The Lost Meaning of Deuteronomy 33:2 as Preserved in the Palestinian Targum to the Decalogue

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This essay is a sequel to a previous article by one of the present writers, which claims to recover the lost meaning of מִמֵּית אָשֶׁר וָנָּהַפְּךָ מִלֶּמֶר in Deut 33:2.¹ That article

• argued that וָנָּהַפְּךָ is a contraction of the verb נָהַפְּךָ* 'she/it flew'—an archaic feminine perfect (cf. נָהַפְּךָ in Lev 25:21) from the root נ-ח-פ 'fly' (cf. נָחַר in Deut 28:49) agreeing with וָנָּהַפְּךָ, its feminine subject;
• equated the contraction (elision of בֶּלֶש) exhibited by וָנָּהַפְּךָ to that exhibited by בָּרְתֵל in Neh 7:70 (contrast בָּרְתֵל in Dan 11:12);
• compared וָנָּהַפְּךָ with בָּרְתֵל 'she came'—a form that occurs in one of the earliest and most important rabbinic manuscripts, the Vatican manuscript of the Sipra (Codex Assemani 66);
• noted that, when taken as a verb, וָנָּהַפְּךָ is a perfect parallel to the verbs in the four preceding stichs and allows the preposition מ to have the meaning 'from' (rather than 'at') as in the four preceding stichs; and
• concluded that the original meaning of the phrase was 'from his right, fire flew to them'.

The image assumed by this interpretation has a number of parallels in the Bible. In addition to those cited in the previous article, we may mention וַהֲקָצָה בֹּזֶל רַגְלָיו 'and fire went out from (with) the Lord' (Num 16:35) and וַהֲקָצָה בֹּזֶל רַגְלָיו 'and fire went out from before the Lord' (Lev 9:24, 10:2). Because references to the Lord's right side are found only in poetry, it seems likely that מִמֵּית אָשֶׁר וָנָּהַפְּךָ מִלֶּמֶר = מִמֵּית אָשֶׁר נָהַפְּךָ מִלֶּמֶר is simply the poetic counterpart of מִמֵּית אָשֶׁר נָהַפְּךָ מִלֶּמֶר. The

¹ R. C. Steiner, "וָנָּהַפְּךָ and מִמֵּית: Two Verbs Masquerading as Nouns in Moses’ Blessing (Deuteronomy 33:2, 28)" JBL 115 (1996) 693–98.
collocation of י-א-ד with וה is probably poetic as well. A similar collocation is found in a liturgical poem of Phinehas b. Jacob Ha-Kohen of Kafra (second half of the 8th century C.E.): יד קרש הדם בימים, וה בא אש ושמירת לחודש. ‘His holy word confounded them in wrath; it flew in fire and brimstone to do battle with them’.  

It appears that the original meaning of the phrase was forgotten when לו was midrashically identified with the homonymous Aramaic loanword of Iranian origin meaning ‘law’. It is not uncommon for interlingual homonyms to become grist for the midrashic mill, and, given that the rabbis found an allusion to four languages (Hebrew, Latin, Arabic, and Aramaic) in Deut 33:2, it is only natural that they would look for foreign words in it. In fact, they found another foreign word in the phrase that immediately precedes ours, והא והמה קרש יד. In the Sipre, the Mekilta, and other midrashim, we find the following paraphrase: יד הוא בכרו הרבב יד ושלא (שלא).  

In Midr. Sekel Tob, R. Menahem b. Solomon explains the linguistic basis for this paraphrase simply by translating it into Aramaic: והא והמה קרש יד ויד. Here, והא is a noun meaning ‘sign’, as it is in Biblical Aramaic in phrases such as (Dan 3:32). In short, the midrash has reinterpreted the verb והא as an Aramaic noun. Similarly in our phrase, the midrash has reinterpreted the verb לו as an Aramaic noun, which in this case happens to derive from Iranian. In other words, we are dealing with a pair of very similar derashot in this


5. See מכסף בין ימי תשנוי בימת (ed. H. S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin; Frankfurt am Main: Kauffmann, 1931) 120, lines 12–13.


