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The Targum of Lamentations: Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes

The Aramaic Bible 17B

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The Targum of Lamentations continues the high standard of scholarship in the Aramaic Bible series directed by Martin McNamara. This volume will greatly assist those scholars and laypersons who are studying and researching the biblical text of Lamentations within Judaism and Christianity. This long-awaited volume contains an excellent translation with superb notes and textual apparatus. Alexander has followed the fine work of his *Targum Canticles* (2003) in the same series. Although Alexander notes that he only scratches the surface, he has indeed opened up many avenues of opportunity for further scholarship on this important text.

The volume is divided into three distinct sections: introduction (1–106); translation (107–87); and a Yemenite appendix (188–207). These three sections are followed by an index of scriptural and other ancient references” (208–19), an index of modern authors (220–22), and a general index (223–24). The introduction examines the pertinent issues concerning the text: (1) “The Text of Targum Lamentations” (1–11); (2) “The Language of Targum Lamentations” (12–19); (3) “The Unity and Integrity of Targum Lamentations” (20–22); (4) “The Theology of Targum Lamentations” (23–37); (5) “Targum Lamentations and the Masoretic Text” (38–50); (6) “Targum Lamentations in the History of Exegesis” (51–70); (7) “Targum Lamentations and Jewish Liturgy” (71–86); and (8) “The Provenance and

Date of Targum Lamentations” (87–90). Alexander closes the introduction with a thorough bibliography (91–106) that contains an up-to-date listing of scholarship on the Targum and related material.

In section 1, “The Text of Targum Lamentations,” Alexander states the goal of this work is “to present the earliest and most uncorrupted form of the text that can be recovered.” He has attempted this by incorporating the manuscript Bibliothèque Nationale, Hébr. 110 (= siglum A) along with other “better readings” from the list of manuscripts provided (4). In addition, Alexander provides a listing of recently published texts of the Targum (2–3). Key to the discussion is the relationship of the Western and Yemenite manuscripts noting the differences in length, coherence, specific verse deficiencies, variation of language to express the same thought, textual and grammatical variants, and the origins of the manuscripts. In addition, he has undertaken a thorough reexamination of the Yemenite manuscripts (see appendix, 188ff.), which concluded that it is “a somewhat simplified version” of the Western tradition (5).

In section 2, “The Language of Targum Lamentations,” Alexander points out that the lack of lexical and grammatical material dealing with the text hampered the work; however, this shortcoming goes unnoticed with the copious notes that he has made in his translation. He suggests that a full analysis was not possible in his study; however, he compares the language of the Targum to the Palestinian Talmud, Targumim, Midrashim, Babylonian Talmud, Targum Onqelos, and Jonathan and concludes that the text evolved from Galilean Aramaic; several lexical and grammatical points support his theory. He goes on to suggest the Targum moved to Babylonia for revision (likely two revisions)—shortened and recast linguistically. The text was then likely transported to Yemen, where it was copied; there it underwent some minor modifications, copying errors, and some expansions. The original Palestinian text was also transmitted westward across North Africa and into Europe. During this time it was copied with minor linguistic changes. Alexander does admit that this process of development is indeed speculative; however, one could easily affirm his conclusions based on his thorough research.

In section 3, “The Unity and Integrity of Targum Lamentations,” Alexander suggests it is possible for one to work back from the present Western text to an archetype of the Targum Lamentations tradition. He concludes that the original began as the work of a single author who offered a complete translation of the text that underwent subsequent changes. In addition, he contends that, since Lamentations is a short book, it would not make much sense for one to translate only sections of the text. The single-author theory is supported by internal considerations of style, language, and theological viewpoint.

