

Targum Isaiah: Translation as Commentary



By Photographs by Ardon Bar Hama, author of original document is unknown.
- Website of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, see link., Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=12149044>

***Targum Isaiah* probably reached its present form by the fifth century CE, given its allusions to historical circumstances and its awareness of ideas in other Jewish sources that were produced during the Amoraic period (c. 200–500 CE).**

The Aramaic term *targum* (תרגום) means “translation”, and indeed, a *targum* (plural: *targumim*) is, in a sense, an Aramaic translation of a book of the Hebrew Bible. Yet, *targumim* often do not function in the way that we usually expect of translations. Indeed, like its fellow *targumim*, *Targum Isaiah* is not a direct word-for-word or thought-for-thought translation of the Hebrew text of the *Book of Isaiah* into Aramaic. For example, consider how Isaiah 52:13 is rendered in *Targum Isaiah*:

“Behold, my servant the Messiah shall prosper. He shall be exalted, extolled, and very strong.”

Here, the Aramaic translation closely resembles the Hebrew text, but with one glaring exception: the addition of “the Messiah”. There is technically nothing in the Hebrew text or the passage’s context to warrant this addition, yet the targumist (the anonymous producer or producers of *Targum Isaiah*) found it reasonable. While the Hebrew text of the passage is ambiguous regarding the exact identity of “my servant”, he is explicitly identified in *Targum Isaiah* as the Messiah—an eschatological ruler whom God will send to lead the people of Israel to defeat and rule over their foreign oppressors.

We should not be too quick to dismiss this addition as an instance of “bad translation”, since *Targum Isaiah* was never intended to be a translation in the conventional sense. Every translation is an instance of interpretation, since conscious decisions were made by the

translator about how to convey the meaning of the base text in the target language. This is much more so in the case of *targumim*, which further seek to apply biblical passages more relevantly to its target audience, which in the case of *Targum Isaiah* were Jews who lived long after the lifetime of the Prophet Isaiah. To ask a more helpful question: What can we learn from the way that this passage is rendered in *Targum Isaiah*?

For one, *Targum Isaiah* reflects an interpretation of the passage where this important character in the *Book of Isaiah*, the servant of the Lord, is specifically identified as the Messiah. This is important, since there was not a monolithic Judaism during this time, and Jews did not all have the same unified view of this passage. Other contemporary primary sources evince Jewish views in which this ‘servant of the Lord’ is variously identified as King Hezekiah, certain rabbis, and even the people of Israel collectively. Among these diverse Jewish interpretations, *Targum Isaiah* stands as an attestation to a messianic reading of the passage during Late Antiquity.

In other passages of *Targum Isaiah*, expressions from the Hebrew text are substituted, modified, or expanded. In some places, entities are mentioned which did not exist during the time of Isaiah but were known to the Targum’s audience, such as the Roman Empire. By these deviations from the Hebrew text, *Targum Isaiah* forms, as it were, a running commentary on the biblical text, informing its readers about how the *Book of Isaiah*, already ancient during their time, applied more immediately to them. In this way, *Targum Isaiah* provides us a window into how its Jewish users treated and interpreted the *Book of Isaiah*.

Source commentary provided by Asher Yiliang Chee

Yiliang Chee (Asher) is a part-time PhD student in History at the University of Southampton. His research seeks to understand what can be learnt about Jewish–Christian relations during late antiquity (4th–6th centuries CE) from the way that Jews and Christians

interpreted and used Scripture. He has a full-time job as a software engineer with the Singapore Government, and is also a lecturer with the Asia-Pacific Institute of International Studies (APIIS).