

*The Targum of Ruth – A Sectarian Composition?**

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The title of this paper, in Hebrew and without the question mark, is that under which the suggestion was made by Akiva Schlesinger that the targum of Ruth owes its origin to the Sadducees.¹ The thesis was subsequently adopted, and developed to some extent, by Etan Levine in his book *The Aramaic Version of Ruth*,² but in its original form, as put forward by Schlesinger, it stood on three legs.

The first of these is the mention in *Tg. Ruth* 1:17 of crucifixion, alongside stoning, burning and execution by the sword, as a form of capital punishment handed down by Jewish courts. The contrast between this statement and that of the Mishnah,³ where the fourth form of execution is strangling, had already, a century and a half earlier, led Moses Sofer to suspect that the writer of *Tg. Ruth* was a Sadducee.⁴ Schlesinger, for all that he attempted to reason according to what he understood to be Sadducean, or at least non-Pharisaic, principles, was really, at this stage of his argument, doing little more than jumping to the same conclusion on the same rather flimsy evidence, whilst paying no regard to the counter-evidence.

The most obvious example of the latter must be the prospect of a reward in the world to come, which is held out to Ruth by Boaz in *Tg. Ruth* 2:12, and acknowledged by her in the following verse. That, in itself, must be a strong argument at least against assigning the whole of the targum to the Sadducees. As for the specific point of capital punishment, the Hebrew commentary to *Megillath Taanith* attributes to the Sadducean "Book of Ordinances" precisely the same death penalties as are found in the Mishnah. While the historical value of that document may be debated, it would seem unwise to assert without solid evidence that Sadducean jurisprudence was in fact different. It must be acknowledged, however, that there is in the mention of crucifixion a real issue which may be of some importance in deciding the question of the origin of *Tg. Ruth*, and I propose to return to this later.

The second argument brought forward by Schlesinger is based on Ruth 1:22 where, for MT's "they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the

* This paper was read at the Congress of the European Association for Jewish Studies at Hertford College, Oxford, on 22-26 July 1984.

¹ *Kitvei Akiva Schlesinger: mehgarim bamiqra ubilshono, Publications of the Israel Society for Biblical Research 9*, Jerusalem, 1962, pp. 12-17.

² E. Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Ruth, Analecta Biblica 58*, Rome, 1973.

³ *mSanh.* 7:1.

⁴ See the notes *lishkat hasoferim to shulhan arukh, even ha'ezer*, 17:43.

barley harvest”, the targum reads “they came to Bethlehem on the eve of Passover, and on that day the Israelites began to harvest the Omer of the Heave-offering which was of barley”. Starting from the fact that we know of a controversy between the Pharisees and the Sadducees about the presentation of the Omer, Schlesinger reasoned that there must also have been disagreement about its cutting, and that the Sadducees would have done this on the Eve of the festival rather than, as the Pharisees, after nightfall on the first festival day; and so he concluded that he had found in *Tg. Ruth* 1:22 a second specimen of Sadducean halakah.

Unfortunately for his theory, Schlesinger appears not to have read the text of the targum carefully, for it does not say that the Omer was cut on the day before Passover. It says “the Israelites began to harvest the Omer” on that day. *mMenah.* 10:3 describes how agents of the Beth Din would go out on the eve of the festival and tie the barley, while it was still growing, in bundles in order to facilitate its ceremonial reaping after nightfall on the following day. If the statement in *Tg. Ruth* may be construed as referring to these preparations (and it is difficult to imagine why else it should say “they began”), then *Tg. Ruth* is, in this respect, quite consistent with Pharisaic halakah.

The third line of argument adopted by Schlesinger is, in some respects, the most interesting, although it does not point in the direction of the Sadducees at all, and was offered by Schlesinger only as a kind of general justification for his contention that *Tg. Ruth* is not, to use his own word, *kasher*. This argument rests simply on the appearance in *Tg. Ruth* 4:7,8 of the word “glove” in place of MT’s “shoe”, and what appears to be a reference to this in the Ramban’s comment on Exod 28:41, where, according to Schlesinger, he refers to this reading appearing in “the Christians’ translations”.

