

CHAPTER FIVE
ISAIAH 6:9-10 IN THE TARGUMS

Several historical circumstances arose which catalyzed the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible. The destruction of the Temple and the Exile 586 BCE gave rise to the Jewish people as an increasing *textual community*.¹ The biblical text appears to have anchored the Jewish people in the absence of nation, Temple, and even active prophecy. In addition to this the language of Aramaic was used in the Persian administration and the *lingua franca* for southwest Asia.² As time passed the influence of Aramaic on the Jewish people grew. In the biblical text Aramaic surfaces significantly in Ezra and Daniel. With the growing emphasis on the biblical text and the reality of Aramaic's influence the need for a translation of the Hebrew bible was realized. This practice likely began orally and liturgically. A possible early example comes from Nehemiah 8:8 which reads, “[The Levites] read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.”

Though the practice of Aramaic translation is indeed ancient our extant Targums are far removed from these origins. Bruce Chilton supports a large consensus which dates the initial “exegetical framework” of the Isaiah Targum

¹ Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of the Bible: Contents and Context* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

around 132 A.D. with the second exegetical framework in the fourth century.³ This does not mean that *all* the content in the Isaiah Targum *originated* within this period. Levine notes that the search for a precise *terminus ad quo* remains inconclusive.⁴ However, he looks at the Targums as *compounds*. Citing a passage in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan he dates some material in the first century BCE with other material in that same passage being dated seven centuries later.⁵ While acknowledging that the Targums should be disqualified as a *vorlage* witness, Levine warns that scholars should not overstate their case stating that “there are cases where [a Targum] constitutes the *only* correct version.”⁶ Support found for the antiquity of Targum Isaiah 6:9-10 rests in the claim that Mark 4:12 is related most closely to the targumic tradition.⁷ With these attributes in mind I move forward cautiously.

Text⁸ and Translation of Targum Isaiah 6

v.1

In the year which King Uzziah was afflicted with leprosy the prophet said,

I saw the glory of the LORD sitting upon a throne

High and exalted in the heavens on high and the Temple was filled with the brilliance of his glory.

בשנת דאתנגע בה מלכא עוזיה

אמר נביא

חזיתי ית יקרא דיוי שרי על כורסי

רם ומנטל בשמי מרומא
ימזיו יקריה אתמלי היכלא

³ Bruce Chilton, “Two in One: Renderings of the Book of Isaiah in Targum Jonathan,” in *Writing and Reading the Isaiah Scroll*, ed. Craig Broyles and Craig Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 547.

⁴ Levine, *The Aramaic Version of the Bible*, 29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷ T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 77ff; B. D. Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and his Bible: Jesus' Use of the Interpreted Scripture of His Time* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier Inc., 1984), 91; C. A. Evans, *To See and not Perceive: Isaiah 6: 9-10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 93.

⁸ Text taken from Alexander Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic Based on Old Manuscripts and Printed Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1959-1968).

v.2

Holy attendants were standing on high
before him.

Six wings! Six wings for each of them.

With two they covered their face

So that they could not see

With two they covered their body

So that they might not be seen

With two they were serving

v.3

They called out, this one to that, and
said,

“Holy in the heavens on high, house of
his presence,

Holy upon the earth, work of his might,

Holy in eternity is the LORD of Hosts

The splendour of his glory fills all the

earth.”

v.4

The door-posts of the Temple were
shaken

From the sound of the words

And the sanctuary was filled with the
dense cloud.

v.5

I said, “Woe is me! See how I have
sinned!”

See how I am a man proved guilty
and I dwell in the midst of the people
covered with sins.

See how my eyes have seen the glory of
the presence of the eternal king, the
LORD of Hosts.

v.6

Set before me was one of the attendants
And in his mouth a word

Which he received from him whose
presence is upon the throne of glory in
the heavens on high, above the alter

v.7

He established this word in my mouth
and said,

“Look! I have placed my words of
prophecy in your mouth.

Your guilt is removed and your sins are
forgiven.”

שמשין קדישין ברומא קדמוהי

שיתא גפין שיתא גפין לחד

בתרין מכסי אפוהי

דילא חזי

ובתרין מכסי גויתיה

דילא מתחזי

ובתרין משמיש

ומקבלין דין מדין ואמרין

קדיש בשמי מרומא בית שכינתיה

קדיש על ארעא עובד גבורתיה

קדיש בעלם עלמא יוי צבאות

מליא כל ארעא זיו יקריה

וזעו אלות סיפי היכלא

מקל מלולא

ובית מקדשא אתמלי אמיטתא

ואמרית וי לי ארי הבית

ארי גבר חייב לאוכחא אנא

ובגו עמא דמגעל בחובין אנא יתיב

חזאה עיניארי ית יקר שכינת מלך עלמא

יוי צבאות

ואשתוי לותי חד מן שמיא

ובפומיה ממלל

דקביל מן קדם דשכינתיה על כורסי יקרא

בשמי מרומא עיל מן מדבחא

וסדר בפומי ואמר

הא שויתי פתגמי נבואתי בפומך

ויעדון חובך וחטאך יתכפרון

v.8

And then I heard the voice of the
Memra of the LORD which said,
“Who shall I send to prophesy?
And who will go to teach?”
And I said, “Here I am, send me!”

