Creating and Disrupting Verbal Connections

in the Targumic Stories of Hagar and Ishmael

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

The first tendency is one of unification, where two different Hebrew words are translated using the same word in Aramaic, in an act of interpretation that creates a connection between them. The second tendency is one of separation, where identical Hebrew words are translated using entirely different Aramaic terms in order to create a distinction that the translator deems important.

First, a short methodological point: Discussing translation from Hebrew to Aramaic in English is complicated. The English translations of the biblical text vary, due to the range of the possible meanings of an expression both in the source language and the target language.

I have used Robert Alter’s (2019) translation of the Bible in this talk since it is a very literal rendition of the Hebrew text and in our context, its precise minimalism is helpful. The language of Alter’s translation is, at times, unconventional. For example, he translates the word מלאך as ‘messenger’ rather than ‘angel’. In other words, he prefers fidelity to the concrete meaning of the words over the accepted interpretation.

In the oral presentation, I have occasionally made use of more standard translations. In any case, the slides contain more than I am able to speak about, and I invite you to take note of them.

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 slave girl Hagar to Abraham in the hope that ‘perhaps I shall be built up through her.’ However, when Hagar scorns Sarah after becoming pregnant, Sarah takes her complaint back to Abraham. In v. 5 she tells him חמסי עליך... (‘This outrage 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 author of 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 of the Targum translating one verse according to another and thus unifying them involves verses that are several chapters apart:

When Hagar flees from Sarah to the desert, she meets an angel who 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 נפ"ל, which many connected to Ishmael’s encampment throughout the land. Onkelos, however, unifies the two, and translates Gen 25:18 according to Gen 16:12: 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 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:

I want to point to two repeated motifs in the verses on the slide: The first is the ‘hand’ motif and the second is the motif of suffering. Abraham tells Sarah that her slave girl is ‘in her hands,’ after which Sarah takes advantage of her power as the lady of the house and oppresses 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 ‘suffer abuse (תתעני) at her hand.’ The Torah here repeats the two components – the suffering and the hand. Later on, the angel tells Hagar that God has heard 'עוניה' – which seems to mean her suffering, stemming from the same root of ענ"ה. 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 suffering 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 be in need of everybody, and also mankind will be in need of him.

The motif of suffering is not preserved at all. At first, Onkelos translates Sarah as oppressing Hagar; but when the angel tells Hagar to return and be oppressed, 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 suffer abuse. Then, instead of ‘the Lord has heard your suffering,’ Onkelos translates שמע ה' אל עניך as ‘the Lord has accepted your prayer,’ following his practice 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 Many verbal connections can be found between the two narratives as well as between them and the narratives that appear between them, particularly 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.

A methodological note: I did not make use of the source-critical readings of the biblical narratives, but rather presumed that the Targum and its audience read the biblical text as we have it today. I did, of course, take textual variants of the Targum into account when necessary.

I will start with an example where the Targum creates a link between narratives, and later demonstrate how this affects a wider web of contexts.

After Hagar loses her way in the desert, the angel appears to her and blesses her unborn child. The blessing commences with the words והוא יהיה פרא אדם (‘and he will be a wild ass of a man’). The word for ‘wild ass,’ or onager, פרא, appears in several biblical sources in the context of an unfettered desert animal that one cannot hunt. It seems that this sense is a very suitable blessing for Hagar’s son, who is to be free and unconstrained, despite the angel’s instruction that Hagar return and be oppressed by Sarah.

Another connotation that the word פרא may arouse in this context is one of fertility. This is akin to the blessing that God gave Abraham, regarding Ishmael: הנה ברכתי אותו והפריתי אותו (‘I will bless him and make him fruitful,’ Gen 17:20). This is further supported by the use of the root פר"א when describing fertility in Hos 13:15.

Aramaic translations other than Onkelos, as well as certain versions of Targum Onkelos, translate פרא as ערוד, ‘onager,’ or ‘like an onager.’ The biblical word ערוד appears in Job 39:5 as parallel to the word פרא and seems to express an alternative Semitic root that refers to the same animal.

