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The Merkabah as a Substitute for Messianism in Targum Ezekiel?¹

Abstract:

This article questions the theory that Targum Ezekiel holds a distinctive position within the corpus of Targum Jonathan to the Prophets with regard to Messianism. According to the hitherto unchallenged studies by Samson Levey, Targum Ezekiel is proof that

¹ The abbreviations MT, TgJon and BCTP stand for Masoretic Text, Targum Jonathan and Bilingual Concordance to the Prophets respectively. The sigla for Targum Jonathan’s textual witnesses as per A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic Based on Old Manuscripts and Printed Texts* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, repr edn, 2004) and J. Ribera Florit, *Targum Jonatán de los profetas posteriores en tradición babilónica: Ezequiel* (Madrid: Instituto de Filología del CSIC, Departamento de Filología Bíblica y de Oriente Antiguo, 1997):

*Manuscripts with Babylonian Vocalization*

z = Ms. Or. 1474, British Library, London

I = Ms. Or. 1473, British Library, London

Eb 24 = Ms. T-S B 4/38, Geniza Collections, Cambridge

*Manuscripts with Tiberian (or no) Vocalization*

c = Ms. 7, Montefiore Library

f = Codex Reuchlinianus, Badische Hof- und Landesbibliothek, Karlsruhe

*Printed Editions*

b = The First Rabbinic Bible, Bomberg, Venice 1515/17

g = The Second Rabbinic Bible, Bomberg, Venice 1524/25

o = The Antwerp Polyglot Bible, 1569/73
Merkabah mysticism functioned as a substitute for Messianism after the cataclysm of 70 CE. This theological shift was supposedly instigated by R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai at a time when messianic speculations had become doctrinally too dangerous. However, the present study shows that the lack of Messianism already goes back to the Hebrew Vorlage itself. A thorough examination of Targum Ezekiel’s translational strategy reveals further that the targonist in fact had a keen eye for the actual meaning of the few messianic references. On the strength of these and other findings it is argued that Targum Ezekiel’s approach to Messianism is not at odds with the rest of the corpus.

Keywords: Book of Ezekiel, Targum Jonathan to the Prophets, Messianism, eschatology, mysticism, Merkabah

In order to examine Targum Ezekiel’s treatment of Messianism we start at the very beginning, with the expansive rendering of the introductory words of Ezek. 1:1: ‘It came to pass in the thirtieth year since Hilkiah the high priest had found the book of the Torah in the Temple’. It is unknown to which era or public event ‘the thirtieth year’ in the Hebrew Vorlage refers.² Apparently, Targum Ezekiel takes the fifth year of the exile of king Jehoiachin (Ezek. 1:2) as a point of reference, which would be 592 BCE. Counting thirty years backwards would result in the year when the book of the Torah was recovered, which triggered king Josiah’s Deuteronomistic reform. And indeed, if one attaches credence to 2 Kgs. 22.3, the law-book was recovered in the eighteenth year of Josiah’s reign, i.e., 622 BCE.³


³ The same interpretation of ‘thirty years’ is mentioned in S. ‘Ol. R. 26, the commentary on Ezek. 1.1 of Church Father Jerome and Yal. Shim. Ezek. 1.1. As regards the origin of this dating tradition,
Levey argues that Targum Ezekiel’s expansion is anything but a mere elucidation of the mysterious ‘thirty years’.

According to him, a much deeper thought underlies the surface, namely, the association of Ezekiel with the Deuteronomistic reformation. Ezekiel’s prophecy and Josiah’s drastic religious measures were both aimed at the people’s repentance and return to Yahwistic worship. Only by drastically changing their religious attitude could the people survive. The key to survival thus was religious purity with Ezekiel’s Merkabah vision being an important tool because it showed that although the earthly sanctuary had been destroyed, God was still present, supremely enthroned in the highest heavens beyond the reach of any mundane power. After the catastrophe of 586 BCE, Ezekiel provided this consoling vision, and thanks to the first century mystic R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai it was kept alive after 70 CE, when the Jewish people, bereft of their sacred heart in Jerusalem, faced the challenge of surviving as a religious community, like their ancestors in the sixth century BCE. Here we touch upon the crux of Levey’s argumentation, which he

the interrelationship between Targum Ezekiel and Seder ‘Olam Rabba is particularly interesting because the latter was probably edited in the early Amoraic period. Was Targum Ezekiel the source for Seder ‘Olam Rabba or vice versa? It is a troublesome undertaking to establish which may have been the original source since both works were subject to editorial elaboration in the consecutive centuries. Moreover, both sources may have drawn from an already existing oral tradition, which also left traces in Jerome’s work. As will be made clear in the following, Samson Levey would probably argue that the tradition found in Targum Ezekiel exerted an influence upon Seder ‘Olam Rabba, given his early dating of the former. However, the real importance of such parallels is whether a pattern can be established, and the extant evidence is too meagre to speculate on further. On the impact of Jewish traditions upon Jerome, see B. Kedar-Kopfstein, ‘Jewish Traditions in the Writings of Jerome’, in D.R.G. Beattie and M.J. McNamara (eds.), The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context (JSOTSUp, 166; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), pp. 420-30.

expounded in two studies. In sum, due to the cataclysm of 70 CE and its aftermath Merkabah mysticism replaced Jewish Messianism, which the Roman rulers considered a threat. This theological shift, attributed to R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai, left its traces in Targum Ezekiel. Levey finds proof of this in the Targum’s non-messianic exegesis: whereas Targum Jonathan to the Prophets in general already exhibits few messianic references, they are notably absent in Targum Ezekiel.

