TAMAR TRIUMPHANT: *TARGUMIM*

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INTRODUCTION

The Tamar-Judah narrative in Genesis 38 is a complex web of family encounters. It is filled with intrigue and deception. When that chapter, roughly two thousand years ago, was recast from Hebrew into Aramaic, the translators took certain liberties with the original text.

The word Targum (plural: *targumim*) means "translation." In the centuries following the Babylonian Exile (586-538 BCE), and leading to the late Second Temple period, the Aramaic language serves as the common link for Jews living in Babylonia and in the land of Israel. The book of Nehemiah (middle to late 5th cent. BCE) addresses the necessity of translating biblical readings during religious services (see Nehemiah 8:7-8, and then also Babylonian Talmud [hereafter BT] *Megillah* 3a). The Targum "was designed for the benefit of the Aramaic-speaking masses, not for scholars who were generally familiar with Hebrew and spoke it among themselves."[1]

There are three Targums (*Targumim*) to the Torah/Pentateuch. The most authoritative is the *Targum Onqelos* (Onkelos) which is also termed as the Babylonian Targum. It is "one of several extant Aramaic versions. The Targumist usually renders MT's [Masoretic Text] Hebrew by its Aramaic equivalent, word for word. When [*Targum Onqelos*] is not literal, the deviation is generally very subtle. The other Aramaic translations, [the *Targum Neofiti*, and the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, known as the Land of Israel Targums] are more expansive, frequently paraphrasing and adding interpretations and *derash* [sermonic material] that are not even implied in the biblical text."[2] The *Targum Neofiti* and the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* often feature material similar to that found in the rabbinic midrashim. The dating for these books is disputed. *Targum Onqelos* was probably composed after the 4th century CE. *Targum Neofiti* many believe comes from the 4th century CE; *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*'s final composition is placed between the 4th and 14th centuries CE.

TARGUM ONQELOS

According to the biblical text Judah marries the daughter of Shua, a Canaanite (Gen. 38:2). (Note: the Hebrew for "daughter of Shua" is *bat Shua,* which in some translations becomes the personal name Batshua). *Targum Onqelos* (hereafter TO) in most versions translates this word *Canaanite*, as *tagra*, which means a *merchant*. Translating this word

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as merchant avoids the controversy that Judah married a Canaanite, something forbidden earlier in the Torah (see Gen. 24:3 and 28:1). Then, in verse 15, TO does not use the normal Hebrew word for prostitute, *zonah*, but rather the term *nafqah*, or *nafqat bara* – "one who goes out."[3] In v. 14 in Genesis Tamar shed her widow's garb and then *covered her face with a veil, and wrapping herself up, sat down at the road to Enaim.* TO explains that she "covered herself with a veil, and *adorned herself*, and sat at the crossroads at Enaim." The Aramaic words suggest embellishing or prettying, not merely covering herself. The items Judah gives Tamar by way of surety are slightly different: in Genesis his *seal*, *cord*, and *staff*, in TO it is his seal, his cloak and his staff. As in Genesis, when Tamar is brought out to be punished, she sends the items to Judah who admits his responsibility. "Judah recognized them, and said, 'She is in the right, by me she is pregnant, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.' But he was not intimate with her again" (TO 38.26).[4] The chapter ends with the birth of Peretz and Zerah.

TARGUM NEOFITI

Targum Neofiti (hereafter TN) states clearly that Judah married "the daughter of a Canaanite whose name was Shua." TN, however, changes the language regarding the deaths of Er and Onan. While Genesis states that God took the lives of both sons, TN modifies the language and instead states that they died by a *decree* from God.[5] In v. 15 TN adds words to explain why Judah did not recognize Tamar. It was "because her face *was* covered *in the house of Judah, and Judah had not known her*." The phrase "Judah had not known her" means that because Tamar covered her face in Judah's house, Judah had never properly seen Tamar. The word "known" means recognized. In rabbinic tradition, Tamar is praised for her modesty in covering her face when in the home of her father-in-law (BT *Megillah* 10b).

In Genesis Judah leaves his *seal, cord,* and *staff*. In TN Judah leaves as surety his signet-ring, the cord of his seal, and the staff which is in his hand. When it comes to v. 25, the dénouement where Tamar sends Judah the three physical items that he left with her by way of surety, items that prove her innocence, TN provides completely new wording not found in Genesis. This additional section, over six hundred words, adds about fifty percent more description to this chapter.

