

“Does God Ever Feel Sorry?”

Understanding Verbs of Divine Emotion in the Pentateuch and the Targumic Versions of Onkelos, Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan.

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ABSTRACT

In the present study we will direct our attention to the particular instances in which God appears as the subject of the verb נחם in the Pentateuch, where the context describes the reaction of “regretting” or “repenting” over a previous decision. In addition, in order to find out whether the Aramaic translators were consistent when trying to avoid anthropomorphisms, we will look at several of the occurrences of the verb in situations where it appears with a human, not a divine subject. This comparative approach will allow us to locate the different dimensions of the semantic field in which a given verb functions. Hopefully the wider the picture of this field, the better the chances are that we will understand the motivations and beliefs that informed the particular choices the translators made.

KEY WORDS: Targums, Anthropomorphism, God, Repentance, Old Testament

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will focus on Aramaic translations of the Hebrew verb of emotion נחם (“to repent”, “regret”), as it appears in Genesis 6:6-7 and Exodus 32:12, 14, and in the Targums of Onkelos, Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan. Although the subject of anthropomorphisms has been amply treated by Targumic scholars, there are virtually no works that deal with the translation of verbs such as these in the Targums. Traditionally they have been labelled *antropophatic*, not *anthropomorphic*, but they fall under the same category as do expressions that attribute human organs (hands, nose, ears, etc.) or actions to God. In the Hebrew literature of the Old Testament there are a number of verbs of emotions that appear to have raised theological problems for some of the Aramaic translators. In addition to נחם (“to repent”, “regret”), one could mention שנא (“to hate, also with the noun form שְׂנֵאָה, “hate”), אנה (“be angry”), אהב (“love”, also

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with noun form, אָהַבָּ “love”).² Each one of these verbs deserves a study on its own, especially as some of them have a high number of occurrences in the Old Testament.

SURVEY OF SCHOLARLY RESEARCH

One must realize that the problem of anthropomorphisms that modern scholars inherited from antiquity is as alive today as it was when the first Aramaic translators of the Old Testament encountered expressions like “the feet of God” or “God repented.”³ In fact, some scholars argued that the phenomenon of anthropomorphism may have been present in the worldview of the biblical writers themselves.⁴ Others noted that the sensitivity in translating certain words or expressions did not affect the Old Testament “until the time of the LXX translation, in which pains are sometimes taken to avoid any anthropomorphic

² By focusing only on verbs, we do not mean to suggest that Old Testament anthropomorphic language is limited only to verbs of human emotions applied to God. Typically, when scholars have approached the subject of anthropomorphism, they have taken into account both inward (emotions) and outward (organs) entities. Thus W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1967), 21, with reference to Zechariah 14:4 (the “feet” of God) and Daniel 7:9 (the description of the “Ancient of days”); W. Klein, et al, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 308, for the usage of anthropomorphisms in poetry.

³ According to A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God. Essays in Anthropomorphism* (London: Oxford, 1937), 29ff., “neither the Tannaim, nor the Amoraim...were unanimous in their views and teachings about the problems of anthropomorphism and anthropopatism.” Marmorstein describes the two main schools of translation as the *literalist* and the *allegorical*. The chief representative of the first school was Rabbi Aqiba, “who preferred the literal exposition, even where anthropomorphic difficulties predominate.” The representative of the allegorical school, Rabbi Ishmael, considered that Torah spoke in the language of human beings, and so, influenced perhaps by the thought of Philo of Alexandria, he adopted the allegorical approach. R. Ishmael considered it a lack of piety to attribute human characteristics to God. Note, however, the more cautious approach of G.F. Moore, *Judaism*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1960), 420, who showed that it is “an egregious error to think that the Targums attempt to dispose of all the anthropomorphisms in the Scripture.” For the approach to anthropomorphism in early and medieval Rabbinic thought see also L. Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2000), 21ff.; E. Urbach, *The Sages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 38, 44, 152-53;