**Messianism in the Book of Ezekiel**

Examining the messianic tendency in Ezekiel’s Hebrew *Vorlage* could further our understanding of the strategy employed in its Targumic version. It is important in this respect to realize that the concept of the מֶשִיחַ as the eschatological redeemer from the Davidic dynasty is nowhere to be found in the Hebrew Bible. One would search in vain for the term מֶשִיחַ in that sense. Messianism only flourished in post-

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6 Levey’s earlier work *The Messiah: An Aramaic Interpretation. The Messianic Exegesis of the Targum* (MHUC, 2; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1974) does not yet bracket Messianism and Merkabah mysticism together. Instead, Levey tentatively attributes the non-messianic outlook in Targum Ezekiel to a composer for whom the return of the Messiah was not a pressing issue, implying that Targum Ezekiel may have germinated in circles other than those which produced the rest of TgJon and undergone centuries of textual transmission without the inclusion of messianic references. This composer may have lived either in Babylonia, a suggestion that contradicts the prevalent opinion of TgJon’s Palestinian roots, or in Palestine, at a time when the policy of the foreign rulers did not trigger messianic speculation (pp. 78-87, esp. 86-87).
biblical Judaism, amalgamating biblical restorative and utopian notions, e.g., the return of the Davidic House, and the Day of the Lord. Consequently, when we speak of the Messiah or, alternatively, messianic allusions in the Book of Ezekiel, we are referring to passages which envisage the restoration of Israel’s glorious past through a Davidic ruler. However, a crucial observation is that already in the Book of Ezekiel itself these messianic references are seldomly attested, in contrast to the other Latter Prophets. Surely, the eschatological overtone is ubiquitous, even more than in any other of the prophetic books, but the Messiah is hardly explicitly alluded to in the prophet’s visions of a restored Israel. This observation led to the prevalent opinion amongst biblical scholars that the ‘idea of a royal messianic deliverance is not important in Ezekiel’. With this preliminary observation in mind we can now focus on the few messianic passages in relation to their rendering in Targum Ezekiel.

The Targumic Rendering of Ezekiel’s Messianic Passages

The Messiah is conspicuous by his absence in the oracles against Israel and Judah (chs. 4-24) and against the foreign nations (chs. 25-32). There are only a few faintly messianic allusions in the aforementioned chapters, viz., 17.22; 21.32b; and 29.21a. The restoration oracles (chs. 34-37) are the setting for two unequivocal messianic

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allusions, viz., 34.23-24 and 37.24-25. Far from obvious is the messianic connotation of the designation נשיא in Ezekiel’s final vision (chs. 40-48).

_Ezek. 17.22_

This verse is embedded in an oracle envisaging a sprig from the highest crown of a cedar that is being plucked by the Lord and planted on Israel’s high mountain (17.22-24). The Lord will cause this tender shoot to thrive, growing into a majestic cedar that will dwarf the surrounding trees. From the preceding verses, Ezek.17.3-4ff., we know that the cedar crown stands for the royal dynasty, and that its sprig represents the Davidic king. Here it is said that the Lord will not just take any shoot, but a tender one from the topmost crown.⁹ It is implied that this newly sprouted shoot represents the restoration of the Davidic kingship, yet verse 22 is devoid of specifically messianic designations. Hence, the message that the oracle seeks to convey is not messianic, but rather eschatological, illustrating the Lord’s majesty and His loyalty to Israel in past, present and future.¹⁰

The composer of Targum Ezekiel seems to have been aware of the subordinate part of Messianism in the Hebrew Vorlage, given the subtle development of the vague allusion in verse 22:¹¹

MT

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⁹ Although the Latter Prophets often depict the messianic figure in horticultural imagery (cf. Isa. 11.1; Jer. 23.5, 33.15; Zech. 3.8, 6.12), Ezekiel’s term רך is not attested elsewhere.

¹⁰ Cf. Block, _The Book of Ezekiel_, vol. 1, p. 552.

