

The Targums to Esther

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Abstract

This introductory article acquaints the reader with a fascinating, ancient translation of the scroll of Esther, the so-called ‘Targum to Esther’. This translation exists in several versions, and therefore it is better to use the plural and speak of the ‘Targums to Esther’. The language and setting in life of these Targums will be discussed, their history will be traced, and some representative examples will be given to show the distinctive character of these translations.¹

Introduction to Targum

In Ancient Judaism the Hebrew and Aramaic term ‘targum’, meaning ‘translation, version’, referred to written translations in any language in general, and to the rendering of the Hebrew Scriptures in particular. So the Greek Septuagint could be called a ‘targum’. However, Targum (in the plural: Targums or Targumim) became the specific designation for the Jewish Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. The Targums are fascinating because they are not only translations but also expositions of the Bible. Due to their paraphrastic nature, Targums can be quite long compared to the Hebrew source text.²

In the course of the Second Temple period Aramaic gradually replaced Hebrew as the spoken language in the Jewish communities of Palestine and Babylonia. We are left in the dark as to when exactly this change in the Jewish vernacular gave rise to the Targumic practice, which was very much, although not exclusively, tied to the synagogue service. Judging from the Mishnaic rulings, the Targum had probably entered the Palestinian synagogal liturgy at the start of the rabbinic era.³ Classic rabbinic sources prescribed that during the Scripture reading an interpreter, the so-called ‘meturgeman’, should translate and interpret the biblical verses into Aramaic. In the case of the Pentateuch reading, the Aramaic translation followed after one verse, and with the portion from the Prophets the respective Targum was recited after three verses. The rendering into Aramaic had to be done by heart because never should the impression be given that the meturgeman was reading the Targum from a scroll. Subsequently, the Scripture reading and the recitation of the Targum had to be

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performed by two persons; these distinct voices, one in Hebrew and the other in Aramaic, kept the boundary clear between the Oral and the Written Torah.

The oral Aramaic translations of the Bible were in the course of time committed to writing. The process of written transmission seems to have happened from Late Antiquity onwards and continued throughout the Middle Ages, well after the Targum's liturgical role had ceased.⁴ When an oral Targumatic tradition was committed to writing, the text may have been augmented, revised and embellished because there was no longer a concern for its proper recitation in the synagogue. It is therefore difficult to establish how the written Targums relate to the versions that circulated orally in the classic rabbinic period.⁵ The extant Targums nevertheless show the important link between the Hebrew Scriptures and rabbinic exegesis. They contain material that reflects traditions found in Talmudic and Midrashic literature. However, sometimes we also find unique material that has not been attested elsewhere.

Popularity of the Esther Scroll

The inclusion of the scroll of Esther in the Hebrew canon is quite remarkable given the lack of distinctively Jewish contents. The name of God is not mentioned at all; it rather seems that God works in mysterious ways behind the scenes of the narrative. Furthermore, no reference is made to any of the Jewish laws and traditions. For instance, Esther and Mordekhai never resort to prayer, even at the height of their fear and despair. In spite of this, the Esther scroll featured prominently within the liturgical service of the Jewish people. The Purim festival was celebrated long before the canonization of the Hebrew Bible, and due to this longstanding tradition the rabbis could not ignore the scroll's relevance and included it in the canon. This may have happened in the course of the 2nd century C.E. The rabbinic debate surrounding the sanctity and status of the scroll of Esther is reflected in tractate Megillah, whose name refers to the scroll (= Megillah) of Esther. This tractate deals with the celebration of Purim and prescribes the proper liturgical use and exegesis of the Esther scroll.

Various Targumatic Traditions

Interestingly, mention is actually made of a Targum to Esther in early rabbinic sources,⁶ and we may infer from these references that an Aramaic version of Esther was already in circulation as early as the third or fourth centuries C.E. Over the next centuries, the Esther scroll seems to have given rise to several distinct Aramaic renderings. Rav Hai Gaon, the

head of the academy of Pumbeditha (998–1038), attested the wide variety of Esther Targums in Babylonia when he was confronted with a seemingly corrupt version:⁷

‘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 makes it evident that halfway through the Middle Ages the Esther Targums could be distinguished according to the amount of aggadic contents. This division may already hint at the existence of two distinct targumic traditions of the Esther scroll: Targum Rishon and Targum Sheni, names that stand for the ‘First Targum’ and the ‘Second Targum’, respectively. Targum Rishon is the targum with less aggadic additions than Targum Sheni. The wide variety of targumic traditions is further testified by the many citations of Targum Esther in rabbinic literature and medieval commentaries that neither represent Targum Rishon nor Targum Sheni. Therefore, it seems that Targum Esther never underwent a rigid process of standardization that resulted in one official, authoritative version.⁸

