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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

l = 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 targumist 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 Hilkiyah 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

² See for a discussion, D.I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997-1998), vol. 1, pp. 80-83; W. Zimmerli, *Ezechiel* (BKAT, 13; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969), vol. 1, p. 42ff.

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'.⁴ 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.

⁴ S.H. Levey, *The Targum of Ezekiel* (AramB, 13; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), p. 21 n. 1.

expounded in two studies.⁵ 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.⁶

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 משיח 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 משיח in that sense. Messianism only flourished in post-

⁵ S.H. Levey, 'The Targum to Ezekiel', *HUCA* 46 (1975), pp. 141-45; idem, *Targum of Ezekiel*, pp. 4-5.

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.⁷ 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'.⁸ 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

⁷ See L.H. Schiffman, 'Messianism and Apocalypticism in Rabbinic Texts', in S.T. Katz (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism. Vol. IV: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 1053-72, esp. 1054-56.

⁸ D.I. Block, 'Bringing back David: Ezekiel's Messianic hope', in P.E. Satterthwaite, *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), pp. 167-88, esp. 169. A summary of this article is found in idem, *The Book of Ezekiel*, vol. 1, pp. 57-60.

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

כה אמר אדני יהוה ולקחתי אני מצמרת הארז הרמה ונתתי מראש ינקותיו רך אקטף ושתלתי אני על הר־גבה

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 sprig¹² 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

כדנן אמר יי אלהים ואקריב אנא ממלכותא דבית דויד דמתיל בארזא¹³ רמא ואקיימניה מבני בנוהי יניק ארבי
ואקיימניה במימרי כטור¹⁴ רם ומנטל

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; ברא // רך; ינקא // רך; and *Qal* קטף // *Pael* רבא. Levey links Aramaic יניק ‘child’ in this verse to Hebrew ינקותיו ‘his shoots’, denoting the equation ‘a clever exegetical device’.¹⁵ However, ינקא is in fact equated with Hebrew רך. The Hebrew ינקותיו is rendered with בנוהי ‘his children’.¹⁶ The equation יונקת // ברא is also attested in Hos. 14.7,¹⁷ a verse that describes Israel’s glorious future in similar

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

¹³ כארזא] b g o read בארזא.

¹⁴ בטור] l b g o f read כטור.

¹⁵ Levey, *The Messiah*, p. 156 n. 90.

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 ינקותיו.

¹⁷ A correction of *BCTP* is in order here: in TgJon Ezek. 17.22 the equation is *not* Hebr. יונק ‘infant, child, shoot’ // Ar. ברא ‘son’. The form employed in Ezek. 22.17 is ינקותיו, 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 ארבי with 'I will anoint'.¹⁸ The *Pael* of רבי can indeed mean 'to elevate, anoint, consecrate' and is used in TgJon as one of the equivalents of Hebrew משה.¹⁹ In the present verse, however, Levey's rendering could be wrongly interpreted, as if the composer deliberately resorted to a verb other than משה to avoid a messianic interpretation.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.²¹ Moreover, the verb is also employed in the sense of growing trees, grass,

of יונק, and treated as a separate noun, see HALAT, p. 385. The correct equation is Hebr. יונקת 'shoot, stripling' // Ar. ברא 'son', which, as said above, is also found in TgJon. Hos. 14.7.

¹⁸ Levey, *The Messiah*, p. 78; idem, *Targum of Ezekiel*, p. 56.

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 (רביא) His king on Mount Zion.

²⁰ De Moor observes the possibly apologetic use of the verb רבי instead of משה in Targum Jonathan whilst discussing TgJon Isa. 61.1; J.C. de Moor, '“Van wie zegt de profet 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 Staalduine-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 משה 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 Staalduine-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.²² 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 רך 'shoot, sprig' in this oracle as the harbinger of the messianic figure in the book of Ezekiel,²³ and the same can be said for its Targumic rendering. The prospective Messiah is literally still in his infancy (יניק '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., ברא // יונקת, 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: ויש מפרשים זאת הפרשה על המשיח וכן נראה (cf. שהוא דעת יונתן שתרגם 'ולקחתי אני מצמר' הארז ואקרב ממלכותא דבית דוד דמתיל כארזא וגו (cf. Rashi's commentary on Ezek. 17.22: את מלך המשיח - את מלך המשיח).