This new material details Tamar's defense, and then Judah's reaction to her producing the relevant items. Most of the language in this section will be paraphrased in various collections of midrashim. In the work *Targum Neofiti – Genesis*, translated by Martin McNamara, the first sentence in verse 25 reads: "And Tamar went out to be burned by fire and she asked for the three witnesses, but did not find them." The term "witnesses" is somewhat misleading; she means the three items that Judah gave her by way of surety, his signet-ring, the cord of his seal, and the staff which was in his hand. Tamar then "lift-

ed her eyes on high" and prays to God, the one "who answers the afflicted in the hour of their affliction" and asks God to give her "the three witnesses." She then promises "three just men in the valley of Dura: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. When they go down into the burning fire they will sanctify your holy name."

This basic idea is also found in *Midrash Tanhuma.* There is, however, a major difference. In the *Tanhuma*, these words referring to those men in Daniel chapter 3 are spoken by God, who responds to Judah's confession of his wrongdoing "The Holy One said to him: Judah, from me you have saved three lives from the fire and one (i.e. Joseph) from the pit. By your life, I will save <four lives> for you, just as you have saved <them> for Me. Who are they? Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah from the fiery furnace (in Dan. 3:20-27) and Daniel from the lion's pit (Dan. 6:16-23) (*Midrash Tanhuma, Wayyeshev*, Genesis 9.17 (Genesis 38:1ff)."[6]

In TN God hears Tamar's supplication and sends the angel Michael to give her the three items. Tamar then gives them to the judges, and says, "*By the man to whom those things belong am I with child*," the same words as in Genesis 38:25. Tamar then says to the court, "although I may be burned I will not make [the name of the man who impregnated me] … known." The text continues, "Judah immediately stood upon his feet" and confessed his responsibility in the affair.

"There is a parallel between the victims in both narratives – Tamar in the one and Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah in the other. The righteous victims in both cases accept their fate, yet make a declaration to the person who condemned them expressing their righteousness (Gen. 38:25, Dan. 3:17-18). In both cases the righteous are saved and unharmed … [further, those three men are] descendants of Judah."[7]

In TN, verse 25 then continues with Judah's heartfelt confession which ends with these words, "Far from her—from Tamar, my daughter-in-law—to conceive sons of harlotry." Verse 25 then ends with these stunning words: "But a *bat kol* [a heavenly voice] came forth from heaven and said: 'They are both just; from before the Lord the thing has come about." TN says clearly that God has intended Tamar's impregnation by Judah.

These matters will come up in midrashic literature as well. *Genesis Rabbah* (85.12) reads, "Rabbi Jeremiah in the name of Rabbi Samuel bar Rabbi Isaac, interpreted Judah's statement (v. 26), she is more righteous *than I* (*mimmeni*), that actually it was the Holy Spirit (*ruah hakodesh*) that said it was 'through me' (*mimmeni*) that these things occurred," that is to say, God orchestrated the encounter with Judah. Further, the Talmud explains that a *bat kol* "came forth and said, 'She is right, constrained by me these things came about.'" (BT *Makkot* 23b). The rest of TN Genesis 38 is essentially like the Masoretic Text, including the statement that Judah was not intimate with Tamar again,[4] and then it mentions the birth of Peretz and Zerah.

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (hereafter TPsJ) like most versions of TO but not like TN explains that Judah married the daughter of a *merchant*, not as the Hebrew of Genesis suggests, a Canaanite. TPsJ then says that Judah proselytized her. "By using the word 'merchant' [TPsJ] had avoided the problem raised by the biblical statement that Judah married a Canaanite ... Now [TPsJ] says that Judah converted the woman, a statement which makes no sense if she was not in fact a Canaanite. It seems that [TPsJ] has placed side by side two mutually exclusive solutions to the problem raised by" the Hebrew text.[8] In v. 6 the text reads, "Judah took a wife for Er his first-born, *the daughter of Shem the Great,* whose name was Tamar." In rabbinic thought Shem is regarded as a priest, and is associated with the figure of Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18.[9] This explains why the suggested mode of execution in v. 24, is that she is to be burned (see Lev. 21:9).