Targum Rishon: The First Targum to Esther

Targum Rishon is approximately dated between 500 and 700 C.E. and probably has a Palestinian provenance. This tradition alternates between faithful, word-for-word renderings of the Hebrew and complete ‘rewritings’ of the biblical tale. Often, though, Rishon just adds a few words in order to clarify the source text, see for instance

Targum Rishon to Esther 3:5: ... Haman became filled with anger *against Mordekhai*

Targum Rishon to Esther 4:7: ... and the fixed sum of silver—*ten thousand talents*—
... (cf. Esther 3:9)

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

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

Targum Rishon to Esther 1:9: Also *the wicked* Queen Vashti made a feast for the women in the royal palace, *in the place of the bedroom* of King Xerxes.

Whereas the Bible is sparse with clues about Queen Vashti's personality, just mentioning her beauty and her refusal to obey the king, Targum Rishon describes her as having a wicked nature. Queen Vashti makes her first appearance in the biblical story in this verse, and therefore the composer of Targum Rishon deems it necessary to immediately clarify what type of person she is, which is not uncommon throughout rabbinic literature. The Targums to Esther, too, have this tendency to reveal the nature of the various people involved in the narrative by adding the fitting adjective. Unsurprisingly, Esther is deemed 'righteous', in contrast to the 'wicked' Haman, but rather intriguing is the characterization of both Vashti and Ahasuerus as 'wicked'.⁹

Equally interesting is the addition that Vashti's feast was held in the bedroom of Ahasuerus, and this notion is also found in other rabbinic sources.¹⁰ According to the Babylonian Talmudic tradition, Vashti must have been a wanton woman because why would she organize her celebrations in the royal palace of King Ahasuerus, rather than the harem, which was a more appropriate venue?¹¹ Targum Rishon adds to this negative portrayal by even stating that Vashti's feast was held in the king's bedroom of all places!

There are also longer insertions in Targum Rishon that contain pure aggadah, and one of these lengthy additions is very interesting because it casts further light on Vashti's negative portrayal. The example is found in Targum Rishon's rendering of Esther 1:1:

Targum Rishon to Esther 1:1:

It happened during the days of *the wicked* Xerxes, the Xerxes *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 Nebukhadnezzar. Because she did not permit the rebuilding of the Temple, it was decreed she be executed in the nude. And because Xerxes listened to her advice, his life was shortened and his kingdom was split up. 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 that 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.

Targum Rishon to Esther 1:1 is much longer than the Hebrew verse. The Esther story takes a completely different turn, and we learn things about Ahasuerus and Vashti that are not found in the biblical narrative. When we concentrate our examination of this verse on the portrayal of Vashti, we now understand better why Targum Rishon casts her in such an extremely negative light, as a wicked and promiscuous woman. According to this Targum and other rabbinic traditions,¹² she was the granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian ruler who had destroyed the First Temple and exiled the Jewish people. By tracing Vashti's lineage to Nebuchadnezzar, Targum Rishon links the story of Purim to a dark episode in Jewish history, when the survival of its people was under severe threat too. However, in Targum Rishon this dark shadow over Israel's past has finally lifted: the collapse of the Temple through the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and the exile of the Jewish people to the East is counterbalanced by the downfall of his granddaughter, Vashti, who had sabotaged the rebuilding of the temple, and the enthronement of Esther as Queen of Persia.

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

Targum Rishon to Esther 6:1:

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 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? Then the 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 Xerxes; whereupon the sleep of the king became unrestful, and he rose in the morning troubled in appearance. So he ordered Shimshai to bring the book of the chronicles

before him. *When Shimshai, the scribe, perceived that which Mordekhai related concerning Bigthan and Theresh, 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.*

It is noteworthy that here, and in Targum Sheni as well, God is very often explicitly mentioned in stark contrast with the source text, where God's name is noticeably absent. We have to assume from the biblical Esther story that God works in mysterious ways behind the scenes, but here we read how he actively performs his miracles.

The Manuscript Tradition of Targum Rishon

As mentioned before, it seems that a Targum to Esther already circulated in the first few centuries C.E., but what is the earliest evidence we have with regards to Targum Rishon? How old are the texts that we have at our disposal? The extant manuscripts range from the early 14th to the 18th centuries. They are from Spain, France, Italy and Algeria. It is important to note, however, 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 legible, but, unfortunately, others are badly damaged. The manner in which the Targum is presented in these manuscripts differs. Sometimes Targum Rishon surrounds the full Hebrew text or runs in parallel columns to it. Alternatively, each Targumic verse is preceded by the first word(s) of the respective verse in Hebrew. The latter practice is nicely illustrated by the first folio of Targum Rishon in a medieval manuscript that is presented below. This manuscript is located in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. At the end of the Targum we learn that it was written in the mid-15th century and that the scribe's name was Natan ben Saadia ha-Cohen Sholal, who lived in Tlemcen, a town in Northwestern Algeria.¹³ The scribe introduces this Targum as follows, at the top of the folio: 'I will begin the Targum of Megillat Esther with the help of the One who performs miracles exceedingly for his people'. Thereupon the initial words of Esther 1:1 in the Hebrew story are given (circled in the image), followed by the targum to that verse. The first Hebrew words of Esther 1:2–4 on that folio are circled too.¹⁴