¹¹ The textual basis for the Hebrew is the _Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia_, for the Aramaic Alexander Sperber’s _The Bible in Aramaic Based on Old Manuscripts and Printed Texts_ (Leiden: E.J. Brill, repr edn, 2004).
Thus says the Lord God: I Myself will take a tender sprig\textsuperscript{12} from the highest crown of the cedar; I will set it out. From the top of its shoots I will pluck it; I Myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

Targum Ezekiel

cדנ מאר_CONST_Dא 확 נבראה CONST_Dא מלקלחתא דבח דוות בציאא CONST_Dא תרמא CONST_Dא CONST_Dא אקודניקא מופני בנהי ניק ארבי

Thus says the Lord God: I Myself will bring near a child from the kingdom of the House of David, which is likened to a high cedar; I will establish him from the sons of his sons.

I will raise and establish him by my Memra like a high and lofty mountain.

Most of the equations employed in Targum Ezekiel are attested in the rest of TgJon, aside from צמרת // מלכותא; ראש // בראש; רך // יניק; קטף // רכה. Levey links Aramaic ניק ‘child’ in this verse to Hebrew ינקתיה ‘his shoots’, denoting the equation ‘a clever exegetical device’\textsuperscript{15}. However, ניקא is in fact equated with Hebrew רך. The Hebrew ינקתיה is rendered with בנהי ‘his children’\textsuperscript{16}. The equation ינקת // בנהי is also attested in Hos. 14.7\textsuperscript{17}, a verse that describes Israel’s glorious future in similar

\textsuperscript{12} The object רך is found further on in the verse; the same applies to its equivalent יניק in Targum Ezekiel.

\textsuperscript{13} הובך read לאראא.

\textsuperscript{14} מפורש read מפורש.

\textsuperscript{15} Levey, The Messiah, p. 156 n. 90.

\textsuperscript{16} Of course, we should allow for the possibility that the Targumist was aware that his use of יניק would also be evocative of Hebrew ינקתיה.

\textsuperscript{17} A correction of BCTP is in order here: in TgJon Ezek. 17.22 the equation is not Hebr. יניק ‘infant, child, shoot’ // Ar. נברא ‘son’. The form employed in Ezek. 22.17 is ינקתיה, the feminine plural
imagery. Consequently, the chosen equation is not an isolated instance, but has a parallel elsewhere in TgJon.

In addition, caution is in place as to Levey’s rendering of Targum’s אָבֶּר with ‘I will anoint’.\(^\text{18}\) The Pael of אָבֶּר can indeed mean ‘to elevate, anoint, consecrate’ and is used in TgJon as one of the equivalents of Hebrew משח.\(^\text{19}\) In the present verse, however, Levey’s rendering could be wrongly interpreted, as if the composer deliberately resorted to a verb other than משח to avoid a messianic interpretation.\(^\text{20}\) The Targum does not speak of a Davidic king but of a Davidic child, and the rendering of רבי in the sense of ‘to rear, raise’ appears to be more appropriate in this respect.\(^\text{21}\)

Moreover, the verb is also employed in the sense of growing trees, grass,

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\(^{19}\) E.g., TgJon 1 Sam. 15.1, 17; 2 Sam. 3.39; Isa. 61.1; possibly also Ezek. 28.14. Cf. TgPs 2.6, where it is explicitly said that the Lord will anoint (８ָרֵא) His king on Mount Zion.

\(^{20}\) De Moor observes the possibly apologetic use of the verb רבי instead of משח in Targum Jonathan whilst discussing TgJon Isa. 61.1; J.C. de Moor, ‘“Van wie zegt de profeet dit?” Messiaanse apologetiek in de Targumim’, in H.H. Grosheide *et al.* (eds.), *De Knechtsgestalte van Christus. Studies door collega's en oud-leerlingen aangeboden aan prof. dr. H.N. Ridderbos* (Kampen: Kok, 1978), pp. 91-110, esp. p. 97. As to Targum Samuel, Van Staaldruine-Sulman offers an alternative explanation. In TgJon 1 Sam. 15.1 the composer did not want to convey the impression that Samuel anointed Saul twice (cf. the verb משח in TgJon 1 Sam 10.1). In TgJon 1 Sam. 15.17 and 2 Sam. 3.39, on the other hand, the use of רבי was intended to heighten the contrast between the kingships of both Saul and David and their humble origins; E. van Staaldruine-Sulman, *The Targum of Samuel* (SAIS, 1; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002), p. 321.

\(^{21}\) E.g., TgJon Isa. 23.4; Ezek. 19.2, 3.
herbs, etc. The child, who is likened to the sprig of a cedar, will be raised and established by the Lord like a tree on the high and lofty mountain.