7. Steiner, “Aramean,” 137.

8. Reinterpreted as a noun, והא can only be in the emphatic state, but this does not prevent the midrash from glossing it with indefinite והא. The emphatic ending (definite article) is spelled with final ה (instead of דל) in Galilean Aramaic and (not infrequently) Biblical Aramaic, not to mention Samaritan Aramaic and the Hermopolis letters from Egypt.
verse; the rabbis performed a single reinterpretive maneuver twice. However, only one of these derashot managed to supplant the peshat.

When was the peshat forgotten? Is there any evidence that it was still known in the postbiblical period? In this essay, we shall attempt to show that traces of the original interpretation can still be detected in the Palestinian Targum (to Exod 20:2), especially when it is read in conjunction with the Sipre (to Deut 33:2).

**Fire Flying from God’s Right in the Palestinian Targum**

The translation of the Decalogue in the Palestinian Targum contains a haggadic embellishment that was widely known in the Middle Ages; it was recited on Shavuot in France, Germany, Italy, and probably elsewhere. In Tgs. Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan, it serves as an introduction to the first two commandments (Exod 20:2, 3)—the ones proclaimed by God himself; in Maḥzor Vitri and other maḥzorim, it is repeated with all 10.9

Several critical editions of the passage are available. In 1991, S. A. Kaufman and Y. Maori attempted to reconstruct the prototype or Urtext of the Palestinian Targum’s rendering of the Decalogue.10 For ease of reference and comparison, we present their edition of our passage and their translation in six numbered lines:

1. דבורי קדמיה וביה הגדפ משנモデル
2. ידך זרח וברק וברק לפמגיר רגית, לאפר ונדר מ pienini אלומר דואהא מ
3. שמשלאלה
4. פורת אתים באיאר שמייה, כל שראל מתיי הוה רדילן
5. והידוהו ומקת ענשיה怀里 מ לכ中国经济בר ירשאה
6. והיהו חמר התקים על תומןقطع על תומן קימה


11. The idiomatic phrase הידוהו וממקת renders מ ‘encircles’ in Tg, Neof. Gen 1:211.

The First Commandment, as it would leave the mouth of the Holy One, may His name be praised,
like meteors and like lightning bolts and like fiery torches—a fiery torch from His right and a fiery torch from His left—would fly and swoop in the air, and all Israel would see and be afraid, and it would encircle the camps of Israel and return and engrave itself on the Two Tablets of the Covenant and say: Oh My people, Children of Israel ...

In 2000, J. Frankel prepared a critical edition of the maḥzor for Shavuot based on scores of manuscripts. His edition of our passage, based on a dozen of those manuscripts, is essentially the same as the above, except that line 3 does not have the clause 'coming to the Two Tablets of the Covenant' and line 4 reads 'going to the camps of Israel and circling them, turning over from side to side in them'. We shall base our discussion on the earlier edition, but the key phrases appear in the later edition as well.

M. Weinfeld has already pointed out that this description derives, in part, from דימינו השכר את מה in Deut 33:2; however, it is possible to go further. The
three underlined phrases, taken together, are equivalent to the rendering previously proposed for מרים אשתת הל מ, namely, ‘from his right, fire flew to them’.

All three phrases appear (in less authentic Galilean Aramaic) in Frankel’s edition as well. It is true that both editions also have הלפיט ארשה המ שמאלה מ or the like; however, this phrase has the appearance of a later addition because it creates an anomaly: if אנ and הנשא are different types of fire, “a torch of יד” plus “a torch of הנשא” do not add up to “torches of יד.” It seems likely, therefore, that the original text was שהלפיט אוור מ מימת.