However, the more accurate Onkelos manuscripts have פרא translated as מרוד, ‘a rebel.’ It seems that the translation does not employ the animal metaphor but rather its symbolic implication. The translation also adds the preposition -ב, ‘among,’ rendering פרא אדם as מרוד באנשא – ‘a rebel among mankind.’ Using the metaphorical implication from the animal world instead of the metaphor itself is not surprising, and appears in several other places in the Targum. However, as Posen noted, the term מרוד for a person appears in only one other place in Targum Onkelos – in the Deuteronomic law of בן סורר ומורה, the ‘wayward and rebellious son,’ which is translated as סטי ומרוד – ‘defiant and rebellious.’ The Targum here creates an association that is not found in the verses themselves, one which implies a negative attitude toward Ishmael. Later we will discuss the question of Onkelos’ treatment of Ishmael, but here there is no doubt that the educated readers of the Targum would have perceived a connection that is not necessitated by the verses, one which has a great impact on the characterization of Ishmael.

Regarding the continuation of the blessing, ידו בכל ויד כל בו, translated as הוא יהא צריך לכולא ואף אנשא יהי צריך ליה – ‘he will be in need of everybody, and also mankind will be in need of him’ – Targum Onkelos expresses a more positive attitude toward Ishmael than the other translations, including the Septuagint and the Vulgate, who attribute oppositional or violent behavior to Ishmael. Onkelos refers to Ishmael’s need for others and vice versa.

[The background for how the different sources treat Ishmael is the connection between the Ishmaelites and the Arabs. This connection is accepted by Onkelos as well, as can be seen on the slide. The connection is based on the identification of Arabia with Kedar in Ezekiel, and the mention of Kedar as Ishmael’s son in Genesis. Grossfeld explains that the translation of the blessing is compatible with the only Arabs that were known to Onkelos – the Nabateans. According to Grossfeld, Ishmael’s need for others and the others’ need for him refers to a commercial dependence.]

Another connection that the Targum creates between the story of Hagar and other narratives involves the root לק"ח, ‘to take.’ Onkelos consistently translates the root לק"ח, in the sense of marriage, as נס"ב; but when Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham as a wife, the Targum uses the root דב"ר, which is usually used for ‘taking’ people in a sense other than marriage. There are only six examples in the entire Torah where דב"ר is used in the context of taking a woman for a wife (as opposed to the 62 times where Onkelos uses נס"ב). Four out of the six times describe an action having to do with Sarah. The first two are used when Pharaoh takes her in Gen 12, the third when she gives Hagar to Abraham, and the fourth when Abimelech takes her in Gen 20.

The two additional times where דב"ר is used to describe a marital relationship are when Laban gives Leah to Jacob, and when Shechem takes Dinah. We can propose that דב"ר is used for instances when a woman is taken by force, whereas נס"ב describes consensual marriage. This proposal is backed by the Targum of Gen 34, which at first describes Shechem as דב"ר Dinah and sleeping with her, and then later, when he wishes to take her as a wife, the Targum uses נס"ב. A similar distinction between דב"ר and נס"ב is found in Genesis Apocryphon in the context of taking Sarah to Pharaoh’s palace: When Pharaoh sends to take Sarah Genesis Apocryphon uses דב"ר, but when he takes her for wife in practice it employs the verb נס"ב. This is true also in other contexts of marriage. If so, then when Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham as a wife, the connotation is one of force and coercion. The same is true when Laban takes Leah and gives her to Jacob.

[It is worth noting that in contexts other than taking a wife, נס"ב is used for taking an object or taking a person by force, while דב"ר is used for taking a person by consent. For example, when Joseph’s brothers take him and throw him into the pit, the translation is נס"ב; but when they take Benjamin to Egypt, the translation uses דב"ר for Benjamin but נס"ב for the gifts they bear. If the ‘taking’ is in a context other than a marital one, it is דב"ר which signifies consent. Some have suggested this distinction also for Sarah’s context, implying that Onkelos emphasized Sarah’s consent and avoided the marital context out of respect for Sarah.]