ושמעית ית קל מימרא דיוי דאמר

ית מן אשלח לאתנבאה
ומן ייזיל לאלפא
ואמרית האנא שלח יתי

v.9

And he said, “Go and say to this people
who listen carefully and do not
understand
and look closely and do not know.

ואמר איזיל ותימר לעמא הדין
דשמעין משמע ולא מסתכלין

וחזן מחזא ולא ידעין

v.10

Fatten the heart of this people
and make their ears heavy,
and their eyes closed.

טפיש לביה דעמא הדין
ואודנוהי יקר
ועינוהי טמטים
דלמא

Lest

They see with their eyes
Hear with their ears
Understand with their hearts
Then turn and it would be forgiven for
them.”

יחזון בעי ניהון
ובאודנהון ישמעון
ובליבהון יסתכלון
ויתובון וישתביק להון

v.11

So I asked, “For how long LORD?”
He replied, “Until towns are desolated,
without inhabitants
And houses are without people
And the land razed and desolated.”

ואמרית עד אימתי יוי
ואמר עד דיצדיין קרויא
מבלי יתיב
ובתיא מבלי אנשא
וארעא תחרוב ותצדי

v.12

Until the LORD the removes the
descendents
and the ruin swells in the midst of the
land.

וירחיק יוי ית בני אנשא

ותסגי ציותא בגוה דארעא

v.13

A tenth will remain,
And it will return for scorching.
As terebinth and as oak
which when their leaves drop off appear
dried up.

וישתארון בה חד מן עסרא
ויתובון ויהון לצרבא
כבוטמא וכבלוטא
דבמיתר טרפיהון דמן ליבישין

Even then they are green enough
to retain within them the seed.
So the exiles of Israel will be gathered
and returned to their land
Behold, the holy seed is their stump.

ועד כען אינון רטיבין
לקיימא מינהון זרעא
כין גלוותא דישראל יתכנשון ויתובון
לארעהון
ארי זרעא דקודשא נצבתהון

Interpretive Issues in Targum Isaiah 6:9-10

The variants of interest in this passage find responsible articulation by Evans.⁹ First, Targum Isaiah includes the relative *daleth* in verse 9 introducing the following verb sequence. With this alteration the following verb sequence reads as participles, in place of the Hebrew imperative and infinitive absolute combination. This alteration supports an argument for a distinct affect on the meaning. The introduced *daleth* specifies a particular people who are already obdurate (i.e. “Go and speak to *this* people, that is, the ones who are . . .”). The removal of the imperative verbs (replaced with participles) supports this reading turning the action into the descriptive acts of the ones identified under the relative pronoun. Evans also sees this shift as particularizing those whom Isaiah preaches against. “Those whom the prophet is to harden consist of those who are spiritually insensitive.”¹⁰ Targum Isaiah’s message is not for *all* the people, but only those already unable to perceive and understand. This reading may be influenced by Isaiah’s message to “the righteous” which clarifies that “it will be well with *them*” (Isa 3:10). However, the context in Targum Isaiah 6 does not explicitly deny that the *particular* people may in fact be *all* the people.

Verse 10 reads שבק, “to forgive” instead of the MT’s רפא, “to heal.” Targum Isaiah also reads טפיש in place of the MT’s השמן, “fatten.” Evans argues that טפיש should be translated “to make dull.” This translation supports both verb alterations as conveying “the more literal intention of the statement than the metaphorical” read in the MT.¹¹ While שבק may constitute an interpretive clarification, טפיש is a perfectly

⁹ Evans, *To See and not Perceive*, 70-71.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

responsible translation carrying with it a metaphorical connotation of “fattening.”¹² Though this metaphor may not be necessary to retain the meaning of the passage, the importance comes in tempering Evans’ argument when there is no basis for his conclusions.

Finally the use of דלמא needs consideration. Though Evans translates דלמא as the equivalent פן he notes that “there is . . . the possibility that דלמא should be understood in a conditional sense.”¹³ In support Evans cites Targum Isaiah’s use of דלמא, as conditional, in contexts where the Hebrew פן is *absent*. In response I would argue that Targum Isaiah consistently translates פן as דלמא (28:22; 36:18; 48:5, 7; only 27:3 does not use דלמא, in this instance Targum Isaiah simply negates the verb). For this reason Evans’ suggestion regarding the possible conditional sense of דלמא should not seriously be entertained.

