

REFLECTIONS OF READERS

NOTE ON A LATIN TERM IN TARGUM PSEUDO-JONATHAN

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It is well known that the various targumim to the Bible not only translate the original but also insert midrashic and other rabbinic interpretations. So often is this the case that eisegesis tells us about the times and attitudes of the interpreter more than it reveals new insights into the actual meaning of the text. One example can be found in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to the story of Joseph being sold in Egypt. This Aramaic translation, also known as the *Targum Yerushalmi*, was often mistakenly attributed to Jonathan ben Uzziel, author of the Aramaic translation of the Prophets. It is not clear who the real author was or exactly when this work was composed.

The Bible recounts the sale of Joseph to Potiphar in a straightforward and simple way: *And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and chief steward, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who brought him down there* (Gen. 39:1).

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan adds some midrashic embellishments:

Joseph was brought down to Egypt and Potiphar bought him because he saw how handsome he was and wished to have homosexual intercourse with him. But immediately it was decreed on him [Potiphar] that his testicles dried up and were hidden. And he [Potiphar] was the chief officer of Pharaoh, chief of the *sapokleturia*, an Egyptian man; he bought Joseph from the Arabs who brought him down there [to Egypt].

The key to understanding this passage is knowing the meaning of the unusual term *sapokleturia*. This term is used occasionally in rabbinic literature to denote an executioner (see TB *Shabbat* 108a, *Lam. Rabbah* 2:3), sometimes in a garbled form (as in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 48: *sinkletorei*). The word is actually based on the Latin term *speculator*, which originally meant a scout, spy or investigator, but over time it came to denote an armed bodyguard of the emperor, who is sometimes employed as an executioner or torturer. In the

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New Testament (Mark 6:27) the word is already used to denote a soldier employed as an executioner, and it always appears with this meaning in rabbinic literature (see Jastrow's *Dictionary of the Talmud*).

The Talmud records the idea that Potiphar purchased Joseph for the purpose of homosexual intercourse (TB *Sotah* 13b), while Onkelos explained that Potiphar served as *rav katolaya*, chief executioner, but Targum Pseudo-Jonathan adds a nuance by using the Latin term *sapokleturia*, recalling a specifically Roman soldier employed as a torturer.

The Targum's use of this Latin term in the context of sexual abuse reflects a particular event in Jewish history, the period after the wars with Rome, when large numbers of Jewish young men and boys were taken into captivity. Many of them were sold to brothels throughout the Roman Empire, from Pompeii to Rome. The Targum portrays Joseph in the same predicament as those young Jews, and gives voice to the prayer of the captives' families that they, like Joseph, might somehow avoid the fate awaiting them. Here we have one of the few instances where this aspect of the national disaster resulting from the conflict with Rome is alluded to in midrashic literature.