The reading “glove” instead of “shoe” is pretty well unique to the targum, and so it might appear that the Ramban was indeed here describing *Tg. Ruth* as not “kosher”, and that Schlesinger’s point is a valid one, but reference to the text of the Ramban’s commentary quickly reveals that the word he used is not “Christians” but “fools” (Heb. *shotim*). Now, of course, the Ramban would have been perfectly entitled to describe the Christians as fools if he wished, but the fact that the distinctive reading is not known to Christian tradition raises the possibility that a reference to Christians was not intended. Before proceeding further it will be necessary to set the comment in perspective.

At this point in his commentary, the Ramban was taking up a point in Rashi’s commentary on the same verse, Exod 28:41, and so it is from the comment of Rashi that our investigation must start. Rashi explained the expression the literal meaning of which is “fill their hands” as referring to installation in office, and he illustrated this by describing the custom of investiture in mediaeval Europe, whereby a glove was handed over by the feudal lord to the vassal as a symbol of his entrusting the fief to him. The

Rashi on Exodus 28:41

ומלאת את ידם. כל מלוי ידים ל' חנוך הוא כשהוא נכנס לדבר להיות מוחזק בו מאותו יום והלאה הוא ובל' לע"ז כשממנין אדם על פקיד' דבר נותן השליט בידו בית יד של עור שקורין גוואנט"ו ועל ידו הוא מחזיקו בדבר וקורין לאותו מסירה ווירסטי"ר והוא מלוי ידים:

Ramban on Exod 28:41

ומשחת אותם ומלאת את ידם. כל מלוי ידים לשון חנוך כשהוא נכנס להיות מוחזק בו מאותו היום והלאה לשון רש"י. ולא הבינותי בדבריו זה איך יבא לשון מלוי ידים לחנוכת כל דבר. ומה שאמר הרב כי בלשון לע"ז כשממנין אדם על פקודת דבך נותן השליט בית יד של עור שקורין גונ"ט ועל אותו בית יד הוא מחזיקו בדבר והוא מלוי ידים. לא ידעתי אם ירצה הרב לומר שעל שם הבית יד יקרא החנוך מלוי ידים ויביא ראיה מן השוטים. ודע כי הענין ההוא להם יצא מן התורה שהוא אצלם קנין החליפין של בועז וכך מתורגם להם שלף איש נעלו ששולף הגנ"ט שלו. והם אומרים שהגואל נתן לבועז וזה מנהגם וזכר בספרי חכמיהם והנה דברנו בדברי הבאי, והנכון כלשון מלוי ידים בתורה שהוא לשון שלמות ...

Salmon ben Yeroham on Ruth 4:7

ואמר לקים כל דבר. הוא בנשיאת אשה וזולתם, כמו איש שיחפוץ להפקיד פקידיים ואפיטרופא כי חייב המפקד לשלף נעלו בפני עדים ויתנהו לו לקיים דבריו.

Ramban, although he dissented from Rashi's opinion on the meaning of the biblical expression, drew attention to support for it in the translation by the *shoṭim*, of the phrase "a man drew off his shoe" in Ruth 4:7 as "his glove was drawn off".

Two questions arise here, namely, "To whom did the Ramban refer as *shoṭim*?" and "Is the translation alluded to the Aramaic targum of Ruth?" Schlesinger's understanding of the Ramban's comment is that he was explaining the source of the custom on which Rashi based his exegesis and on this approach his identification of the *shoṭim* as Christians is reasonable. However, this is not the only possible interpretation of the Ramban's comment and, in view of the fact that the version of Ruth 4:7 therein described is not known in Christian tradition (as Schlesinger acknowledged), I would suggest that this view cannot be correct and that the Ramban was observing that support for the position reflected in Rashi could be adduced from the interpretation of Ruth 4:7 adopted by those whom he designates *shoṭim*.