⁴ Thus A. De Pury, “Yahwist (“J”) Source,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:1013, who shows that in order to support their view in favor of the Documentary Hypothesis, some scholars linked the presence of anthropomorphism with the Yahwist (J) source. Accordingly, the Yahwist source consists of the work of 10th century biblical authors who revised and/or added certain portions of the sacred text of the Old Testament. As we will show, the argument simply fails when one takes into account the presence of anthropomorphisms in passages that the same scholars would attribute to the Deuteronomist source (e.g., Deut 1:27; 9:28; 12:31).

implication (e.g. Exod 24:10).”⁵ This, of course, raises the important question of dating and the historical and geographical contexts in which the Greek and the Aramaic translations took place.⁶

More specifically, the debate in recent times appears to have focused more on the theories of Aramaic translations of the Old Testament, and in particular on the Pentateuch.⁷ With Marmorstein and Klein we may argue that there have risen three main approaches that dominated this debate: the *Allegorist*, the *Moderate*, and the *Literalist*. According to the Allegorist school, the Targumic translators intentionally eliminated or toned down all anthropomorphic expressions.⁸ The reasons for this approach were varied, ranging from theological concerns to issues of literary aesthetics and/or simple clarification of a difficult style.⁹

The Moderate approach may be divided in three subsequent theories. The *topical* system combines the allegorical and the literalist approaches, depending on the

⁵ Thus G.W. Bromiley, “Anthropomorphism,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:137. First of all, Bromiley’s example does not concern us in particular, for the simple reason that the LXX translation does not seem to vary too much from the MT in the passages that we selected for our analysis. Second, the example cited by Bromiley concerns an anthropomorphism applied to human beings, not to God. The MT reads: וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (“And they saw the God of Israel”), while the LXX has καὶ εἶδον τὸν τόπον οὗ εἰστήκει ἐκεῖ ὁ θεὸς τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ (“And they saw the place where the God of Israel stood.”). It is the “seeing” of the elders, not of God, that the LXX appears to reformulate here.

⁶ Scholars have dated the Targums anywhere from the 2nd century B.C. to the 3rd-6th century A.D. In this sense, see S. Kaufman, “Dating the Language of the Palestinian Targums and Their Use in the Study of First-Century Texts,” in *The Aramaic Bible. Targums in Their Historical Context*, D.R.G. Beattie, M. McNamara eds., JSOTSup. 166 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 118-41, esp. 122., and B. L. Visotzky, “Text, Translation, Targum,” in *Fathers of the World*, WUNT 80 (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1995), 21. A. Shinan, “Targum,” *The Cambridge History of Judaism and Jewish Culture*, J.R. Baskin ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 586-88, shows that in the 7th century new languages such as Arabic and later Yiddish “displaced the Aramaic Targumim.”

⁷ Thus M. Klein, “The Translation of Anthropomorphisms and Anthropopathisms in the Targumim,” *Congress Volume - Vienna 1980* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), and his survey of the Medieval and Modern debates regarding the problem of anthropomorphism. For theories of translation in the formation of Targumim see also M. McNamara, “Some Targum Themes,” *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, D.A. Carson et al (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 308ff.

⁸ Note that the three-fold division and the titles adopted in our summary are based on our own reading of Klein’s analysis. For the proponents of this view see Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973), 37; Y. Komlosh, *The Bible in Light of the Aramaic Translations* (Tel Aviv, 1973), 103; B. Grossfield, “Bible: Translations, Aramaic (Targumim),” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), and M. McNamara, “Targums,” *The Interpreters’ Dictionary of the Bible. Supplement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1976), 860.