In conclusion, Block has described the דר רד ‘shoot, sprig’ in this oracle as the harbinger of the messianic figure in the book of Ezekiel, and the same can be said for its Targumic rendering. The prospective Messiah is literally still in his infancy (‘child’). The absence of explicit messianic references in this verse is insufficient proof of a deliberate avoidance of Messianism or, alternatively, of Targum Ezekiel’s emergence in circles other than those which composed the rest of TgJon. In contrast, the employment of a crucial equation, viz., רוח / בר א, which is also attested in another eschatological verse (Hos. 14.7), points at the composer’s awareness of TgJon’s conventions. Moreover, although Targum Ezekiel does not explicitly mention the Messiah, in vss. 23-24 it equips the God-given mighty ruler of Davidic lineage with armies and fortresses, speaks of the righteous and the humble who shall linger in his presence, and envisages the downfall of the once mighty kingdom. Hence, according to Kimḥi’s commentary on Ezek. 17.24, this rendering in Targum Ezekiel does seem to refer to the Messiah:

Ezek. 21.32b

22 E.g., TgJon Isa. 61.11; TgJob 38.27; TgQoh 2.6.

According to Levey, Ezek. 21.32 is another verse that suspiciously lacks a messianic interpretation in Targum Ezekiel.\textsuperscript{24} In the Hebrew Vorlage, the verse serves as the climax of Ezek. 21.23-32 [Eng. 21.18-27], the oracle about Nebuchadnezzar, the agent of the sword against Judah. Our verse concludes the oracle with a sinister foreboding, inspired by Gen. 49.10: Judah will be ruined, and the scale of the destruction will be unprecedented. This is followed by the crucial phrase: ושאת אשר לו המשפט ונתתיו ‘until he comes to whom judgment belongs, and to whom I shall commit it’. At first glance, the phrase readily lends itself to a messianic interpretation: after the destruction, justice will be done by the Messiah. And indeed, people have recognized messianic or Christological features in this verse, from the composer of the Septuagint via the Church Fathers to present-day commentators.\textsuperscript{25} However, quoting Zimmerli,

\begin{quote}
‘Die große Schwierigkeit all dieser Deutungen besteht nun aber darin, daß sie allesamt von einem Verständnis des Wortes משפט ausgehen, das bei Ez nie so zu belegen ist. Eine Überprüfung des Sprachgebrauches von משפט im Buche Ez führt (…) auf 23\textsuperscript{24b} als die für die Deutung von 21\textsuperscript{34} [sic] am nächsten liegende Parallelstelle’.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

In the Hebrew text of Ezek. 23.24b, when the Lord addresses his unfaithful Oholibah, i.e., Jerusalem, the emphatic use of the root משפט clearly indicates its different meanings:

\textsuperscript{24} Levey, The Messiah, pp. 85-86; idem, ‘Targum to Ezekiel’, p. 144; idem, Targum of Ezekiel, p. 69 n. 21.

\textsuperscript{25} For an overview see Block, ‘Bringing back David’, p. 170 n. 4; idem, The Book of Ezekiel, vol. 1, p. 692 n. 192; Zimmerli, Ezechiel, p. 495.

I shall commit judgment to them, and they shall judge you according to their judgments

Here, the first ‘משפט’ and the following verb ‘שפט’ are employed in the sense of ‘punishment’. Targum Ezekiel to this verse is fully aware of the semantic spectrum of ‘משפט’ for it employs three different equations in its exposition:

Targum Ezekiel

ואתיך הרמיהו פורענות דינה וייתפרעון מניך בנימוסיהו

I shall commit just punishment to them, and they shall punish you according to their laws

Targum Ezekiel has conveyed the different overtones of ‘משפט by employing the lemmata ‘punishment, retribution’، ‘דיין، ‘justice’، and ‘نزמה, ‘law, custom’.

Importantly, we find the equation ‘משפט פורענות also in Targum Ezekiel’s rendering of עדים אשר המשפט ונתיתו in vs. 21.32. The composer has fully understood that a messianic interpretation would be intrusive in the context. The phrase does not convey a message of salvation but rather deepens the impending doom: the destruction inflicted upon Judah will be unprecedented; nothing like this has been


28 Otherwise Targum Ezekiel would have translated Hebrew ‘משפט with Aramaic ‘דיין ‘justice’.
seen until he comes who, with God’s permission, will execute punishment. Whereas
the Hebrew text implies that Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, is the executor of
God’s wrath, Targum Ezekiel identifies Ishmael, the son of Nethaniah, as the one
who inflicts punishment, by assassinating Gedaliah.

To conclude, Levey’s observation that Targum Ezekiel avoids a messianic
interpretation of this verse requires modification because neither the Hebrew text nor
rabbinic exposition gives any cause for it. Past messianic interpretations can be
traced back to an inaccurate reading of this verse, particularly of the crucial term
משפט. By enacting the historical drama of Judah’s downfall that lies behind Ezek.
21.32, the composer of Targum Ezekiel has -once again- demonstrated his keen eye
for the message that the prophet truly aimed to convey.