In section 4, “The Theology of Targum Lamentations,” Alexander determines that it is a difficult task for one to identify the author’s theology. The starting point must be the biblical text of Lamentations. From here one determines what is solely the voice of the targumist and not the biblical author. The biblical text is not a treatise on suffering and disaster, as many have suggested in the past, but rather Lamentations is the author’s attempt to bring relief for the suffering that resulted from the destruction of 587 B.C.E. In addition, he notes that Lamentations is the topic of much rabbinic discussion. He contends that there are close ties between the rabbinic theology of catastrophe and the theology of Targum Lamentations. Specifically, he notes the correlation of Targum Lamentations and Lamentations Rabbah, which is roughly contemporary with Targum Lamentations and also shares similar material. However, the author of Targum Lamentations does not follow this rabbinic theology of catastrophe but rather places the lamenting of the biblical text in the mouth of God. The theology of Targum Lamentations is one of theodicy.

Section 5, “Targum Lamentations and the Masoretic Text,” opens with a discussion of the general characteristics of Targum Lamentations as a translation. Among these, Alexander notes that Targum Lamentations mirrors the form of the biblical text in that it follows the same sequence as the Masoretic Text. Targum Lamentations reflects the author’s midrashic tendencies, but this is rather limited in that it does not contain named authorities, there are no citation formulae, and there is no exegetical reasoning. He suggests that the author of Targum Lamentations sacrificed poetic meter for homiletic and didactic reasons in order to convey a specific theological message. There are two types of translation found in Targum Lamentations: (1) word for word; and (2) paraphrastic and expansive. In addition to the Masoretic Text, Alexander discusses the relationship of the text with the Septuagint, Peshitta, Vulgate, and the Sa’adia.

In section 6, “Targum Lamentations in the History of Exegesis,” Alexander offers a detailed account of the relationship of Targum Lamentations with Lamentations Rabbah. He states that this rabbinic text is key to understanding the place of Targum Lamentations in early Jewish biblical exegesis. He offers various examples of early rabbinic traditions and Jewish traditions from late antiquity and the medieval period, then closes the section with a discussion of Christian traditions that are related to Targum Lamentations.

In section 7, “Targum Lamentations and Jewish Liturgy,” Alexander reviews the relationship of Targum Lamentations and the Jewish fast the 9th of Ab. Here he suggests that one finds the *raison d’être* for Targum Lamentations: it is to accompany the reading of Lamentations on the 9th of Ab. The Targum was written to provide a public Aramaic reading of the biblical text on the day of the fast. Alexander also notes the debate that surrounds Targum Lamentations and the “Mourners of Zion.” This group of

eschatological, pietistic Jews was waiting for the coming of the Messiah and the restoration of Zion. Some scholars have suggested that the people were a priestly movement and were thought to be responsible for authoring Targum Lamentations. Alexander soundly states, "I think not."

The final section of the introduction (excluding the bibliography) is "The Provenance and Date of Targum Lamentations." Alexander argues for a single author of the original text, which was later "reworked into one major recension" (87). The editorial work was completed in various locations (Babylonia, Yemen, North Africa, and Europe); however, the original is well-preserved in the Western tradition. He suggests that the text possibly originated in the Galilee and likely had strong ties to the rabbinic community. The author had excellent Hebrew and Aramaic language skills. The audience was likely the general population. Alexander notes internal evidence to establish a date of the text. Using 4:21–22, he suggests a *terminus a quo* of 324 C.E. (founding of Constantinople) and a *terminus ad quem* of the fifth century C.E. (Rome no longer capital of the West). He narrows the dating to the late fifth century C.E. due to Targum Lamentations's close affinity to Lamentations Rabbah. The apocalyptic outlook of the text suggests an apocalyptic revival; this event was no earlier than the late fifth century C.E. During this period there was a renewed interest in messianism in Judaism.

Alexander's translation is well supported in his textual apparatus and the copious notes that he offers on each chapter. He is careful to note the linguistic and grammatical differences between the various manuscripts and the text's relationship to the biblical book of Lamentations.

Alexander's *The Targum of Lamentations* is a well-constructed and extremely detailed scholarly work. He has attempted to discuss the many complex issues found in the text, language, and interpretation of an Aramaic Targum. He has covered with sufficient depth the long exegetical history of Lamentations and the Targum Lamentations in rabbinic literature while examining its reception in Judaism in late antiquity and the medieval period and also in its Christian milieu. Alexander has produced a volume that deserves the full attention of scholars and laypersons studying Lamentations and rabbinic theology.