⁹ See, for example, B. Grossfeld, *The Targum Onkelos to Genesis* (Bates City, MO: Michael Glazier, 1988), 12-14.

terms to be translated and the subjects to which these terms are attributed.¹⁰ The *evolutionary* system holds that the anthropomorphic terms underwent a historical process of development, one that intensified during the final stages of translation/redaction.¹¹ The *thematic* system focuses on the consistency and theological significance of the usage of the word *memra* (“word” or “manifestation”) in the contexts of the themes of creation, revelation and salvation.¹² All three systems allow for the employment of both the *allegorical* and the *literal* schools of translation.

Underlined mainly by Klein, the Literalist approach assumes that anthropomorphisms did not appear to be an issue for the Aramaic translators. There is a wealth of examples where anthropomorphic terms were intensified (rather than toned down), as well as instances where identical words were used both with respect to God and to human beings, for reasons other than theological. Klein allows for certain anthropomorphic tendencies in the Targumim, but explains them as late, pious attempts to remove literal translations of anthropomorphisms. The secondary origin of these changes is evident especially in places where the Aramaic syntax is awkward or where scribal errors occurred. The scribes thus “introduced only minimal changes, often at the expense of grammar and syntax,” and these “do not belong to the original strand of the texts.”¹³

For the most part, the scholarship that we have reviewed so far has dealt little or not at all with the possibility that the Targumic authors may have been influenced by Greek thought in their view of God and the impossibility of him showing regret. In Greek thought, for a being such as God to undergo “changes”, “modifications” or “processes” would subvert the logic and hence the reality of the perfection of being. Aristotle, and classic Attic thought, may have also come under the influence of Pythagorean philosophy with its view of *πάθος* both as a good “emotion” and a “defect.” In its early stages *πάθος* derived from the term *πᾶσχω* – “that which happens” – and it came to be applied incidents, or events

¹⁰ Thus S. Maybau, *Die Anthropomorphien und Anthropopathien bei Onkelos und die spatern Targumim* (Breslau, 1870).

¹¹ See M. Gingsburger, *Die Anthropomorphismen in den Thargumim* (Braunschweig, 1891).

¹² D. Munoz, *Dios-Palabra: Memra en los Targumim del Pentateuco* (Granada: Institution San Jeronimo, 1974); *La Gloria de la Shekina en los Targumim del Pentateuco* (Madrid: Consenjo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, 1977).

¹³ Klein, “Translation of Anthropomorphisms,” 177.

that that took a unfortunate turn.¹⁴ In fact, the word appeared as early as Homer under the form πένθος, with the sense of “sorrow.”¹⁵

Given the history of the concept, then, Aristotle’s notion of θεὸς ἀπαθής (God impassable) would make perfect sense. And so would his reticence in ascribing any emotions to God.¹⁶ For Aristotle, God is “a substance which is eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things.” Therefore, he is “impassive and unalterable.”¹⁷ For some the Aristotelian god is more like an “It” that “does not know anything outside of itself” and hence cannot be the object of human worship.¹⁸ This leads us to conclude that, if there ever was any shared background between Greek and Aramaic thinkers, it made little or no direct impact on the worldview of Targumic translators. We know that Hellenistic philosophy had a minimal degree of influence over Palestinian Rabbinic Judaism. The apparent lack of consideration on the part of Palestinian scholars for the writings of Philo of Alexandria, for example, remains a relevant case. But even if contact between the two was minimal, it still remains important to ask why Greek thought shared with Rabbinic Judaism a similar reticence in ascribing human emotions to God.

Overall, we may conclude by observing that, in spite of Klein's weighty contribution to the debate, the views of the *allegorist* and *moderate* approaches appear to command more acceptance in contemporary scholarly circles.¹⁹ What one must understand, however, is the fact that for most Jews who understood

¹⁴ Thus H.G. Liddell and H.S. Scott, πένθος, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

¹⁵ W. Michaelis, πένθος, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, G. Friedrich ed., translated by G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 5:926-39. Note the Aristotelian association of πα,ροϋ with evpiquimi,a, ovrg,h,, and fo,boj, among other vices.