Ezek. 21.32b

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

²³ Block, 'Bringing back David', p. 168; idem, *The Book of Ezekiel*, vol. 1, p. 550; Cf. Zimmerli, *Ezechiel*, vol. 1, p. 389: 'Es liegt hier unverkennbar ein Wort messianischer Verheißung'.

According to Levey, Ezek. 21.32 is another verse that suspiciously lacks a messianic interpretation in Targum Ezekiel.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: עֲדִיבָא אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ הַמִּשְׁפָּט וְנִחַתְיוּ ‘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.²⁵ However, quoting Zimmerli,

‘Die große Schwierigkeit all dieser Deutungen besteht nun aber darin, daß sie allesamt von einem Verständnis des Wortes מִשְׁפָּט ausgehen, das bei Ez nie so zu belegen ist. Eine Überprüfung des Sprachgebrauches von מִשְׁפָּט im Buche Ez führt (...) auf 23^{24b} als die für die Deutung von 21³⁴ [*sic*] am nächsten liegende Parallelstelle’.²⁶

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

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

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.

²⁶ Zimmerli, *Ezechiel*, p. 495; cf. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, vol. 1, p. 692.

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

Here, the first משפט 'judgment' 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

ואתין קדמיהון פורענות דינין ויתפרעון מניך בנימוסיהון

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 פרענותא 'punishment, retribution', דינא 'justice', and נימוסא 'law, custom'.²⁷ Importantly, we find the equation משפט // פרענותא also in Targum Ezekiel's rendering of ונתתיו ונתתיו המשפט ונתתיו in vs. 21.32. The composer has fully understood that a messianic interpretation would be intrusive in the context.²⁸ 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

²⁷ Cf. Smolar and Aberbach's observation on Targum Ezekiel's rendering of Ezek. 23:24b: 'The implication is that judgment in accordance with pagan laws constitutes punishment rather than fair and impartial justice'. L. Smolar and M. Aberbach, *Studies in Targum Jonathan to the Prophets* (New York; Ktav Publishing House, 1983), p. 41.

²⁸ Otherwise Targum Ezekiel would have translated Hebrew משפט with Aramaic דינא '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

בעדנא²⁹ ההוא אקים³⁰ פרקן לבית ישראל

At that time I will *establish redemption* for the House of Israel

²⁹ ביומא] b g o f c read בעדנא

³⁰ איתי read] ארים I reads

According to Levey, this rendering further proves that Targum Ezekiel systematically recoils from Messianism.³¹ Of importance for understanding his reasoning is the parallel in Ps. 132.17:

MT

שם אצמיה קרן לדוד ערכתי נר למשיחי

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

Targum Psalms

תמן אצמח מליך יקיר לבית דוד סדרית 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.

In this psalm, too, קרן ‘horn’³² and צמח ‘to sprout’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 מליך יקיר, and לדוד with לבית 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. Ḥanina, 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

³¹ Levey, *Targum of Ezekiel*, p. 87 n. 10.

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 *HALAT*, pp. 1068-69.

³³ On the use of horticultural imagery in messianic passages see footnote 9.

renders Hebrew קרן with פרקנא 'redemption':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.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.

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

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

³⁵ See Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, vol. 2, p. 721. Block does not want to rule out either interpretation; *The Book of Ezekiel*, vol. 2, p. 152; idem, 'Bringing back David', pp. 168-69.

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

Ezek. 34.23-24

MT

23 והקמתי עליהם רעה אחד ורעה אתהן את עבדי דויד הוא ירעה אתם והוא ייהיה להן לרעה: 24 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

23 ואקים עליהון פרנס³⁷ חד ויפרניס יתהון ית עבדי דויד³⁸ הוא יפרניס יתהון והוא יהי להון לפרנס: 24 ואנא יוי אהוי להון לאלה³⁹ ועבדי דויד מלכא⁴⁰ ביניהון אנא יוי גזרית במימרי:

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

³⁶ Levey, *The Messiah*, pp. 80-84; idem, ‘Targum to Ezekiel’, p. 144; idem, *Targum of Ezekiel*, p. 99 n. 12; p. 105 n. 12.

³⁷ פרנסא] I f c Eb 24 read

³⁸ ית דוד עבדי דויד] b g o read

³⁹ לאלהא] b g o read

⁴⁰ רבא] f reads

24 ועבדי דוד מלך עליהם ורועה אחד יהיה לכלם ובמשפטי ילכו וחקתי ישמרו ועשו אותם: 25 וישבו עליהארץ אשר נתתי לעבדי ליעקב אשר ישבורבה אבותיכם וישבו עליה המה ובניהם ובני בניהם עד-עולם ודוד עבדי נשיא להם לעולם:

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.

