Creating and Disrupting Verbal Connections

in the Targumic Stories of Hagar and Ishmael

Commentators and scholars of the Targum point to two common trends which dictate word choice in the Onkelos Targum.

The first trend is to unify, where two different phrases are translated using similar language in an act of interpretation that creates a connection between them. The second tendency is to distinguish, where the same biblical word is given different translations in order to create a distinction that the translator deems important.

Before presenting my central claim, let us first take a brief look at a few Targumic translations characteristic of the above two categories. The examples are taken from the chapters I deal with in my study.

In Genesis 16, Sarah gives her handmaid Hagar to Abraham for the purpose of procreation, and in the hope that “perhaps I shall be built up through her.” However, when Hagar scorns Sarah, Sarah takes her complaint back to Abraham. In v. 5 she tells him "חמסי עליך..." (‘This outrage against me is because of you’), and continues, ‘Let the Lord judge between you and me.’ Onkelos translates the beginning of the verse in light of its end: "דין לך עלך..." – ‘I have cause for a legal complaint against you’; "ידין ה' בינא ובינך" – ‘may the Lord judge between me and you.’ Several scholars relate to the Targum’s motives and view his translation as a way of refining the term used by Sarah. The word "חמס" is a strong term that describes serious transgressions, and the Targum prefers to avoid using it within Sarah’s accusation of Abraham. According to Posen, the Targum changes 'חמס' to 'דין', a legal term, conforming with the trend which shows respect to the patriarchs. According to Rappel, the change results from an attempt to present relationships within the family in a more refined manner, or perhaps from the importance accorded to the legal system. For our purposes, I do not wish to focus on the Targum’s motives, but rather on the practice of translating one part of the verse according to its other part, creating harmony between the two.

Another example reflects the translation of one verse according to another to create unity, in this case spanning the distance of several chapters:

When Hagar loses her way in the desert, an angel blesses the son who is to be born to her. He concludes his blessing with the words: "ועל פני כל אחיו ישכון" (‘he will **encamp** in defiance of all his kin’). Several chapters later, when Isaac and Ishmael come to bury Abraham, the Torah sums up Abraham’s life and descendants, and writes of Ishmael: "ועל פני כל אחיו נפל" (‘In defiance of all his kin he **went down**’). Several commentaries discuss the meaning of the Hebrew verb נפל", which many connected to Ishmael’s encampment throughout the land. Onkelos, however, unifies the two, and translates Gen 18:25 according to Gen 12:16: "על אפי כל אחוהי שרא", ‘he dwelt in the presence of all his kinsmen,’ clearly understanding this to be the manifestation of the former blessing.

The Targum’s second and opposite tendency is to create distinctions by translating the same word differently. This disrupts the link that the verses create between the different parts of the story. For example:

In the following verses, I wish to point to two repeated motifs: The first is the ‘hand’ motif and the second is the motif of torment. Abraham tells Sarah that her handmaid is ‘in her hands,’ after which Sarah takes advantage of her power as the lady of the house and torments Hagar. When Hagar meets the angel and tells him that she had run away from her mistress, the angel directs her to return to Sarah – and to ‘be tormented under her hand.’ The Torah here repeats the two components – the torment and the hand. Later on, the angel tells Hagar that God has heard 'עוניה' – which seems to mean her torment, stemming from the same root of "ענה". He also blesses her unborn child, foretelling that "ידו בכל ויד כל בו" – ‘his hand against all, the hand of all against him.’

The Targum preserves the motif of hand both in the torment which took place before Hagar’s escape and when the angel instructs her to return to be ‘under Sarah’s hands.’ However, it disrupts the connection to the blessing of Ishmael; Onkelos understands the blessing to mean that Ishmael will have need of everybody, and mankind will be in need of him as well.

The motif of suffering is not preserved at all. At first, Onkelos translates Sarah as tormenting Hagar; but when the angel tells Hagar to return and be tormented, the Targum prefers the term "השתעבדי", be enslaved by her, perhaps a more refined term. This may stem from the discomfort of having the angel instructing Hagar to return and be tormented. Onkelos then translates "שמע ה' אל עניך" as ‘the Lord has accepted your prayer,’ as he does in many other verses which deal with God’s ‘hearing’; we will return to the root "שמע" below. As to characterization, the fact that the Targum attributes God’s response to Hagar’s prayer, as opposed to her suffering, reflects a more positive attitude to Sarah. However, it also connects Hagar to a long line of people who pray, and whose prayer God hears, despite the lack of any prayer mentioned in the verses.

It seems that the Targum is motivated by exegetical considerations to dissimilarly interpret words that are repeated as motifs in the biblical narrative, severing connections between verses; this then creates new connections which are likewise meaningful.

In this paper, I will attempt to reveal the web of connections and connotations that the Targum creates within the story of Hagar and Ishmael, and between it and other sources. I will also explore the differences between the Bible’s own semantic network and that of the Targum—both in cases where the Targum disrupts biblical connections and where it creates new ones. The connections made or severed by the Targum can teach us how the Targumic audience understood the story and linked together its various, scattered parts.

The point of view that interests me is the one held by the Targum’s audience, not that of the translator himself. My discussion does not revolve around the translator’s considerations or his level of consistency, but rather upon the connotations and connections created in the minds of his listeners, irrespective of the translator’s intentions.

For demonstration purposes, I chose the Torah narratives of Hagar and Ishmael. Ishmael’s birth is described in Genesis 16, and his banishment in Genesis 21. These two narratives share many verbal connections, words that are also found in the stories embedded between the two, mainly that of Isaac’s birth. A comparison between the verbal connections which the Torah creates, and the connections which the Targum creates or disrupts, leads to several very interesting examples of the Targum’s web of connotations.