The tradition of Genesis Apocryphon connects between Pharaoh’s abduction of Sarah and Hagar, probably due to Hagar’s Egyptian origin, which the Torah makes a point of noting. According to Genesis Apocryphon, Hagar is a maidservant whom Pharaoh includes among the gifts he gives Abraham. In Genesis Rabbah, Hagar is Pharaoh’s daughter, whom Pharaoh wished to give as a maidservant to Abraham after being highly impressed by the latter. The Midrash also connects Hagar’s name to the root אג"ר – ‘reward.’ Later on, it connects the Dinah affair to Leah’s actions, though with no connection to her marriage to Jacob; there, the Midrash is based on the verse which associates Dinah to Leah, referring to her as ‘Dinah, Leah’s daughter.’

If we treat the Targum as an independent literary text, even without the midrashic context, it is difficult to ignore the connection created between the narratives. In both the case of Sarah and Hagar and the case of Leah and Dinah, the linkage generated by the use of the same words constitute literary allusions to the common fate of the two women so linked and perhaps even to a causal connection, wherein what happens to the first woman in each pair is what leads to the fate of the second. The use of the rare verb דב"ר to describe Sarah, who herself was taken as a wife twice, and then again when she takes her slavegirl and gives her to Abraham, raises questions regarding the balance of power and the effect of Sarah’s personal experience on her treatment of Hagar. Similar questions arise regarding Laban tricking Jacob and forcing Leah upon him instead of Rachel: Was there any chance that this relationship would succeed, or is Dinah’s affair its inevitable tragic outcome, like the sale of Joseph?

Example 6:

Another example that demonstrates an interesting connection between Ishmael’s fate and Sarah’s personal story has to do with the translation of the verb צח"ק. The tidings of Isaac’s birth are repeated in both chapter 17 and chapter 18. In chapter 17 the tidings are given only to Abraham, while in chapter 18 to Sarah as well. Both respond with laughter and with wonder that Sarah will give birth, but the Torah relates to their respective laughters differently. After Abraham laughs and expresses wonder, God tells him to name the child יצחק – literally, the future tense of ‘laugh.’ As opposed to this, after Sarah laughs and expresses wonder, God asks Abraham: ‘Why is it that Sarah laughed… Is anything beyond the Lord?’ leading to Sarah denying her laughter.

Exegetes have suggested different ways of distinguishing between Abraham and Sarah’s responses, and the Targum resolves the difficulty by translating the two instances of צח"ק differently. When Abraham laughs, the Targum translates it חדי, ‘rejoiced,’ whereas when Sarah laughs, she is חייכת, ‘jesting.’ This verb has a more negative connotation and is used by the Targum also for words meaning scorn or torment.

The distinction that the Targum creates between Abraham’s laughter and Sarah’s laughter leads to a connection that arises later in the story. When Sarah sees Hagar’s son Ishmael מצחק and consequently seeks to drive him out so that he does not inherit with her son Isaac, the Targum translates Ishmael’s laughter using the root חי"כ; this forms a connection between Sarah’s laughter upon hearing the tidings of Isaac’s birth and Ishmael’s laughter. This connection separates these two from Abraham’s laughter, the one that inspired the choice of the name יצחק. This distinction stands in contrast to the terminology employed in the Bible itself, which uses the same root, צח"ק, throughout the Abraham cycle.

In our example, a lexical connection is generated in the Targum between two events which could be understood as significant from a literary perspective. The severity with which Sarah responds to Ishmael’s laughter raises speculations regarding the force with which she denied her own laughter, attempting to conceal it.