Targum Ezekiel

24 ועבדי דוד מלכא עליהון ופרנס⁴¹ חד יהי לכולהון ובדיני יהכון וקימי יטרון ויעבדון יתהון: 25 ויתבון על ארעא דיהבית לעבדי ליעקב דיתיבו בה אבהתכון⁴² ויתבון עלה אנון ובניהון ובני בניהון עד עלמא ודוד עבדי מלכא להון לעלם:⁴³

24 My servant David will be king over them, and there will be one *leader* 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 *king* 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

⁴¹ ופרנסא] z l f c read ופרנס.

⁴² אבהתהון] c reads אבהתכון.

⁴³ לעלם] o reads לעלמא.

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.⁴⁴ Targum Ezekiel has translated the poetical metaphor literally, and three equations are crucial to understand its interpretation:

a. רעה 'to graze' // פרנסא 'leader, manager'

b. רעה 'to graze' // פרנס Quadrilit. 'to provide, sustain'

c. נשיא 'chief, minor king' // מלכא 'king'

a. and 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 *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

⁴⁴ Block, 'Bringing back David', pp. 172-83; idem, *The Book of Ezekiel*, vol. 2, pp. 297-301, 414-18; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, pp. 841-44, 913.

promise of David, and the striking similarities suggest literary interdependency.⁴⁵ The Targumic interpretations of these passages are identical, including the same equations, as shown above.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'.⁴⁷ From this word Targum Ezekiel ought to have adduced its messianic interpretation. However, TgJon never equates רעה 'shepherd, to graze' with משיחא '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.⁴⁸

MT

ויאמר יהוה לך אתה תרעה את-עמי את-ישראל ואתה תהיה לנגיד על-ישראל:

⁴⁵ For more on Ezek. 34 and the possible literary affinity with Jer. 23.1-8 see W.H. Brownlee, 'Ezekiel's Poetic Indictment of the Shepherds', *HTR* 51 (1958), pp. 191-203; cf. R. Kuyvenhoven, 'Jeremiah 23:1-8: shepherds in diachronic perspective', in H. den Hollander, *et. al.* (eds.), *Paratext and Megatext as Channels of Jewish and Christian Traditions* (JCPS, 6; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003), pp. 1-36.

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.

⁴⁷ Levey, *The Messiah*, pp. 82, 84.

⁴⁸ The New Testament takes the verse messianically though (Mt. 2.6). See Van Staaldune-Sulman, *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

ואמר יוי לך את תפרניס ית עמי ית ישראל ואת תהוי למלכא⁵⁰ על ישראל:

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 מלכא ‘king’. According to Churgin, we are dealing with a harmonizing translation, which is rooted in Ezek. 37.24a: ועבדי דוד מלך עליהם.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 רבא ‘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 מלכא whilst speaking of Solomon’s kingship. We should allow for the possibility that the composer wanted to harmonize the translation

⁴⁹ you] I.e., David.

⁵⁰ מלכא] f reads למלכא.

⁵¹ P. Churgin, *Targum Jonathan to the Prophets* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, repr edn, 1983), p. 76.

⁵² Only Codex Reuchlinianus renders נשיא with רבא in Ezek. 34.24.

⁵³ Cf. 2 Sam. 5.2, where David is called in the Hebrew text נגיד and in the Targum מלכא, 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 מלכא 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. 40-48.⁵⁴ 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 מלכא.⁵⁵ 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'.⁵⁶ The נשיא in chs. 40-48 cannot be put on a par with David's designation as נשיא in 34.24 and 37.25.⁵⁷ 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

⁵⁴ Esp. Ezek. 44.3; 45.7, 8-9, 16-17, 22; 46.2, 4, 8, 10, 12, 16-18; 48.21-22.

⁵⁵ Levey, 'Targum to Ezekiel', p. 144; idem, *Targum of Ezekiel*, p. 119 n. 2.

⁵⁶ Block, 'Bringing back David', pp. 186-87. Cf. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, vol. 2, p. 1227f.

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,⁵⁸ and sometimes even reinforced.⁵⁹ The Targum does not take נשיא 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,⁶⁰ 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

⁵⁸ The term רעה 'shepherd, to graze' becomes both פרנסא 'leader' and פרנסא Quadrilit. 'to provide, sustain'.

⁵⁹ The designation נשיא is equated with מלכא.