The proof that this description of the theophany at Sinai is based in part on Deut 33:2 can be seen in the Sipre on that verse:

The divine utterance would emerge from the mouth of the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He, it would go out by way of His right to Israel’s left and circle the camp of Israel, twelve miles by twelve miles, and it would return by way of Israel’s right to His left, and the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He would receive it in His right hand and inscribe it on the tablet, and His voice would go from one end of the universe to the other, as it is said: “The voice of the Lord kindles flames of fire (Ps 29:7).”

Several of the phrases in this description have counterparts in the targum:

These verbal parallels hint that one of these two passages is based on the other or that they go back to a common ancestor.

21. The form יד—that is, “divine utterance” (Steiner, “Colloquialism,” 13–15)—is found in a Genizah fragment of the Sipre passage (קא טעה מדרש הלל, 322, line 8).

22. This form appears in half of the manuscripts; the other half have יד.

23. See משלי, 399, lines 1–15 (§343); קא טעה מדרש הלל, 320, lines 1–6; 322, lines 8–10. Landauer (“Fragment,” 24) views this passage as “the kernel of the introduction [to the Decalogue] in its oldest form.” There are parallels to the passage in later midrashim, but they have little value for our purposes.

24. In other words, the fire of Deut 33:2 did not emerge from God’s right hand, and it did not fly straight toward the Israelites. It emerged from God’s mouth and moved counterclockwise around the Israelite camp (as viewed from above), so that the Israelites saw it first on their left, then behind them, then on their right.
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The two texts complement each other. Unlike the Sipre, the targum has verbs of flying, including שָׁקַע (səkāʿ), which renders רַקְאָה (raqaḥ) in Tg. Neof. Deut 28:49 (םִ֛כְרָה לִ֖י הַמֵּחָשָׁרָה יָֽהוּ אַ֖דֶּד רַקְאָה רַךָּאָה) = רַקְאָה תַּנְדִיטָא. On the other hand, the targum—in its present form, with לָפֶֽתַּיתָא רַאֶֽשַׁת מַֽעֲשָׁא, added—lacks a strong link to Deut 33:2.

In short, the Aramaic description of the theophany in the Palestinian Targum is a kind of “displaced translation.” It appears to preserve an interpretation of מִחְלָמָּה אֶֽשְׁדוּת הַמַּעֲשָׁא that is lost everywhere else, consigned to oblivion by the midrashic reinterpretation of תָּבָא discussed above. Even the Palestinian Targum has this reinterpretation at Deut 33:2. Tg. Neofiti is typical: מִחְלָמָּה אֶֽשְׁדוּת מַֽעֲשָׁא ‘and He stretched forth His right hand from the midst of the flames of fire and gave the Torah to His people’.

The Date of the Embellished Introductions in the Palestinian Targum to the Decalogue

Are the embellished introductions in the Palestinian Targum to the Decalogue early enough to warrant the belief that they preserve the lost meaning of Deut 33:2? It would be difficult to maintain that late texts preserve the original premidrashic interpretation of our verse. What can we say about the date of the introductions?

The most conservative way of assigning a terminus ante quem to these texts is to rely on the oldest manuscript in which they appear—a Genizah fragment of a collection of targumic passages used on festivals, labeled F by P. Kahle. Kahle believed that this manuscript “could hardly be later than the 10th or 11th century.” M. Beit-Arié labels it “early/middle,” a much less precise date.

