

Targum Rishon Furthermore, *the wicked* Queen Vashti made a feast for the women in the palace, *in the place of the bedroom* of King Ahasuerus

The addition of a derogatory adjective, such a 'wicked' here, for infamous personalities in Jewish tradition is standard in Rabbinic literature. In the Hebrew text Vashti makes her first appearance here, and therefore the Targum feels it necessary to clarify what type of person she is. The targums to Esther have this tendency to reveal the nature of the various people involved in the narrative, such as the *wicked* Vashti, the *righteous* Esther, the *wicked* Haman, and the *stupid* Ahasuerus.

Just as interesting is the addition that Vashti's feast was conducted in the bedroom of Ahasuerus, and this notion is also found in other rabbinic sources.¹ In their interpretation of the Hebrew text of Esther 1:9, the rabbis noticed that Vashti must have been a promiscuous woman, because why would she organize her feast in the royal palace of King Ahasuerus, a place meant for men, and not in the natural venue for such an event, the harem? Targum Rishon adds to this negative portrayal by even stating that Vashti's feast was held in the king's bedroom of all places!

Slides 8-9: Targum Esther 1:1

There are also longer insertions in Targum Rishon that contain pure aggadah, and one of these lengthy additions is very useful for us to look at because it casts further light on Vashti's negative portrayal. The example is found right at the beginning of the book, in Esther 1:1:

Hebrew text:

It happened during the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who ruled over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia.

Targum Rishon:

It happened during the days of *the wicked* Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus *in whose days (the decree allowing) work on the house of the great God was revoked. It remained revoked until the second year of Darius on the advice of the sinful Vashti, daughter of Evil Merodakh, son of Nebuchadnezzar. Because she did not permit the rebuild-*

1 E.g. Aggadath Esther 1:9 Midrash Leqah Tob 1:9.

ing of the Temple, it was decreed she be executed in the nude. And because Ahasuerus listened to her advice, his life was shortened and his kingdom was split up. **Slide 9** Previously all peoples, nations, and (speakers of various) languages, and provinces were under his rule, but now they were no longer subjected to him. In view of this fact, and subsequently, when it was revealed before the Lord that Vashti would be killed and he was destined to marry Esther, who was a descendant of Sarah, who lived 127 years, he was given an extension and he ruled 127 provinces, from India to western Ethiopia.

As you can see, the targum to this verse is much longer than the actual verse in Hebrew! The Esther story takes a completely different turn, and we learn things about the characters that are not found in the Hebrew text itself. Much of this additional material is also attested elsewhere in rabbinic literature. When we concentrate our examination of this verse on the portrayal of Queen Vashti, we now understand better why this targum casts her in such an extremely negative light, as a wicked and promiscuous woman. According to this targum and rabbinic tradition in general, she was the grand-daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian ruler who had destroyed the First Temple. Thanks to this additional information about Vashti, the Targum adds a lot of symbolism to the story. Vashti's replacement by Esther symbolizes the reversal that occurs in the Book of Esther: the destroyers of the Temple and the ones who sabotage its rebuilding receive their punishment while former glory will be restored for the people of Israel.

Slides 10-11: Esther 6:1

Another example also serves to illustrate the fantastic embellishments that are preserved in this targum:

Esther 6:1

Hebrew text:

That night the king could not sleep, so he ordered to bring the book of records, the annals, and they were read to the king.

Targum Rishon:

That night the outcry of women from the House of Israel ascended heaven and their voice was heard before the Lord of the Universe like the voice of young goats until all the supreme beings from on high [i.e. the angels] were shattered. So they arose in agitation, saying to each other: Perhaps the time has come for the world to be destroyed. Thus they assembled and came before the Lord of the Universe. The Master of the Universe replied and said to them: What is this voice of young goats that I hear? **Slide 11** Then the attribute of compassion [i.e. personalized divine attribute of compassion] replied, saying as follows: It is not the voice of young goats that you hear but the voice of women from the House of Israel who are destined to be killed upon the decree of the wicked Haman. Immediately thereupon the Lord of the Universe became filled with compassion and goodness for his people and ordered to tear up the seal which was seen worn by the House of Israel, and he commanded the angel who was in charge of disturbance to descend and disturb King Ahasuerus [It is noteworthy that in the targums to Esther God is very often mentioned in stark contrast with the source text, where God's name is noticeably absent, as I said earlier. We had to assume from the Hebrew text that God works in mysterious ways behind the scenes, but here we actually read how he works his miracles]; and the king could not sleep, and he rose in the mourning troubled in appearance. So he ordered Shimshai to bring the book of records [the Shimshai mentioned here seems to refer to Shimshai the scribe in the Book of Ezra, who wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king; according to rabbinic interpretation he is also one of Haman's sons]. When Shimsai, the scribe, perceived that which Mordechai related concerning Bightan and Theresh [this refers to Mordechai's discovery of a plot by these two men to kill the king], he turned over the pages of the book and did not wish to read, but on account of the desire from before the Lord of the Universe, the pages unfolded before the king.