⁶⁰ Levey's view is adopted in Block, 'Bringing back David', p. 182 n. 48; idem, *The Book of Ezekiel*, vol. 1, p. 550 n. 145; Gordon, *Studies in the Targum*, p. 14. However, Smelik questions the validity of a link between the cataclysm of 70 CE and mysticism on the one hand, and the connection between the decline of Messianism and the rise in mystical speculation on the other; W.F. Smelik, *The Targum of Judges* (OTS, 36; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), pp. 52-53. Another critical assessment of Levey's views is found in B.D. Chilton, *The Glory of Israel: the Theology and Provenience of the Isaiah Targum* (JSOTSup, 23; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), p. 113.

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.⁶¹ Moreover, rabbinic materials are equivocal on R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai's supposed non-messianic outlook. For instance, we may adduce from ARN^B 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.⁶² 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.⁶³ However, setting aside the discussion on the historicity of these persecutions,⁶⁴

⁶¹ Schiffman, 'Messianism and Apocalypticism in Rabbinic Texts', pp. 1061-62.

⁶² Cf. P. Schäfer, 'Bar Kokhba and the Rabbis', in idem (ed.), *The Bar Kokhba War Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome* (TSAJ, 100; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), pp. 1-22; cf. idem, *Der Bar Kokhba-Aufstand: Studien zum zweiten jüdischen Krieg gegen Rom* (TSAJ, 1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981).

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.⁶⁵ From a Roman perspective such interference would be highly unconventional, especially given Judaism's status as a *religio licita*.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷

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

⁶⁵ See M.D. Herr, 'Persecutions and Martyrdom in Hadrian's Days', *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 23 (1972), pp. 85-125. The author extracts no fewer than 21 decrees from rabbinic materials (pp. 94-98).

⁶⁶ It is worth noting that, according to the Gospels, both Herod and Pontius Pilate did not see any harm in Jesus' messianic claims.

⁶⁷ 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.), *Redemption and Resistance: The Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2007), pp. 227-44. Regarding the rabbinic approach to Messianism in the first centuries CE, Alexander observes the virtual absence of messianic allusions in the Mishna, the Tosefta, the Tannaitic Midrashim as well as the 'official' Targums, Onqelos and Jonathan, which betray signs of rabbinic influence. According to Alexander, not only the failed revolts may have contributed to the rabbis' marginalizing of Messianism, but also the association with the priesthood: Messianism was regarded as a priestly doctrine. In addition, the emergence of Christianity may account for the rabbis' initial lack of messianic interest. By avoiding messianic interpretations of Scripture they may have sought to prevent any Christological readings of it. However, as to the plausibility of the latter reason, see my comment on the earliest attestations of polemics between Judaism and Christianity in footnote 73.

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 *taqqanot* 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

⁶⁸ E.g., m.Rosh. Hash. 4:1. Cf. A. Oppenheimer, 'Messianismus in römischer Zeit', in idem, *Between Rome and Babylon. Studies in Jewish Leadership and Society* (ed. N. Oppenheimer; TSAJ, 108; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 263-82, esp. 266, 278.

⁶⁹ Recent studies have questioned the historicity of the rabbinic traditions in which R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai is portrayed as a mystic. See A. Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac: The Rabbinic Invention of Elisha Ben Abuya and Eleazar Ben Arach* (Contraversions; Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 233-65; cf. S.G. Wald, 'Johanan ben Zakkai', in *EncJud*, vol. 11, pp. 373-77, esp. 375. Contrast U.D. Herscher, 'Yohanan Ben Zakkai at Yavneh: Merkavah and Messiah', in S.F. Chyet and D.H. Ellenson (eds), *Bits of Honey: Essays for Samson H. Levey* (SFSHJ, 74; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), pp. 25-42.

⁷⁰ Cf. A. Damsma, 'An Analysis of the Dialect and Early Jewish Mystical Lore in a Targumic Tosefta to Ezekiel 1.1 (Ms Gaster 1478)', *Aramaic Studies* 6.1 (2008), pp. 17-58; idem, *The Targumic Toseftot to Ezekiel* (SAIS, 13; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2012).

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 משיח ‘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

⁷¹ Levey, *The Messiah*, p. 157 n. 116.

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 profet 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 we do find rabbinic attestations of both apologetics and polemics against Christianity; cf. S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200*

B.C.E. to 640 C.E. (JCMAMW; Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 180f. 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 קד פרוגט; 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* (JSOTSup, 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.