Note that the other Aramaic translations of the Torah attribute greater sins to Ishmael when translating the word מצחק: idol worship, incest, and bloodshed. This renders Ishmael’s character in a more negative light, lending greater justification for his subsequent expulsion. Onkelos uses a verb with a negative connotation, which is reasonable since it is this laughter that leads Sarah to demand his expulsion; however, he does not paint Ishmael’s character as inherently negative.

A more complex example combines the choice of different translations for the same word with the creation of connections between some of the translations for a word. The root שמ"ע, ‘to hear or to listen,’ holds a central place within the Ishmael narratives and even serves as the basis for his name ישמע-אל, ‘God will hear/listen.’

[Abraham listens to Sarah in two contexts. In chapter 16 verse 2 he listens to her when she suggests taking Hagar as a wife, and Onkelos translates as he usually does: וקביל אברם למימר שרי, ‘obeyed the command of Sarai.’ The second time, in chapter 21 verse 12, after Sarah wishes to drive out Ishmael so that he will not inherit with her son, God tells Abraham: ‘Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice,’ which Onkelos translates as קבל מינה – ‘listen to her.’ Apparently, in chapter 21 the Targum emphasizes that the acceptance stems from Sarah’s authority and not just from the content of her words. Perhaps we can learn from this about a certain undermining of Abraham’s esteem for Sarah, given how she conducted herself vis-à-vis Ishmael, especially after Isaac’s birth. However, according to the Targum, God clarifies that Abraham must accept Sarah and her authority, even beyond the specific content of her words.]

Translating ‘hearing’ or ‘listening’ as ‘accepting’ occurs also when God ‘hears’ Hagar and Abraham with regard to Ishmael.

In Gen 16:11 Hagar is instructed to call her son Ishmael – ‘for the Lord has heeded your suffering,’ שמע אל עניך, which the Targum renders ארי קביל ה' צלותך, ‘for the Lord has accepted your prayer.’ The Targum here refers to Hagar’s prayer, despite the absence of any mention of prayer in the verse. This translation of שמע is characteristic in cases when there is a response or salvation on God’s part.

The interesting point is that Onkelos uses the exact same phrase when translating God’s words to Abraham after the promise of Isaac’s birth. Abraham requests (Gen 17:18): ‘Would that Ishmael might live in Your favor,’ and God responds (v. 20) ולישמעאל שמעתיך – ‘As for Ishmael, I have heard you’ – which Onkelos again translates as קבילית צלותך, ‘I have accepted your prayer.’ This means that in the narrative of the Targum, similar to what seems to be the simple reading of the text, Ishmael is blessed both on account of Hagar and thanks to Abraham’s request. The verbal connection that the Targum creates between God’s response to Ishmael’s two parents emphasizes the symmetry between the two.

On the other hand, when God hears Ishmael himself (Gen 21:17), the Targum is different: ‘The cry of the boy was heard before the Lord.’

Maimonides, in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, notes this systematic distinction in the Targum: When God heeds a request, Onkelos translates the ‘hearing’ as the acceptance of prayer, while when God merely ‘hears’ and has knowledge of an issue, the translation is in the passive voice, שמיע קדמי, ‘it was heard before me.’

It is interesting to note that although Hagar does not pray in chapter 16, the Targum has God accepting her prayer, perhaps inspired by her weeping in chapter 21 (as Grossfeld suggests). However, when Hagar weeps in chapter 21, it is the lad’s voice that God hears, and the Targum does not mention either Hagar or Ishmael crying out or praying.

Curiously, when the root שמ"ע that is mentioned in connection with the biblical explanation of Ishmael’s name, it is translated as קב"ל, ‘accept’; it is only when Ishmael’s name is not mentioned that the Targum uses the root שמ"ע. Even though the Targum does not usually preserve biblical name explanations in its translation, it seems that in Ishmael’s case this would not have been difficult – like the with the explanation of Simeon’s name, where the Targum preserved the root שמ"ע.

The atmosphere in chapter 21 focuses specifically on God’s mercy on Ishmael and not on God saving him on account of his parents. This is expressed in an additional example, the final one that I will present today.