Slide 12: Targum Rishon's manuscripts

As I said before, it seems that a targum to Esther already circulated in the first few centuries CE, but what is the earliest evidence we have with regards to Targum Rishon? How old are the texts that we have at our disposal? Well, the manuscripts that we have range from the early 14th to the 18th centuries. They are from Spain, France, Italy, and even Algeria. It is important to note, how-

ever, that even when Targum Rishon was copied in the late Middle Ages, its text could have been in circulation much longer. Furthermore, we should not underestimate the importance of oral tradition. Targum Rishon could have circulated for a long time before it was committed to writing. How do these manuscripts look? Some manuscripts are very well legible, but, unfortunately, others are badly damaged. They are spotty and sometimes totally illegible. The way the Targum is presented in these manuscripts can differ too. Sometimes Targum Rishon surrounds the Hebrew text of Esther, or the Targum runs in parallel columns to the full Hebrew text, or the Targumic text follows the initial words of the Hebrew verse.

Slide 13: Example manuscript Targum Rishon

To give you a better idea of how a manuscript can look like, I am showing you a manuscript with the first page of Targum Rishon. This manuscript is located in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. At the end of the targum we learn that this manuscript was written around 1455-56, and that the scribe's name was Natan ben Saadia ha-Cohen Sholal, who lived in Tlemcen, a town in North-western Algeria. My search on the identity of this scribe revealed that, in fact, he and his father had served as rabbis for the Jewish community in this town. The scribe introduces this targum as follows, at the top of the page:

'I will begin the targum of Megillat Esther with the help of the One who performs miracles, especially for His people'.

Thereupon the initial words of Esther 1 verse 1 in the Hebrew text are given [which I have encircled with a red colour], followed by the targum to that verse. In the rest of the manuscript, each verse of the Targum is preceded by the first word of the respective verse in Hebrew [the rest of the Hebrew words on that page are encircled in red too, vss. 2-4].

Slide 14: Targum Sheni

Now we briefly turn our attention to the second major tradition of Esther Targums, which is known as Targum Sheni. This work dates to the end of the 7th or beginning of the 8th century CE. However, the surviving manuscripts are dated much later and range from the late 12th to the 15th century. They stem from Central Europe, Italy, and Yemen. The variety in the presentation of this targum in the manuscripts is similar to that of Targum Rishon.

Targum Sheni is much more voluminous than Targum Rishon. In fact, it is the most expansive of all the Targums to the Bible! It is so full of additional, aggadic embellishments that it is difficult to still define it as a proper targum. Its translational character is almost buried underneath all the aggadic additions. Only about 75 of a total of 167 verses in the Hebrew source text are translated literally, the rest is full of extensive aggadic paraphrase. Because it runs into such fantastic excess, it was difficult for me to find a suitable example that would not take up too much time or too much space on the screen. I managed to find an example that fits those requirements:

Slides 15-16: Esther 2:8

The final example I am going to show you is taken from Esther 2:8.

Hebrew text:

So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in the citadel of Susa in the custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put into the custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women.

Targum Sheni:

So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in the citadel of Susa in the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch (and) keeper of the women, and when Mordechai heard that virgins were being sought, he took and hid Esther from the officers of King Ahasuerus, who went out to seek the virgins so that they should not come and lead her away. **Slide 16** He enclosed one room within another room so that the messengers of the king should not see her. Now when his messengers used to pass by, the gentile girls would dance and show off their beauty through the windows. Thereupon the messengers of the king would go out and bring many virgins from the provinces. Moreover, the messengers of the king knew of Esther, so when they observed that Esther was not among these virgins, they said to one another: 'We are wasting our energy in the provinces. There is here in our province a girl beautiful in looks and pleasing as well as amiable in appearance, more so than all of the virgins which we have brought'. So when Esther was sought but not found, they informed King Ahasuerus. When he heard (of it), he wrote an order that every virgin who shall hide herself from before his messengers, there is only one decree for her: that she be executed. So when Mordechai heard of the order, he panicked and brought out Esther, his father's brother's daughter, into the street. And Esther was also taken into the king's palace and put into the custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women.

It seems that the targum wants to resolve an inconsistency in the Hebrew source text of this verse, because why was Esther taken to the palace after the young girls had been gathered in the citadel of Susa? Targum Sheni resolves this puzzle by stating that Mordechai initially resisted the king's decree by hiding Esther. Whereas the gentile girls made themselves visible to the messengers because they wanted to be married to the king, Esther hid herself. According to a parallel passage in a Midrash,² Esther was not seen by anyone for four years! Only after the second decree Mordechai brought Esther out in the open, whereupon she was taken to the palace.

Slide 17: Concluding words

There is much more to say about these fascinating targums to Esther. They contain a wealth of exegetical material that throws a completely different light on the Esther story. It is clear how important the Book of Esther was for the Jewish communities in different times and places through these targumic traditions, which continued to grow and flourish for many centuries. I hope that this presentation has raised your interest in these unique translations!

Slide 18: Thank you & Herzlichen Dank!

2 Midrash Panim Aherim.