The Meaning of Targum Isaiah 6:9-10 and the MT

Evans offers three variances in Targum Isaiah which he believes “mitigated the harshness of the Hebrew text.”¹⁴ One alleged variance is Targum Isaiah’s use of דלמא. This aspect should not even be considered in the evaluation of meaning transferred in the Aramaic translation of this passage. I have argued that the testimony of the rest of Targum Isaiah demonstrates that the translator had no knowledge of or at least used no other equivalent.

¹² *Jastrow*, 548.

¹³ Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 71.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

Secondly, Evans points to the addition of the relative *daleth* and the subsequent replacement of imperatives for participles. The sense of that alteration reads clearly. Isaiah will preach to those who *already* hear but don't understand, see and don't know. I agree that this passage may particularize the group to which Isaiah is preaching. However, it cannot be determined that the targumist did not understand *all* of the people as constituting those *particular* people. Thirdly, Evans adds the expansion in verse 13 which clarifies and reinforces the reality of the remnant and God's provision.

The author of Targum Isaiah has certainly diverged from the Hebrew original. The later two points made by Evans illustrate two of several deliberate expansions and alterations. Has this reading unethically mitigated the harshness of the Hebrew original?

Targum Isaiah and its Place in the Interpretive History of Isaiah 6

The entire chapter of Targum Isaiah 6 represents explicit interpretation and expansion. The author expands on the meaning of the Seraphim and their wings. The three "holies" are also explained by the author. The cryptic notion of the holy seed tacked on at the end of this chapter also receives expansion.

Though our extant Targums constitute a highly literary product their liturgical origin cannot be discounted. The meturgamen or later translators likely did not view their product as *the* Word of God, but potentially as "the obvious and only meaning of the inspired Word of God."¹⁵ In any event, the product of this process resulted in the

¹⁵ Martin McNamara, *Targum and Testament* (Grand Rapids, Minn.: Eerdmans, 1968), 75.

understanding that “the text and its interpretation went together.”¹⁶ Targum Isaiah 6 certainly offers something *different* than the MT of Isaiah 6. However, do they represent different *meanings*? I argue that the Targum does not represent the *only* meaning of Isaiah 6, but that it does represent, in Vanhoozer’s language, an *adequate* and *ethical* reading of Isaiah 6:9-10.

Targum Isaiah does appear to particularize the message of Isaiah as given by God. In reading the Hebrew text of Isaiah the translator likely had many factors in mind. First, there were “the righteous” for whom the message was that “it will be well (טוֹב)” (Isa 3:10). The Hebrew text in chapter 6 also offers an element of particularization. God tells Isaiah to go and speak לְעַם הַזֶּה “to *this* people” (Isa 6:9). The translator may have simply carried the message with this clarification in mind. In addition there is the final thought that though the land sits desolated and scorched there remains a seed which might carry the hope of holiness. These factors make the targumist’s choice to particularize the message more understandable.

What of the message itself? The people are to look so that they cannot perceive, hear so that they cannot understand. Readers as well as translators *should* be confounded by such a statement. By what can the success of this message be measured? If they understand this message it will be misunderstanding.¹⁷ Can this be viewed as a people who “multiply their sacrifices” but still do not understand the worship of God (Isa 1:11)? So to whom is this message being sent? Targum Isaiah has made an exegetical decision and clarified that it is to those *already* listening but not understanding.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Francis Landy, “Strategies of Concentration and Diffusion in Isaiah 6,” *BibInt* 7 (1999), 70.

The addition in verse 13 also needs comment as it receives much clarification and expansion from the Hebrew text. This expansion reads similarly to the expansion of verses 2 and 3. Does its presence mitigate the harshness of verses 9-10? We should remember that the Hebrew text of Isaiah 6 likely also underwent expansion in this manner as leading up to its accepted (that is “original”) form. Even a relatively conservative scholar such as Childs admits, in agreement with Williamson, that “v.13 offers an analogy that must be seen as an editorial edition from [the] post-exilic period.”¹⁸ In light of the whole of the book of Isaiah the translator’s addition read in an entirely understandable way *further* clarifying and the interpreting his context (post-exilic).

Finally with respect to the “harshness” of the passage, verse 10 *still* depicts God as calling Isaiah to prepare the people for destruction. Their hearts are still to be fattened (the imperative is preserved) *lest* they repent and it be forgiven.

In conclusion, Evans statement about the mitigation of the harshness of this passage should be qualified. The translator’s interpretation appears highly suitable to the context of Isaiah itself and the expansion of verse 13 should be viewed in line with the spirit found in our original Hebrew text. The translator did not preserve the whole of the meaning, but contributed a responsible reading.

¹⁸ Brevard Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2001), 58. Note also the absence of the final line of verse 13 in the oldest attestations of the LXX.