Throughout the entire story of Hagar and Ishmael’s expulsion, the biblical narrator deliberately refers to Ishmael in various ways. Sarah views him as ‘the slavegirl’s son,’ Abraham perceives him as ‘his son,’ and Hagar as ‘a child,’ while Ishmael on his own seems to be called ‘the lad,’ נער. The Targum leaves the translation of בן as בר – ‘son,’ but blurs the distinction between mentions of ‘boy’ and ‘lad,’ translating both ילד and נער as a child – רביא. It seems that the Targum identifies with the mood in the chapter, and treats Ishmael as a young child who is in danger.

There is only one verse in which Onkelos translates נער as עולימא – ‘youth,’ the translation he uses throughout the rest of the Torah. In verses 12-13, God tells Abraham to not be upset about banishing Ishmael, for Ishmael, too, will become a nation. There the emphasis is on Ishmael thriving in his own right, and the Targum indeed renders it as ‘youth.’

The Targum of verse 13 is interesting as well. Throughout the entire Torah, Onkelos translates the word זרעך – ‘seed’ – as a collective noun: בנך, ‘your sons,’ in the plural. It is only here that he translates כי זרעך הוא – ‘for he is your seed’ – as ברך, ‘your son,’ in the singular.

The Targum appears to align with Genesis’ distinction between perceiving Ishmael as Abraham’s son while not accepting the nation he engendered as a partner in God’s covenant.

Onkelos also creates an interesting connection in his translation of verse 20: Ishmael will grow up to be a רובה קשת, a ‘seasoned bowman.’ The Hebrew roots of the words ילד and רובה are different – ילד is related to נולד, birth, while רבה is connected to growth. The Targum, however, who uses the word רביא throughout the chapter as a translation for both ‘boy’ and ‘youth,’ now uses that same word – רביא – to describe Ishmael’s proficiency with a bow and arrow: רביא קשתא, thus emphasizing that the period of ‘growth’ has been completed and was not arrested.

To conclude, when we examine the Targum’s text in its entirety, and not only attend to the motive behind each word choice, we find that certain connections are created and others are disrupted. This then impacts the general mood of the story, as well as how the Targum’s Aramaic-speaking audience would read it, regardless of whether the author of the Targum did so deliberately, or this result was a side effect of other changes.

Concerning the framing of the characters in the narrative, the connections generated by the Targum reveal a complex attitude toward Sarah, where the links between her personal story and her severe treatment of Hagar and Ishmael may offer insight into her motives. Sympathy is shown to Hagar, perhaps partially from an interest in preserving God’s honor and Sarah’s dignity. As for Ishmael, the Bible’s preference for Isaac as the one who continues God’s covenant is somewhat justified by the Targum’s translation for פרא אדם, which alludes to the rebellious and wayward son, as well as its distinction between Ishmael as Abraham’s son and Ishmael’s descendants who are disconnected from Abraham and are not part of the covenant. However, the Targum’s attitude toward Ishmael is not inherently negative, and sometimes reflects sympathy toward Ishmael, and this appears to be the characteristic attitude of early Jewish literature. The attitude toward Ishmael in Jewish sources declined over time, reaching a nadir in Pseudo-Jonathan which exhibits a clearly anti-Islamic trend.

The general atmosphere that the Targum creates with regard to the characters affords us a glimpse of the historical and literary contexts within which its author was active. The attitudes toward Ishmael and the identification of Ishmael with the Arabs can shed light upon the different historical contexts of the various translations. The link between Pharaoh taking Sarah and Hagar’s Egyptian origin provides a literary context that enables a comparison between similar traditions. The historical and literary contexts may also help us better evaluate the translator’s audience, such as the types of literary allusions the translator may assume his readers would identify and decode. The context, then, provides us not only with a means of characterizing the Targum and the setting in which it was composed but may also help afford us an appreciation of its audience.