25. This is a special case of what Klein calls “associative translations,” for the translation survives at a secondary locus but not at its primary locus; see his Genizah Manuscripts, i:xxxi; and idem, “Associative and Complementary Translations in the Targumim,” Ehr 16 (Orlinsky Volume; 1982) 134–40.
26. For a deeply flawed attempt to date variant readings of the Palestinian Targum to the Ten Commandments relative to each other, see L. Díez Merino, “El Decálogo en el Targum Palestnense,” EstBib 34 (1975) 43–44. The author argues that a variant that gives a literal rendering of מַצִּיר ‘my commandments’ in the second commandment must be earlier than one that expands the phrase into ‘the commandments of my Law’. The argument is based on at least three untenable assumptions: (1) the author of the expanded rendering is polemizing against the sectarian view that only the Decalogue was revealed at Sinai, whereas (2) the author of the literal rendering knows nothing of the controversy and (3) must therefore have lived before the controversy broke out. The flaw in the first assumption can be seen by examining Tg. Neofiti’s rendering of possessive forms of מַצִיר in Deuteronomy outside the Decalogue. The flaws in the second and third assumptions are too obvious to belabor.
ing, covering many centuries. 28 Another relevant Genizah fragment contains a citation of only two words from our texts, but they happen to be the two words that are most important for our thesis: רָפָאְתְוָּמִסִים (corrected to רָפָאְתְוָּמִסִים). The text in which this phrase appears is a commentary on Ezekiel by a Byzantine Jew named Reuel, whose exegesis can often be traced to Palestinian sources. At Ezek 13:20, Reuel uses the targumic phrase to shed light on a biblical expression:

“the prophet likens them to the man who hunts the souls of birds, like רָפָאְתְוָּמִסִים.” 29 The fragment dates from ca. 1000; 30 thus, the quotation provides a fairly precise terminus ante quem for the use of the phrase רָפָאְתְוָּמִסִים in the Palestinian Targum. As for manuscripts covering other portions of the Palestinian Targum, the oldest is a parchment scroll with Palestinian pointing, labeled A by Kahle. Kahle dated it to the 7th or the beginning of the 8th century. 31 Beit-Arié labels it “very early,” that is, the 8th/9th century or earlier. 32

An earlier terminus ante quem emerges from the work of Kaufman and Maori. In their view, “the Palestinian Targum . . . reached its canonical form ca. 500 c.e. or before.” 33 The canonical form to which they refer naturally includes the prototype of the translation of the Ten Commandments. According to A. Tal, three linguistic criteria provide an even earlier terminus ante quem, 34

28. Genizah Manuscripts, 1.xxxvii.
29. N. de Lange, Greek Jewish Texts from the Cairo Genizah (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996) 190–91, line 241. Steiner has corrected de Lange’s reading, רָפָאְתְוָּמִסִים; see R. C. Steiner, “Textual and Exegetical Notes to Nicholas de Lange, Greek Jewish Texts from the Cairo Genizah,” JQR 89 (1998) 161. The suggestion in Steiner’s article that Reuel is quoting רָפָאְתְוָּמִסִים from Lev. Rab. 3:4 (לְלֵב שֶׁהָרָפָאְתְוָּמִיסִים בִּלְמַע צֶרֶן וּמַעֲשַׂה תִּרְעֵה לוּשֶׁה; see n. 14 above) is also to be corrected. The לֵב in רָפָאְתְוָּמִסִים shows that these are Aramaic participles (לֵב בִּלְמַע), quoted from an Aramaic work. It is remarkable that Reuel expected his readers to recognize this two-word prooftext without being told the source. Our targumic passage must have been very well known indeed.

31. Kahle, Masoreten des Westens, 2:2*–3*.
32. Genizah Manuscripts, 1.xxxviii.
33. Kaufman and Maori, “Targumim,” 21. In a subsequent essay (“Dating the Language of the Palestinian Targums and Their Use in the Study of First Century ce Texts,” in The Aramaic Bible [ed. D. R. G. Beattie and M. J. McNamara; JSOTSup 166; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994] 118–41), Kaufman discusses much earlier dates, but that may be because his goal there is to establish a terminus post quem. It goes without saying that individual strata can be centuries older than the canonical form of the whole; see, for example, P. S. Alexander, “Jewish Aramaic Translations of the Hebrew Scriptures,” in Mikra (ed. M. J. Mulder; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1988) 243–47.
proving that the language of the Palestinian Targum is more archaic than the language of the early haggadic midrashim and the language of the Palestinian Talmud. Of the three archaic features that he discusses, two appear in the translation of the Ten Commandments. In Exod 20:8, we find rather than . In Exod 19:25, we have 'draw near and receive the Ten Commandments' with nun-less plural imperatives, contrasting with the III- imperative 'be mindful/careful' in 20:8. According to Tal, these features can be used to date the Targum to the pre-Talmudic period, around the 3rd century C.E.