In the commentary on Ruth attributed to the Karaite Salmon ben Yeroḥam⁵ there is a statement very similar to that of Rashi – "when a man wishes to appoint officials and overseers, the one making the appointment has to take off his shoe in front of witnesses and give it to him to confirm his words". Leaving aside, for the moment, the fact that a shoe is mentioned here and not a glove, it might be suggested that the Ramban's *shoṭim* should be identified as the Karaites. That such a description of members of that party would have been in keeping with his attitude towards them may be indicated by the fact that in his commentary on Lev 3:9, where the Ramban is explicitly controverting the opinion of the Karaites, whom he there calls "Zadokim", he quotes, in justification of his contradiction of them, Prov 26:5, "Answer a fool according to his folly".

To turn now to the other question, is it the targum of Ruth that is indicated in the Ramban's comment? I think not, for several reasons. First, at a period when, whatever its earlier history, the targum of Ruth had had a respectable pedigree for some time – it was cited by Nathan of Rome in the *Arukh*, and attributed by the tosafists⁶ to the period of the tannaim – it would be odd to find doubts being cast on its "legitimacy". It would be unwise to detect such an attitude without the clearest evidence. Second, the Ramban certainly knew the targum of Ruth. He refers to it by name, and quotes from it, in his commentary on Exod 22:15, and there is no indication in the passage with which we are at present concerned that the translation to which he there refers disparagingly is one he has previously cited with

⁵ Hebrew text edited by I. D. Markon, *Livre d'hommage à la mémoire du Dr Samuel Poznański*, Warsaw, 1927, Hebrew section pp. 78-96. English translation in D. R. G. Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 2, Sheffield, 1977, pp. 47-101.

⁶ *Tosafot*, *bMeg.* 21b.

approval. Third, having referred to the substitution by the *shotim* of “glove” for “shoe”, the Ramban continues, “and they say that the redeemer gave [it] to Boaz”. This exegesis of Ruth 4:8, which appears as a minority view in various places in rabbinic literature,⁷ is not found, so far as I know, in any text of the targum. A few targum manuscripts leave the subject of the verb “he took off” in Ruth 4:8 unspecified, as it is in MT, but most supply “Boaz” as the subject, thereby agreeing with the traditional majority view to which the Ramban apparently subscribed. The other opinion, which to the Ramban was characteristic of the *shotim*, does, however, appear in the commentary of Salmon ben Yeroham.⁸

Thus, of the two points made by the Ramban with respect to the exegesis of Ruth by the *shotim*, one appears in the targum and one does not. The one which does not appear in the targum appears in a Karaite commentary. The one which appears in the targum—the reading “glove” in place of “shoe”—remains, as I have said, “pretty well unique” to the targum. I should explain what I mean by that. The reading “glove” is known to me, apart from its appearance in the targum, only in the commentary attributed to David Kimchi,⁹ where dependence on the targum may be suspected. This commentary, whatever its actual origin, cannot be the “translation” referred to by the Ramban, but according to Levine the reading “glove” also appears in “the Karaite commentaries”.¹⁰ He does not, however, give any more specific information.¹¹ I know of no other Karaite commentaries on Ruth apart from the Arabic commentary of Japhet ben Ali and the Hebrew version of the same commentary¹² which is attributed to Salmon ben Yeroham, and I think I can safely say that the word “glove” does not appear in either.

There is at least one piece missing from the jigsaw, but I think the picture is sufficiently clear to allow the suggestion to be made that the Ramban was referring, in his comment on Exod 28:41, not to the targum of Ruth but to a Karaite document, perhaps an Arabic translation, which is at present unknown, at least to me. It may, in any case, be concluded that the third leg of Schlesinger’s thesis is no more secure than the other two, and that that thesis just will not stand up.

⁷ *Ruth Rab.* 7:12; *Ruth Zuta* on 4:8; *bB.M.* 47a.

⁸ At 4:10.

⁹ Hebrew text in Io. Mercerus (Jean Mercier), *Libellus Ruth cum scholiis masorae ad marginem*, Paris, 1563. English translation in Beattie, pp. 149-152.

¹⁰ Levine, p. 104.

¹¹ His index suggests that a comment of Japhet ben Ali on Ruth 4:7 is cited on p. 104, but Japhet’s name is not mentioned there. The item in the index is puzzling because Levine appears to know Japhet’s commentary only from the English translation of L. Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology, Yale Judaica Series 7*, New Haven, 1952, pp. 82-107, which includes only the commentary on the first two chapters of Ruth. All the other passages cited by Levine are in the first two chapters.