Targum Sheni: The Second Targum to Esther

Now we turn our attention to the second major targumic tradition of Esther, which is known as Targum Sheni. This work is tentatively dated to the end of the 7th or beginning of the 8th centuries C.E. and, like Targum Rishon, probably has a Palestinian provenance. However, the surviving manuscripts are dated much later, ranging from the late 12th to the 15th centuries, and are from Central Europe, Italy and Yemen. The variety in the presentation of this Targum in the manuscripts is similar to that described for Targum Rishon. If Targum Rishon, with its extensive paraphrase, already defies the definition of targum, it is telling that Targum Sheni easily outweighs the former in the sheer volume of aggadic ‘rewritings’. In fact, Sheni’s fantastic excess makes it 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. Targum Sheni’s midrashic character is illustrated by the following example:

Targum Sheni to Esther 2:8

Now when the words of the king were made public as well as his decree, and when many young girls were gathered to the fortress of Susa, to the custody of Hegai, *the king’s eunuch (and) keeper of the women*, so when Mordekhai heard that virgins were being sought, he took and hid Esther from the officers of King Xerxes, who went out to seek the virgins so that they should not come and lead her away. 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 was not found, they informed King Xerxes. 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 Mordekhai heard of the order, he panicked and brought out Esther, his father’s brother’s daughter, into the street. Whereupon Esther was taken to the royal palace to the custody of Hegai, the keeper of the women.

Careful reading of the biblical story may give the impression that Esther was taken to the palace *after* the other young girls had already been gathered in the citadel of Susa. Targum Sheni resolves this puzzling situation by telling that Mordekhai initially managed to hide Esther. Whereas the gentile girls made themselves visible to the messengers because they wanted to be married to the king, Esther remained in hiding. According to a parallel rabbinic passage, Esther was not seen by anyone for four years!¹⁵ Interestingly, another rabbinic source shows that Esther's name already hints at this fate by creating an etymological link between the name Esther (אסתר) and the Hebrew verb for 'to hide (oneself), be hidden' (סתר).¹⁶ Only after the issue of the second decree, Esther was brought out in the open by Mordekhai.

There is much more to write about these two Targums to Esther. They contain a wealth of exegetical material that throws light on the Jewish reception history of the scroll of Esther from Late Antiquity onwards. Furthermore, the variety of targumic versions and the multitude of extant manuscript materials testify to the importance of this biblical book in Judaism. It is therefore worthy of note that the Esther scroll, whose inclusion into the Hebrew canon had been subject of debate, gave rise to the exegetically richest and most fascinating targumic traditions of the Bible; traditions that continued to grow and flourish for many centuries.

Guide for Further Study on the Targums to Esther

Text Editions:

- B. Grossfeld, *The First Targum to Esther, according to MS Paris Hebrew 110 of the Bibliotheque Nationale: Translated and Annotated*, New York, 1983.
——, *The Targum Sheni to the Book of Esther*, New York, 1994.
- R. Kasher and M.L. Klein, 'New Fragments of Targum to Esther from the Cairo Genizah', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 61, 1990, pp. 89–124. [includes translation of the fragments]

[Note that Grossfeld's text editions of Targum Rishon and Targum Sheni, including lexical analysis, are freely available to consult via the textual database of the *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*: <http://cal.huc.edu/>]

Translations and commentaries:

B. Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther: Translated, with Apparatus and Notes*, Collegeville, Minn., 1991.

B. Ego, *Targum Sheni zu Ester*, Tübingen, 1996.

Concordances:

B. Grossfeld, *Concordance of the First Targum to the Book of Esther*, Chico, Calif., 1984.

Selected articles:

B. Ego, 'Targumization as theologization: aggadic traditions in the Targum Sheni of Esther', in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in Their Historical Context*, eds. D.R.G. Beattie and M.J. McNamara, Sheffield, 1994, pp. 354–59.

——, 'God as the ruler of history: main thematic motifs of the interpretation of Megillat Esther in Targum Sheni', *Journal for the Aramaic Bible* 2, no. 2, 2000, pp. 189–201.

B. Grossfeld, 'The Haggada in the Targum Rishon to Esther according to the Bibliothèque Nationale Paris Hébr. 110', *Hebrew Studies* 23, 1982, pp. 101–109.