Ezek. 29.21a

More ambiguous is the statement at the end of an oracle that envisions the downfall
of Pharaoh’s Egypt through the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. In Ezek. 29.21, the Lord
announces a message of salvation, and I would like to draw the reader’s attention to
the first part and its rendering in Targum Ezekiel:

MT

ביום ההוא אצמיח קרן לבית ישראל
On that day I will cause a horn to sprout for the House of Israel

Targum Ezekiel

ב прият לזרת ליבי ישראל
At that time I will establish redemption for the House of Israel

29 ב ב g o f c read read.
30 אוירל אדרס; b g read.
According to Levey, this rendering further proves that Targum Ezekiel systematically recoils from Messianism.\textsuperscript{31} Of importance for understanding his reasoning is the parallel in Ps. 132.17:

\begin{quote}
MT

ше אצמך קרן לדוד ערבתי נר למען

There I will cause a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed one

Targum Psalms

תמן אצמח מלך יקר ללבית דוד שרגא למשיחי

There I will cause an honored king to sprout for the House of David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed one.
\end{quote}

In this psalm, too, קרן ‘horn’\textsuperscript{32} and צמוח ‘to sprout’\textsuperscript{33} have been combined, and, more importantly, the metaphorical speech serves in an unmistakably messianic context, with references to David and the anointed one. The Targumic version of Ps. 132.17 further develops the messianic imagery by equating קרן with מלך יקר, and לדוד with ללבית דוד. The parallel in Psalms may have triggered the messianic understanding of our present verse. Important in this respect is b.Sanh. 98a, where R. Hanina, the third century Amora, quotes Ezek. 29.21a as a proof text when predicting the coming of the son of David. Our Targum, however, lacks any messianic designations. Instead, it

\textsuperscript{31} Levey, \textit{Targum of Ezekiel}, p. 87 n. 10.

\textsuperscript{32} The term קרן ‘horn’ functions often as a metaphor for ‘strength’ in the Hebrew Bible; e.g., Deut. 33.17; 1 Sam. 2.1,10; Jer. 48.25; Zech. 2.1-4; Ps. 18.3; see \textit{HALAT}, pp. 1068-69.

\textsuperscript{33} On the use of horticultural imagery in messianic passages see footnote 9.
renders Hebrew קרן with ‘redemption’.\textsuperscript{34} the Lord promises salvation to his people rather than the coming of the Messiah. This more general, eschatological interpretation has been prevalent from Jewish medieval commentators like Rashi down to present-day scholars.\textsuperscript{35}

It is difficult to establish whether the composer of Targum Ezekiel deliberately refrained from a messianic interpretation. The messianic tendency in the Hebrew verse is far from clear-cut compared with Ps. 132.17, and the Targumist may have been oblivious to the latter parallel and the rabbinic tradition that interpreted Ezek. 29.21 messianically (b.Sanh. 98a). Even if the composer was aware of the messianic connotation that rabbinic expositors attached to this verse, he may have felt it intrusive, given the context of this oracle. In fact, now that we have learnt of the Targumist’s extraordinary feeling for Ezekiel’s message, this suggestion seems the more probable one.

\textit{Ezek. 34.23-24; 37.24-25}

Both in the woe-oracle against the shepherds in Ezek. 34 and the vision of Israel’s renaissance in Ezek. 37, the promise of a future Davidic king is clothed in the shepherd metaphor. Targum Ezekiel has stripped the prophetic speech of this

\textsuperscript{34} This equation is unattested elsewhere in TgJon. In addition, מלכה and מְלָכָה are never employed as equivalents for Hebrew קרן, although we do find the equation קרן / מלכות in TgJon 1 Sam. 2.10 (note messianic context!); Jer. 48.25; and Zech. 2.1-2, 4.

metaphor, resulting in a literal rendering that exhibits, according to Levey, the ‘glaring absence’ of a messianic interpretation.\(^36\)

Ezek. 34.23-24

MT

והקמתי עליהם רעה אחד ורעה אתהן את עבדי דויד הוא ירעה אתם והוא לא יירעה לי להן לרעה.

ואני יהוה אהיה להם לאלהים ועבדי דוד נשיא בתוכם אני יהוה דברתי.

23 I will appoint over them one shepherd, and he will tend them, my servant David. He will tend them and be their shepherd. 24 And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I, the Lord, have spoken.

Targum Ezekiel

ואני יתייה להן לרעש ותירעש יית עבדי דויד.

ואני יהוה אהיה להם לאלהים ועבדי דוד מלכא.

23 I will appoint over them one leader, and he will sustain them, my servant David. He will sustain them and be their leader. 24 And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David will be king among them. I, the Lord, have decreed it by my Memra.

Ezek. 37.24-25


\(^{37}\) פרגס | l f c Eb 24 read פרגס.

\(^{38}\) וי | b g o read וי ודר.

\(^{39}\) לאלהים | b g o read לאלהים.

\(^{40}\) רבא | f reads רבא.
24 My servant David will be king over them, and there will be one shepherd for all of them. They will follow my judgments and keep my statutes; and observe them. 25 They will dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors dwelt. They, their children, and their children’s children will dwell there forever. And my servant David will be their prince forever.