¹⁶ Thus J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1991), 267-71, who points out the Aristotelian concept of θεὸς ἀπαθής (God impassable). For Aristotle, “as actus purus and pure causality, nothing can happen to God for him to suffer.” And as “the perfect being, he is without emotions.” F. Copleston Jr., *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1:317, also noted that for Aristotle “(a) God could not return our love, and (b) we could not in any case be said to love God.”

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by W.D. Ross (<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>), XII:7.

¹⁸ A. Diogenes, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1985), 129.

¹⁹ This view, summarized by Paul Flesher, “Anthropomorphism,” *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical World*, 2 volumes, J. Neusner ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1996), explains that “the Targums have a strong tendency to alter...anthropomorphisms.” He views the *memra* and *shekinah* of the Lord as attributes, rather than nominal substitutes for God (which would be Klein's position). Thus “instead of God creating, for example, God's *memra* creates. At other times the action is not performed by God but in front in God, or is rendered in the passive voice.”

little or no Hebrew a “targum like Neofiti would have been their Bible.”²⁰ This notion helps us put into a proper perspective the importance of targumic studies and the hermeneutics of translation/interpretation. Were the Jewish readers as sensitive over the literalness of their translation as are scholars of the same texts today? To what extent did factors like *society* and *culture*, *historical* events and *geographical* location influenced the hermeneutics of the translators? Do certain Targumic traditions fall into clear patterns of hermeneutics that differ from others? Do they exhibit sufficient variations as to defy a comfortable and predictable scholarly classification?

Although our study focuses on a very specific theme, it is hoped that at the end we will have had a better understanding of the methodological approaches that characterized the work of Targumic translators. We will now turn our attention to several of the texts from the Pentateuch where God is described as sharing the human reactions of “feeling sorry” and “changing his mind.”

VERBS OF “REPENTANCE” OR “FEELING SORRY”²¹

The verb that describes the act of “feeling sorry” is נחם. It occurs 108 times in the Bible and it has “two broad semantic domains.”²² The first has the sense of “comforting”, “strengthening”, “ameliorating someone’s pain,” or “feeling sympathy” for someone. Under this form, which is the more frequent of the two, the verb usually appears in the Piel family, especially with the sense of “comforting.”

In the second sense, נחם connotes the idea of “regret, feeling sorry, repenting,” or “changing one’s mind.” The biblical authors used this form of the verb with

²⁰ Thus P.V.M. Flesher, “Targums as Scripture,” *Targum and Scripture: Studies in Aramaic Translations and Interpretation in Memory of Ernest G. Clark*, P.V.M. Flesher ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 71. Yet see P.S. Alexander, “The Rabbinic Lists of Forbidden Targumim,” *JJS* 27 (1976):177-99, for the contention that certain portions of the Targums were prohibited from being read in the synagogue. This shows that, at least in some circles, people shared a more skeptical attitude toward the notion of the Targums as Scripture. Alexander, “Targum,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:330, argues that the Targum was a pre-rabbinic institution “which the Rabbis attempted to rabbinize and to control,” even though “official uniformity was never achieved.”

²¹ For the English translations we have relied on the ESV Bible Translation. Whenever we departed from the ESV translation, we indicated it by placing the words so translated in *italics*.

²² Thus H. Simian-Yofre, נחם, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Botterweck, H. Ringgren eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 9:340-55. The verb occurs some nine times in this form: One would notice that in Numbers 23:19 and Psalm 110:4, even though the verb appears with God as subject, it conveys precisely the opposite idea of God not feeling regret, as human beings would usually do: “God is not man..., that he should repent” (אִישׁ אֵל וַיִּתְנַחֵם).
 אִישׁ אֵל וַיִּתְנַחֵם).

both human beings and God as a subject.²³ When the verb occurs with God as subject, it usually takes the Niphal form and it describes the notion of God himself “feeling regret” over a certain event or act that he had previously planned otherwise.²⁴ The verb occurs several times in the Pentateuch with the sense of God “being sorry” or “repenting” (Genesis 6:6, 6:7; Exod 32:12, 14).²⁵ This second aspect, evidently, created some sort of dissonance for many expositors and, here, for Targumic translators, as they may have thought it improper to convey literally the notion of divine repentance.²⁶ In order to understand better the extent of this phenomenon, we will list the main passages where the נחם verb appears in the Hebrew text, along with the translations of the targums Onkelos, Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan.

