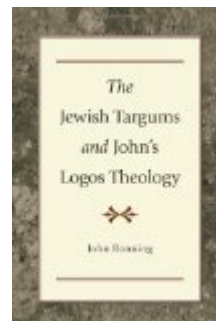


**John Ronning.** *The Jewish Targums and John's Logos Theology.* Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009. 315 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-59856-306-1.



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On the first page of this book, John Ronning asserts that “John’s decision to call Jesus ‘the Word,’ the Logos, was influenced by the Targums, the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, many or most of which were prepared for recitation in the synagogue after the reading of the Hebrew text.” In this first chapter, Ronning addresses certain preliminary matters (i.e., previous proposals for the origin of John’s Logos title along with an introduction to the Targums) and provides an opening argument for his thesis. In short, the title of Logos within the Gospel of John is *based* on the targumic “*memra*.” Generally, this targumic term is believed to indicate a divine command and a divine oracle, as well as resolve a metaphor of divine power, and is used as a sort of buffer in order to distance God from the affairs of humanity and the world.

Throughout the book, Ronning compares numerous passages from John’s Gospel with various passages from the Targums. This is the primary value of the book. Not unlike Louis Ginzberg’s *Legends of the Jews* (7 volumes, 1909-38), a great

deal of material containing interpretative or textual parallels is assembled. One notable example of the numerous “allusions” and “echoes” provided by Ronning appears in Exodus 12:42 of Targum Neofiti, where the *memra* of the Lord is said to hover over the formless creation as a light, which shines in the darkness. Despite the appearance of such language elsewhere (i.e., *Sifre Deut.* 330, Wisdom 9:1, and Jubilees 12:4), the similarity of this passage to the language of John’s Gospel is striking (cf. John 1:4-5, 9). Again, not unlike Ginzberg, there is little or no effort devoted to determining a precise relationship between the parallels. Accordingly, some of the topics covered include the biblical background to John’s prologue (chap. 2), “the name of the Father and the mission of Jesus” (chap. 3), the divine descent of Jesus as the Word (chap. 4), Jesus as the lawgiver (chap. 7), and the “I am he” sayings of Jesus (chap. 9). Additionally, Ronning devotes a chapter to the “unwitting prophecies within the Targums” (chap. 10) and a chapter to the incarnation of Jesus discussed elsewhere in the New Testament (chap. 11). In the

twelfth chapter, addressing a number of the criticisms rendered against his position (and that of Martin J. McNamara and others), Ronning argues for “the superiority of the Targum view” (chap. 12). The book concludes with a summary of the thesis and implications for future Johannine scholarship.

There are two significant problems with this book: a lack of traditio-historical methodology and a lack of interaction with rabbinic literature. Regarding the former, this book was dedicated to the vindication of McNamara, whose use of the Targums in studying the New Testament has been criticized for being methodologically unsound.[1] As such, Ronning has assembled an enormous amount of data to buttress his own position and that of McNamara, namely, that the Targums served to influence early Christian theology. Inexplicably, Ronning provides no methodological discussion or rationale for his approach to the infinitely complicated matter of tradition history. If the Targums preserve pre-Christian elements, it is necessary to specify how these are extracted, for the Targums have their respective origins in various times and places which are subsequent to the New Testament. Onqelos, Neofiti, and Pseudo-Jonathan contain pre-tannaitic, tannaitic, and post-tannaitic traditions. For example, one need only observe the Arabic names and traditions within Pseudo-Jonathan for evidence of significantly late traditions (e.g., Fatima and Adisha in Gen. 21:21 parallels al-Tabari in Num. 21:35 and the place name “Adriat” in Deut. 1:4, 3:1, and 10). The notion that all of the Targums can be examined as a whole in order to discover a pre-Christian targumic tradition is problematic to say the least.

Ronning could have adopted or adapted the traditio-historical approaches of Henry Sysling, Etan Levine, René Bloch, or Paul Flesher but did not.[2] Rather, he provided nearly three hundred pages of detailed comparisons, which included parallel structures, allusions, and echoes (though

these categories were never clearly defined). In one of the few instances where he addresses this problem, Ronning notes that “a measure of uncertainty is warranted” due to the fact that all of the Targums “seem” to post-date John (p. 271). According to Ronning, this uncertainty is unwarranted since “the cumulative weight of evidence strongly supports the conclusion that the Logos title is adapted from the Targums” (p. 271). Since the relationship between the traditions was never demonstrated, only assumed, his argument lacks force. Is it not possible that John’s Logos theology and the later rabbinic Targums alike could have been influenced by a pre-Christian antecedent, be it targumic or not? Is it also not possible that Christian theology could have been an influence on certain aspects of the targumic *memra* (cf. the antichrist “Armalgos” or “Armilius” in Deut. 34:3 of Pseudo-Jonathan)? Ronning has not demonstrated how these scenarios are impossible. Likewise, he has not demonstrated *how* the later rabbinic Targums preserve the pre-Christian theological germ to John’s Logos title.

The second major problem with this book is a lack of interaction with rabbinic literature. This may stem from the presupposition that the “allusions” and “echoes” within the Targums have their origin in pre-Christian traditions (thus providing the basis for John’s Logos title). I would argue that, since the Targums are rabbinic documents that are replete with rabbinic traditions and ideologies (especially the later Targums), it is necessary to explore all rabbinic parallels of a given passage and/or concept when discussing their tradition history. In addition to identifying potential sources of influence for a given targumic translation or expansion, rabbinic parallels may directly affect the targumic notion of *memra*. There are a number of important rabbinic parallels that receive no discussion, such as *m. ’Abot* 5.1, where the world is said to have been created by ten words or statements, or *b. Sanhedrin* 42a, where God is said to have created the heavens “by his word.” For the New Testament scholar work-

ing with the Targums, access to such rabbinic parallels is easily acquired through such resources as Bernard Grossfeld and Lawrence H. Schiffman's *Targum Neofiti 1, An Exegetical Commentary to Genesis* (2000). This is a massive treasure-trove of rabbinic parallels to the Targum, which fails to appear in Ronning's volume (cf. also Aaron Hyman and Arthur B. Hyman, *Torah Hakethubah Vehamessurah* [volumes 1-3, 1998], published in Hebrew).

In short, Ronning has assembled a large amount of data, which he has carefully analyzed. This data and his observations regarding parallels between the New Testament and the Targums are important and useful. However, having failed to describe or exercise a traditio-historical methodology and having overlooked the vast amount of relevant rabbinic literature, it is my opinion that the central thesis to Ronning's volume has yet to be demonstrated.

#### Note

[1]. See, for example, Bernard Grossfeld, review of *Targum and Testament*, by Martin J. McNamara, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 69, no. 2 (October 1978): 117-119.

[2]. Henry Sysling, *Tehiyyat Ha-Metim: The Resurrection of the Dead in the Palestinian Targums to the Pentateuch and Parallel Traditions in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996); Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of the Bible: Contexts and Context* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988); Paul Flesher, "The Theology of the Afterlife in the Palestinian Targums to the Pentateuch: A Framework for Analysis," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 1-47; and René Bloch, "Methodological Note for the Study of Rabbinic Literature," *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice*, ed. W. S. Green (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), 1:51-76.

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