¹² On the question of the identity of the two commentaries see L. Nemoy, “Did Salmon ben Yeroham compose a commentary on Ruth?”, *JQR* 39 (1948) p. 215f., and Beattie, p. 25f.

What, then, may be said about Levine's development of the thesis? In the introduction to his book, Levine observes that "in every case where [the targum] incorporates material that was disputed by Sectarrians, it presents the sectarian rather than the Pharisaic-Rabbinic position!"¹³ and he proceeds to supplement Schlesinger's three points, which he adopts, with four more.

When the targum has Boaz greet his reapers with the words "May the *Memra* of the Lord be your sustenance", whereas MT has him say, "Yahweh be with you", Levine detects an explicit policy of "non-acceptance of the sole rabbinic exegesis of Ruth found in the Mishnah, viz., that the name of God may be used in greetings".¹⁴ He does not appear to have paused to reflect that if this is an indication of sectarian origin the same would have to be said with respect to many another targum.¹⁵

When the overseer reports Ruth's request to be allowed, in the words of the targum, "to glean ears among the sheaves, what remains on the ground behind the reapers", Levine sees another contradiction of Pharisaic-Rabbinic tradition, or rather, he says in his introduction¹⁶ that he does, but this is not borne out in his commentary on that verse, where, although he observes that "that which falls behind the reapers and remains on the ground is *shikhah* and not *leqet*", he defends the wording of the targum as "a purposeful paraphrase intended to convey the paltriness of her gleanings".¹⁷

The third point raised by Levine is the kinsman's refusal in 4:6 to marry Ruth. When the redeemer says, "Since I have a wife, I have no right to take another in addition to her, lest there be dissension in my house, and I destroy my own estate", Levine detects a reference to a legal ban on polygamy, and concludes that "again the targum has presented a juridical stance differing from rabbinic law".¹⁸ He does not, however, build anything on this.

So far, Levine's comments do not amount to very much, but his fourth point promises a little more, for he observes that, while the terminology of levirate marriage is employed in the targum to describe Ruth's second marriage, "rabbinic tradition is unanimous in not regarding levirate marriage as relevant to Ruth".¹⁹ For this one point he is able to adduce

¹³ Levine, p. 6.

¹⁴ Levine, p. 68.

¹⁵ In *Tg. Judg* 6:12, for example, the angel uses the same expression to greet Gideon.

¹⁶ Levine, p. 7.

¹⁷ Levine, p. 70. E. Z. Melamed, "l'targum m'gillath ruth", *Bar Ilan Annual* 1 (1963), pp. 190-194, had listed the confusion of *leqet* and *shikhah* here amongst several examples of what he understood as confusion of talmudic material. Melamed saw this confusion as one indication of a late date for the targum, and it is perhaps for that reason that Levine was concerned here to counter his suggestion.

¹⁸ Levine, p. 102.

¹⁹ Levine, p. 100.

evidence of a sectarian viewpoint in agreement with that of the targum, for the Karaites, who understood the levirate law to apply not to a literal brother but to a more distant relative, understood Ruth's re-marriage as an example of the levirate. Indeed, they saw the advocacy of this custom as one of the main purposes of the book of Ruth.²⁰

Levine, however, does not suggest that the targum is of Karaite origin. He thinks it is too old for that. Nor does he suggest that the Karaite commentators knew and used the targum. That suggestion has been made by others,²¹ but I am not convinced, so far as *Tg. Ruth* is concerned, that the evidence is conclusive. While certain similarities may be seen between the exegesis of the Karaites and the targum, nothing that is distinctive to the latter appears in the Karaite commentaries.

The result of our investigation would appear to be negative. There is no secure foundation for the suggestion that the targum of Ruth is of sectarian origin. Yet there must be something of value for the question of the origin of the targum in the observation that it is so often at odds with rabbinic principles. I would suggest that the simple conclusion to be drawn from this is that the targum was just not interested in legal minutiae. It belongs to the genre *aggadah*, and its author did not concern himself with the *halakah* as it was understood by the rabbis in the academies.