For the first time in the Book of Ezekiel the messianic contents of a passage is unequivocal: the Lord promises to establish one shepherd, his servant David, over his
flock, and he shall be a proper shepherd and tend the sheep. Here, and in the following verses, the future hope of a divinely appointed Davidic ruler and the restoration of the nation go hand in hand; the two notions essential to the definition of biblical Messianism.\textsuperscript{44} Targum Ezekiel has translated the poetical metaphor literally, and three equations are crucial to understand its interpretation:

\begin{itemize}
\item[a.] \(רעה\) ‘to graze’ // \(פרנסא\) ‘leader, manager’
\item[b.] \(רעה\) ‘to graze’ // \(פרנס\) Quadrilit. ‘to provide, sustain’
\item[c.] \(נשיא\) ‘chief, minor king’ // \(מלכآ\) ‘king’
\end{itemize}

\textit{a.} and \textit{b.}

These equations are dealt with jointly since they both serve in the same context, namely, the shepherd metaphor found in the Prophets. With the help of \textit{BCTP} it transpires that Targum Ezekiel’s rendering of these two passages neatly fits into TgJon’s conventional translational strategy. Firstly, \(רעה\) ‘shepherd’ is equivalent to \(פרנסא\) ‘leader’ in TgJon Jer. 3.15; 22.22; 23.1-2, 4; Ezek. 34.2, 5, 7-10, 23-24; Mic. 5.4 (variant in Codex Reuchlinianus: \(פרנסין\) instead of \(מלכין\)); Zech. 11.7-8, 9 (most versions add \(פרנס\) after \(עליכון\), 15-17). In addition, \(רעה\) ‘to graze’ is rendered by \(פרנס\) Quadrilit. ‘to provide, sustain’ in 2 Sam. 5.2, 7.7; Isa. 5.17; 14.30; 30.23; Jer. 3.15; 23.2, 4; Ezek. 34.2-3, 8, 10, 13-16, 23; 7.14; Mic. 7.14; Zeph. 2.7; 3.13; Zech. 11.4.

That Targum Ezekiel 34.23-24 and 37.24-25 are in complete accord with the rest of TgJon is proved by the way Jer. 23.1-8 (esp. vss. 1-4) has been interpreted. In the latter passage we also find a woe-oracle against the bad shepherds and the messianic

promise of David, and the striking similarities suggest literary interdependency.\textsuperscript{45} The Targumic interpretations of these passages are identical, including the same equations, as shown above.\textsuperscript{46} It is somewhat puzzling why Levey did not take this remarkable parallel into account because one cannot discuss Targum Ezekiel’s translational strategy in an isolated manner whilst seeking to prove its distinctive character. According to Levey, the messianic implication of Ezek. 34.23-24 and 37.24-25 lies in רעה ‘shepherd’.\textsuperscript{47} From this word Targum Ezekiel ought to have adduced its messianic interpretation. However, TgJon never equates רעה ‘shepherd, to graze’ with מישיהם ‘Messiah’, but mostly with פרנסא ‘leader’ and פרנס Quadrilit. ‘to provide, sustain’. Interestingly, 2 Sam. 5.2b is another instance where David and the shepherd metaphor are combined, but TgJon lacks a messianic interpretation, employing the verb פרנס instead.\textsuperscript{48}

\textbf{MT}

\begin{quote}

ויאמר יהוה לך אתה תרעה את עמי ואתה תהיה לנגיד על ישראל׃
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{46} It is worth noting that the designation of David in Jer. 23.5 as the Messiah is unrelated to the shepherd metaphor in the preceding verses. The term צמח ‘branch’ in relation to Davidic kingship is what triggers the messianic interpretation here.

\textsuperscript{47} Levey, \textit{The Messiah}, pp. 82, 84.

\textsuperscript{48} The New Testament takes the verse messianically though (Mt. 2.6). See Van Staaldhuine-Sulman, \textit{Targum of Samuel}, p. 506; De Moor, ‘“Van wie zegt de profeet dit?”’, p. 95.
And the Lord said to you,49 ‘You shall tend my people Israel, and you shall be ruler over Israel’

Targum Samuel

ואמרך יאא את שלגאנו און עיבי אתי ישראא אוהו מלכאת עע ישראלא.

And the Lord said to you, ‘You shall sustain my people Israel, and you shall be king over Israel’

c.

Both in 34.24 and 37.25 Targum Ezekiel has substituted נשיא ‘chief, minor king, prince’ with מלכה ‘king’. According to Churgin, we are dealing with a harmonizing translation, which is rooted in Ezek. 37.24a: והיבור הוד מלך ילאים.51 David being designated both as מלך and נשיא could have puzzled the reader. In addition, the composer may have felt it inappropriate to portray David in other than royal designations. The conventional equivalent of נשיא, which is ראב ‘great man, commander, teacher’, may have been considered unworthy of David,52 particularly given the messianic context of these verses.53 The only two other instances of this equation underscore the plausibility of this suggestion. Firstly, in 1 Kgs. 11.34 TgJon renders Hebrew נשיא with מלכה whilst speaking of Solomon’s kingship. We should allow for the possibility that the composer wanted to harmonize the translation