36. See the Targum Studies Module of the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon website (cal1.cn.huc.edu).

37. Kaufman and Maori, “Targumim,” 51. Their reading for MS F, identical to the reading of the Targum Studies Module of the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon, is erroneous. The reading of Kahle (Masoretens des Westens 2:58) and Klein (Genizah Manuscripts, 1:267) is , and Klein’s photograph (2, pl. 91) leaves no doubt that it is correct.

The date of the Sipre’s comment is relevant here as well. Even though it lacks a verb of flying, its similarity to the targumic passage suggests that it is descended from an earlier text that did have a verb of this sort. It is usually assumed that the final redaction of the halakic midrashim took place in the middle of the 3rd century C.E.;39 however, in the view of at least one scholar, our passage is considerably older.40

There is no reason to assume on linguistic grounds that the embellishments of the Decalogue in the Palestinian Targum were not composed before the 3rd century C.E. Linguistic modernization has been noted in many ancient Jewish texts, for example, the Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.41 According to P. S. Alexander, the same thing happened with the Palestinian Targum: “At some point the Old Palestinian targumim in Standard Literary Aramaic were recast in the younger dialect of Galilean Aramaic. This probably happened after the Bar Kokhba war when the centre of Jewish cultural life moved from Judaea to Galilee.”42 It has long been recognized that the Palestinian Targum preserves very ancient traditions.43

The embellishments were undoubtedly composed for the special public reading of the Decalogue on the Festival of Shavuot. According to Weinfeld, that special public reading is very ancient:

The festival at which it became customary to call up the memory of the scene at Mount Sinai and so to speak receive the Torah anew with an oath of loyalty was the Festival of Shavuot. In our opinion, the ceremonies on that occasion are reflected in Psalms 50 and 81. During the Second Commonwealth this festival was given the name ‘ažereth (= “assembly”). That is the designation used by Josephus. The very name signifies that Shavuot was a day of public gathering, or in biblical language yom ha-qahal—“the Day of Assembly.” This was the occasion when the people at large gathered to hear the word of the Lord, as expressed in the Ten Commandments (Deut. 9:10; 10:4; 18:16). It appears that on this Festival of ‘ažereth they re-enacted in a special

40. M. Fishbane refers to it as “an old tradition” (“Midrash and the Meaning of Scripture,” in Interpretation of the Bible, 549).
42. Alexander, “Jewish Aramaic Translations,” 248.
43. See, for example, J. Heinemann, “Early Halakhah in the Palestinian Targumim,” JJS 25 (1974) 114–22; A. Shinan, מנה יוהניא יג (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992) 195 n. 15; and the literature cited there.
ceremony the great event of “The Stand at Mount Sinai,” and renewed the covenant and the oath to keep the Ten Commandments. 44 Weinfeld adduces much extrabiblical evidence for a covenant renewal ceremony on Shavuot, especially from the book of Jubilees and the Dead Sea Scrolls. 45 Such a ceremony would be a perfect Sitz im Leben for an embellished Aramaic translation. 46 We should therefore not be surprised to find that the Palestinian Targum of the Decalogue preserves an ancient exegetical tradition that was lost everywhere else.

44. Weinfeld, “Uniqueness of the Decalogue,” 34.
45. Ibid., 36–40; and idem, “Pentecost as Festival of the Giving of the Law,” Imm 8 (1978) 7–18.