But might it be possible to go further? This explanation might suffice for many of the points raised by Levine (and it should, perhaps, be noted that, in the course of his commentary, he makes several further, similar points), but others will not be so easily disposed of, notably the mention of crucifixion with which we started. Can it really be held that it stems from someone who got his *halakah* garbled? I do not think so, for it is difficult to conceive of anyone making the kind of error that would be involved.²² We have here a case where the principle applies, if ever it does, that what is anti-mishnaic is pre-mishnaic.

The way I see it is this. The notion of four kinds of capital punishment did not originate with the rabbinic *halakah*, though two of the four modes of execution specified there (burning, at least in the manner prescribed in the Mishnah, and strangling) undoubtedly did. What we have in *Tg. Ruth* is an historical statement of four modes of execution, two of which are prescribed in biblical law, while the other two were practised by the Hasmonaeans and the Romans. We have, in short, the historical set of four death penalties which must have been the starting-point for the rabbinic *halakah*, and therefore earlier than it.

²⁰ This is stated at the outset of the commentaries of Japhet ben Ali and Salmon ben Yeroham. See Nemoj, *Karaite Anthology*, p. 86; Beattie, p. 48.

²¹ Nemoj, *Karaite Anthology*, p. 83. N. Schorstein, *Der Commentar des Karäers Jepheth ben Ali zum Buche Ruth*, Berlin, 1903, p. 7.

²² This point has already been made by J. Heinemann, *hatargum lish'mot 22:4 v'hahalakah haq'dumah*, *Tarbiz* 38 (1968-69), pp. 294-296. Melamed, however, saw just such an error in the targum.

I would like to go on from this to suggest that the targum of Ruth, as a whole, may be assigned to an early date, but that would be a topic for another short paper, at the very least. I would, however, venture to suggest that there is in *Tg. Ruth* another equally ancient element which has not hitherto been identified as such, although its existence has not exactly been overlooked. In the same verse, when Naomi informs Ruth of the four death penalties and Ruth declares her intention to meet the same end as her mother-in-law, Naomi continues, according to the targum, "We have a cemetery (Aram. *beth qe'burta*), and Ruth replies, "And I will be buried there". Because the halakah speaks of two graves²³ for executed criminals the text of the targum has often been emended²⁴ and the explanation has been offered that the targum's reading originated in the error of a scribe who mistook the letter *beth*, representing the numeral "2", for the word *beth*.

My proposal, in brief, is that this idea should be stood on its head, and I make it for two reasons. First, the reading "a cemetery", as in the targum, is sensible in its context, whereas it would be quite illogical to have Ruth declare her intention to be buried in two places. The purpose of the statement would have been, as I see it, to draw attention to the distinctively Jewish practice of burial as opposed to cremation.²⁵ My second reason is that the origin of the halakah of the two graves is not only obscure, it is incomprehensible. My suggestion is that it originated in a mistaken reading of the word *beth*, or perhaps the Aramaic word *bey*,²⁶ as the numeric sign *beth*.

Of course, I realize that what I say could be used to the opposite effect, inasmuch as it might be said, by those who see an error in the targum, that the source of that error lay in thinking as I have been thinking, but if it should be thought that there is something in my suggestion, then those who propose a sectarian origin for the targum of Ruth are right, if by "sectarian" they mean "non-rabbinic", or, as I would propose, "pre-rabbinic".

²³ *mSanh.* 6:5.

²⁴ By D. Hartmann, *Das Buch Ruth in der Midrasch-Litteratur*, Leipzig, 1901, p. 26, n. 4; S. H. Levey, *The Targum to the Book of Ruth: its linguistic and exegetical character*, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, thesis, 1934; Melamed, p. 191; Levine, p. 62.

²⁵ Tacitus, *Hist.* V, 5, treats burial as a distinctively Jewish custom. According to Hartmann, *loc. cit.*, W. Bacher interpreted the statement of the targum as being in opposition to the Persian religion, which knows no burial places.

²⁶ This is the reading of the Aramaic text published by Ch. S. Neuhausen in *hatsofeh l'hokmat yisrael* 14 (1930), pp. 33-52.