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49 you ] I.e., David.
50 מלכה ] f reads למלכה.
52 Only Codex Reuchlinianus renders ראב in Ezek. 34.24.
53 Cf. 2 Sam. 5.2, where David is called in the Hebrew text נגיד and in the Targum מלכה, see quotation above.
because of the presence of ממלכה in the same verse. However, this is not the case in Ezek. 30.13, where the נשיא of Egypt becomes the מלך of Egypt in the Targum. The composer apparently understood that the Pharaoh was aimed at and wanted to do justice to his high status. That the נשיא is sometimes made subordinate to the מלך in the Book of Ezekiel becomes clear from Ezek. 7.27 and 32.29. This observation may help to explain the non-messianic interpretation of the נשיא in Targum Ezekiel to chs. 40-48. Levey links the נשיא portrayed in Ezekiel’s final vision with the נשיא in 34.24 and 37.25 and wonders why Targum Ezekiel employs the equivalent רבא rather than מלך. Block’s elaborate analysis of Messianism in the Book of Ezekiel provides the answer because in it he notices that ‘although one might expect a consistent use of a technical term like נשיא throughout the book, Ezekiel has a habit of using the same expressions with different nuances’. The נשיא in chs. 40-48 cannot be put on a par with David’s designation as נשיא in 34.24 and 37.25. A crucial difference is that the portrait of the נשיא in the concluding chapters is devoid of any monarchic allusions. Consequently, conceiving this enigmatic figure, however exalted, as the Messiah without a Davidic link would be unthinkable. The targumist understood the different nuance and translated it accordingly by using the conventional equation for נשיא: רבא ‘great man, commander, teacher’.

To conclude, the Targumic rendering of Ezek. 34.23-25 and 37.24-25 does justice to the messianic message of the Hebrew Vorlage. All the messianic features are

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54 Esp. Ezek. 44.3; 45.7, 8-9, 16-17, 22; 46.2, 4, 8, 10, 12, 16-18; 48.21-22.
57 The Jewish Medieval commentators Kimḥi and Mezudat David do link these passages together, resulting in a messianic interpretation of the נשיא which does not do justice to the actual portrait, as will be made clear in the following.
preserved within TgJon’s conventions, and sometimes even reinforced. The Targum does not take התושב in chs. 40-48 messianically, because its non-royal portrayal does not warrant it.

**Messianism in the Targum to Ezekiel: Final Observations**

In recapitulation, on the strength of the findings in his *Messiah*-study, Levey suggests in his two subsequent works that Targum Ezekiel may be a document which reflects the theological stance of R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai, who favoured Merkabah mysticism at the expense of Messianism, the latter being deemed doctrinally too dangerous after the cataclysm of 70 CE. As seen above, Levey finds evidence that Targum Ezekiel is in accord with R. Yoḥanan’s approach in the absence of messianic interpretations. However, Levey’s verdict on Targum Ezekiel’s treatment of Messianism and his explanation for it, which have hitherto hardly been challenged, require modification.

First of all, we should carefully examine the role of Messianism after the failed Great Revolt. The supposed silencing of Messianism imposed by R. Yoḥanan does

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58 The term רעה ‘shepherd, to graze’ becomes both מנהיג ‘leader’ and מנהל Quadrilit. ‘to provide, sustain’.

59 The designation נשיא is equated with מלך.

not tally with the messianic hope expressed in contemporary works such as 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra. Of course, these apocalyptic writings do not necessarily reflect the theological outlook of the rabbis, but at least we know that the post-Destruction era was rife with feverishly messianic and eschatological expectations that eventually culminated in the Bar Kochba revolt. Moreover, rabbinic materials are equivocal on R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai’s supposed non-messianic outlook. For instance, we may adduce from ARN³ 31 that he had not been caught up in the messianic fervour, unlike many of his contemporaries. But, according to b.Ber. 28b, in R. Yoḥanan’s final hour, he did expect the arrival of the messianic dawn to be imminent. It is doubtful, though, whether these passages have a sufficient ring of truth to build a theory on, as Levey did. Furthermore, it is difficult to establish whether the rabbis cherished messianic hope by supporting the Bar Kochba revolt because not only the extent of their involvement is still subject to debate, but also the messianic connotation of the title ‘Nasi’, with which Bar Kochba designated himself. Levey states that Messianism was targeted during Roman persecutions, which may account for the absence of messianic references in Targum Ezekiel. As an example, he mentions the Hadrianic persecutions in retaliation for the Bar Kochba war. However, setting aside the discussion on the historicity of these persecutions,