The Judah-Tamar interchange in v. 15 at the crossroads to Timnah is unique to TPsJ. "Judah saw her, and *in his eyes he compared* her to a harlot, *because she was of sullen appearance in the house of Judah, and Judah did not love her*." The term "sullen appearance," *k'isat apa'yin,* means something like angry-looking or morose, according to Jastrow.[10] This is another reason why Judah did not recognize her. By way of surety, she suggests that he give her his "signet ring … fringes … and [his] staff." When Tamar is accused of promiscuity, she looks for the "three pledges" that Judah gave her. As in TN, they are missing. She then, again as in TN, implores God to answer her in "in this hour of my distress … that I might find my three witnesses. And I will raise up for you from my loins three holy ones who will sanctify your name by going down to the furnace of fire in the valley of Dura." As in TN, this refers to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, though they are not named. God then beckons to [the angel] Michael who enlightens her eyes so that she is able to find them.

This is followed by similar language, saying she would not divulge the name of the man who impregnated her "even if I were burned." Judah then recognizes the items and gives an extended and impassioned confession/speech where he admits his guilt. In his speech he uses the phrase "measure for measure" [*midah*].[11] Judah then alludes to the fact that he used similar language with his father Jacob when he showed Jacob Joseph's bloodied clothing – *haker na,* "*Identify, I pray your son's cloak*" (Gen. 37:32). In fact, in Genesis the *brothers* show Jacob the clothing, no specific brother is mentioned. Judah explains, "Tamar is innocent; she is pregnant by me." As in TN, "Then a heavenly voice [*bat kol*] came down from heaven and said, 'The matter has come from before me.' So both of them were delivered from judgment." Judah then admits that this has come about because he did not give his son Shelah to Tamar. TPsJ continues following the standard Genesis narrative.

CONCLUSION

The Aramaic Targumim on Genesis, *Targum Onqelos*, *Targum Neofiti*, and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* each add new interpretive material, most obviously in the case of *Targum Neofiti*, and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, but even in TO, with its translation of Canaanite as merchant. The new information presented in *Targum Neofiti*, and *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, with some modifications, appear in rabbinic midrashim and aggadic statements in the Talmud. For example, in both TN and TPsJ Tamar makes reference to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. These works present Tamar in an expanded role, one which sees her very sympathetically. Her modesty and her willingness to die rather than cause Judah public embarrassment earn her acclaim. She prays to God and her request is honored. Biblical Tamar is quick-witted and tenacious. The Targums' Tamar is resourceful, strong-minded, restrained, respectful, and brave. She is Tamar triumphant.

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NOTES

1. *Targum Onkelos to Genesis. A Critical Analysis Together With An English Translation of the Text.* Tr. Moses Aberbach and Bernard Grossfeld. (New York: Ktav/Denver: Center for Judaic Studies, University of Denver, 1982), p. 9.

2. *Targum Onkelos to Exodus. An English Translation of the Text with Analysis and Commentary*. Tr. Israel Drazin. (New York: Ktav/Denver: Center for Judaic Studies, University of Denver, 1990), p. 2.

3. Marcus Jastrow. *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, the Midrashic Literature.* (New York: Pardes, Vol . 2, 1950), p. 926; Vol. 1, p. 188 (*nafqat bara*).

4. This matter is in dispute. In the Talmud, Samuel the elder, father-in-law of Rabbi Samuel bar Ammi said in the name of Rabbi Samuel bar Ammi, "Having once known her, he [Judah] *did not separate* from her [Tamar] again." (BT *Sotah* 10b. See also Rashi on Gen. 38:26.

5. *Targum Neofiti. - Genesis*. Tr. Martin McNamara. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical/Michael Glazier, 1992), p. 175.

6. *Midrash Tanhuma, Genesis. Vol. 1*. S. Buber Recension. Tr. John T. Townsend. (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1989).

7 Zvi Ron. "Rescue from Fiery Death: Daniel Chapter 3 and Genesis Chapter 38." *Jewish Bible Quarterly.* 41:1, 2013, 25, 26.

8. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan - Genesis*. Tr. Michael Maher (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical/Michael Glazier, 1992), p. 127.

9. According to *Genesis Rabbah* 85.10, Tamar was the daughter of Shem or a descendant of Shem, Noah's son (*Ruth Rabbah* 8.1). Shem is identified as Melchizedek the priest: BT *Nedarim* 32b, *Leviticus Rabbah* 25.6. See also *Midrash Tanhuma, Genesis*. *Yayyeshev*, Genesis 9.17 (Genesis 38:1ff).

10. Jastrow, *k''ays, k''as,* p. 656.

11. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan – Genesis,* p. 130, n. 28.