R. Hayward, 'Targum a misnomer for Midrash? Towards a typology for the Targum Sheni of Esther', *Aramaic Studies* 9, no. 1, 2011, pp. 47–63.

¹ The substance of this paper was presented before the 45th International Jewish-Christian Bible Week, which was held from 28 July to 4 August 2013 at Haus Ohrbeck. I am grateful to Rabbi Prof. Jonathan Magonet and the rest of the organizing committee for their kind invitation, as well as for the acceptance of my paper in this Journal. Shortly before the start of Bible Week 2013, Rabbi Dr Bernard Grossfeld passed away. Professor Grossfeld was a great name in the field of Targumic studies, and I am particularly indebted to his pioneering work on the Esther Targums. In the following, the English translations of the Esther Targums are from Grossfeld's *The Two Targums of Esther: Translated, with Apparatus and Notes*, Collegeville, Minn., 1991.

² For a good, general introduction to the Targums, i.e. the Jewish Aramaic translations of the Bible, see P.V.M. Fleisher and B. Chilton, *The Targums: A Critical Introduction*, Waco, 2011. For a briefer introduction, see P.S. Alexander, 'Jewish Aramaic Translations of the Hebrew Scriptures', in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, eds. M.J. Mulder and H. Sysling, Assen, 1988, pp. 217–53.

³ Some of the major rabbinic rulings on the delivery of the Targum in the synagogue are found in tractate Megillah: m. Meg. 4:4, 6; t. Meg. 4(3):20, 21; y. Meg. 74d, 75a; b. Meg. 21b, 23a–b, 32a.

⁴ Interestingly, the Targums never lost their liturgical function in the Yemenite Jewish community. In addition to the Yemenite practice, Targumic activity was attested amongst Jewish communities in Iran and Iraq until recently. For many generations, Targums circulated orally in various Neo-Aramaic dialects and they were passed on by the communities' religious leaders. However, in the 1950s many Jews left Iraq and Iran, the majority of the people settling in Israel. After their migration, some of the religious leaders committed Neo-Aramaic Targumic traditions to writing. These written versions are extremely valuable and unique given the oral character of the Targumic tradition.

⁵ It should be borne in mind that some Targums, such as those to Proverbs and Chronicles, probably never had a liturgical function in the first place.

⁶ t. Meg. 4(3):20, 21; y. Meg. 4:1; see also the discussion in Flesher and Chilton, *The Targums*, pp. 297–302.

⁷ As quoted in R. Kasher and M.L. Klein, 'New Fragments of Targum to Esther from the Cairo Genizah', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 61, 1990, p. 89.

⁸ Cf. Kasher and Klein, 'New Fragments of Targum to Esther from the Cairo Genizah', pp. 89–124, esp. 89–90. This article presents hitherto unattested fragments of Targum Esther that belong to the literary treasure discovered in the Cairo Genizah, thus showing that even up to the present day Targumic versions resurface. This publication and several others also mention the existence of a third Targumic tradition of Esther, which was found in the Antwerp Polyglot Bible. However, a study by Grossfeld and Le Déaut established the artificial nature of this 'Third Targum of Esther'; see B. Grossfeld and R. Le Déaut, 'The origin and nature of the Esther Targum in the Antwerp Polyglot: exit Targum Esther III?', *Textus* 16, 1991, pp. 95–115.

⁹ Cf. Grossfeld, *The Targums of Esther*, p. 34 n. 45.

¹⁰ E.g. Aggadath Esther 1:9; Midrash Leqaḥ Tob 1:9.

11 b. Meg. 12a–b; cf. T. Kaddari, 'Vashti: Midrash and Aggadah', in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, eds. P. Hyman and D. Ofer, Jerusalem, 2006 (CD ROM edition).

¹² E.g. Targum Sheni to Esther 1:12; b. Meg. 12b; Esther Rabbah 3:5; Midrash Panim Aḥerim (ed. Buber) B:1.

¹³ Natan ben Saadia ha-Cohen Sholal and his father served as rabbis for the Jewish community in this Algerian town; cf. D. Corcos and L. Bornstein-Makovetsky, 'Tlemcen', in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds. in chief M. Berenbaum and F. Skolnik, 2nd edn, vol. 19, Detroit, 2007, p. 747.

¹⁴ The entire Targum Rishon in manuscript Hebr. 110 can be consulted online via the following link: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9064419p/f114.item>

¹⁵ Midrash Panim Aḥerim (ed. Buber) to Esther 2:7(32b); cf. Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther*, p. 137 n. 18.

¹⁶ Midrash Tehillim 22,3(91a); cf. B. Ego, *Targum Sheni zu Ester*, Tübingen, 1996, p. 224.