63 Levey, The Messiah, pp. 86, 157 n. 111; idem, Targum of Ezekiel, p. 5.

64 For an overview of this discussion and further bibliography, see R. Kalmin, ‘Rabbinic Traditions about Roman Persecutions of the Jews: A Reconsideration’, JJS 54 (2003), pp. 21-50.
rabbinic materials do not support Levey’s implicit claim that Messianism was forbidden under Hadrian. Rabbinic literature has brought forward many decrees, which are not recorded in Roman sources, except for the prohibition of circumcision, but it is silent on Messianism.\footnote{See M.D. Herr, ‘Persecutions and Martyrdom in Hadrian’s Days’, \textit{Scripta Hierosolymitana} 23 (1972), pp. 85-125. The author extracts no fewer than 21 decrees from rabbinic materials (pp. 94-98).} From a Roman perspective such interference would be highly unconventional, especially given Judaism’s status as a \textit{religio licita}.\footnote{It is worth noting that, according to the Gospels, both Herod and Pontius Pilate did not see any harm in Jesus’ messianic claims.} Judging from the paucity of messianic allusions in Tannaitic sources, we may rather state that the rabbis themselves sought to temper Messianism after having witnessed the dire consequences of the failed Second Revolt.\footnote{Following Schiffman, ‘Messianism and Apocalypticism in Rabbinic Texts’, pp. 1062f; cf. Alexander’s study of messianic references in classic rabbinic texts and other Jewish sources from Late Antiquity, such as the Targumim and Hekhalot materials: P.A. Alexander, ‘The Rabbis and Messianism’, in M. Bockmuehl and J. Carleton-Paget (eds.), \textit{Redemption and Resistance: The Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity} (London: T. & T. Clark, 2007), pp. 227-44.}

Caution is also in place when it comes to Levey’s suggestion that the advancement of Merkabah mysticism under R. Yoḥanan was the ‘formula for
survival’ of Judaism. Rather, the key to survival seems to have been rooted in the emphasis on the study and application of the Torah in daily life. Torah piety became a substitute for the Temple and the cult rather than mysticism, which had never been the primal focus of attention in Pharisaic and rabbinic tradition. Proof that even R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai himself concentrated on the practical implementation of the Torah is found in his legal innovations, the so-called tagqanot of Yavneh.68 We can only speculate on the true extent of R. Yoḥanan’s mystical activities.69 Even if Merkabah mysticism did flourish in those days, it is much less evident in Targum Ezekiel than Levey asserts. On the contrary, Targum Ezekiel adopts the same wary approach as the Targumic Toseftot to Ezek. 1, namely, to pre-empt the public exposition of the Merkabah vision.70

Finally, and most importantly, my analysis of the Targumic rendering of Ezekiel’s messianic verses has shown that the composer did not shy away from messianic interpretations. To begin with, the paucity of messianic allusions harks back to the


theology of the Book of Ezekiel itself, in which eschatology prevails over Messianism. The few unmistakably messianic verses have been rendered accordingly in Targum Ezekiel (17.22-24; 34.23-24; 37.24-25). Levey interprets ‘non-messianic’ as the absence of the outright designation מֶשֶׁכָּה ‘Messiah’, the absence of which he explains through Targum Ezekiel’s different authorship. However, the far-reaching ramifications of his line of thought become only visible in an observation that is tucked away in an endnote, namely, that the same applies to the Targum of Amos, whose rendering of vs. 9.11 also steers clear of a messianic interpretation.71 Accordingly, two of TgJon’s Targums should have emerged in circles other than those responsible for the rest of the corpus. Thanks to BCTP, which was not at hand when Levey wrote down his theory, the opposite can be proved: Targum Ezekiel’s exegesis of messianic references is not at odds with the rest of TgJon.72 Our Targum operates within TgJon’s conventions, with crucially important equations found elsewhere in the corpus.73


72 See Chilton on the similarities between the messianic interpretation in Targum Ezekiel and the Isaiah Targum: ‘[…] if the terminology of Tg Ez. 17.22-24 is not messianic, its substance is, and, taken together with 34.26, the coherence with the messianic teaching of the Isaiah Targum is evident, although far from comprehensive’; The Glory of Israel, p. 113.

73 In connection with this it is worth briefly touching on the possibility of a revision of messianic passages in TgJon. De Moor suggests that initially the idea of the suffering Messiah had been present in Targumic exegesis, but was subjected to revision from the middle of the 2nd century on in the polemics against Christian messianic interpretations; De Moor, ‘“Van wie zegt de profeet dit?”’, pp. 106-10. However, Christianity seems to have been only of marginal importance in that period and did not pose a threat to the rabbis until the early fourth century, when the process of christianization started to affect Judaism. Only from the sixth century on do we find rabbinic attestations of both apologetics and polemics against Christianity; cf. S. Schwartz, Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200
By that time the final redaction of TgJon seems to have already taken place. Moreover, it seems De Moor contradicts himself in a subsequent study with his observation that Mt. 23.10, in which Jesus designates himself as ‘one master, the Christ’, is rooted in the Targum to Ezek. 34.23 and 37.24, where רעה אחד has been rendered with חד פרנס; J.C. de Moor, ‘The reconstruction of the Aramaic original of the Lord’s Prayer’, in W. van der Meer and J.C. de Moor (eds.), *The Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry* (JSOTS, 74; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), pp. 397-422, esp. 399. One would have expected that this Targumic verse had been revised in response to its interpretation in the New Testament.