1. Genesis 6:6-7

6 וַיִּנְחַם יְהוָה כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֱלֹהִים:
7 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֲמַחֶה אֶת־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר־בְּרָאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה מֵאָדָם
עַד־בְּהֵמָה עַד־רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם כִּי נַחַמְתִּי כִּי עָשִׂיתֶם:

⁶ And the LORD *regretted* that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

⁷ So the LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I *regret* that I have made them.”

²³ Thus L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, נחם, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000, Bible Works module). D.K. Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 672.

²⁴ Notice, however, Judges 2:18, where the same Niphal form of נחם is rendered as “For the Lord was moved to pity” (כִּי־יִנְחַם יְהוָה) because of the suffering of Israel at the hands of her enemies. Evidently the author draws a line distinction here between “regretting” and “feeling pity”.

²⁵ The verb appears in other books with the same sense as well. Thus 1Samuel 15:10-11: “[the Lord said] I feel sorry (נַחַמְתִּי) that I made Saul king” (cf. 15:35), 2Samuel 24:16 and Jonah 3:10: “the Lord felt sorry (וַיִּנְחַם יְהוָה) over that evil” (cf. 1Chronicles 21:15), Jeremiah 18:10: “I will change my mind (וַיִּנְחַמְתִּי) over the good that I had said I would do” (cf. 26:3, 19), Ezekiel 24:14 and Zechariah 8:14: “I will not feel sorry” (וְלֹא אֲנַחֵם), Joel 2:14 and Jonah 3:9, 4:2: “Who knows if [the Lord] will not turn and feel sorry” (אֵי שׂוֹב וְנַחֵם), Amos 7:3, 6: “The Lord repented (נַחַם יְהוָה) over this thing: It shall not happen.”

²⁶ Thus K.A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 341ff. Both Matthews and G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 144-45, show that the biblical authors were more interested to convey the anguish of God, not to deal with aspects of philosophical determinism and theological systematization.

Gen 6:6 (T. Onk.) ותב יי במימריה ארי עבד ית אנשא בארעא:
(6:7) ארי תבית במימרי ארי עבדתינון:

And the Lord *regretted* in his memra that he made man on earth, (6)...

for I *regret* in my memra that I made them” (7)

Gen 6:6 (T. Ps Jon) ותב יי במימריה ארום עבד ית אינשא בארעא
ואידיין עליהון במימריה
(6:7) ארום תבית במימרי ארום עבדתינון:

And the Lord *regretted* in his memra that he had made man on the earth(6)
and he debated about them in his memra...

“for I *regret* in my memra that I made them” (7)

Gen 6:6 (T. Neofiti) והוות תהו מן־קדם יי ארום ברא ית בר־נשא בארעא ואתפיס עם לבה
(6:7) ארום הוה תהו קדמי ארום בראת יתהון

And *it was regret* from before the Lord that he had created the son of man on the
earth and he was reconciled with his heart (6)...

“for there *was regret* before me that I created them” (7)

2. Exodus 32:12, 14

12 שוב מחרון אפך והנחם על־הרעה לעמך:
14 וינחם יהוה על־הרעה אשר דבר לעשות לעמו

12 Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your
people.

14 And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on
his people.

Ex 32:12 (T. Neofiti) חזור כען מן תקף רוגוך תהו ¹ קדמך ² ותנחם על בישתא די אמרת
¹ למייתי ² למייתי ² יתה על עמך:
14 ⁷ והוות תוהו קד יי על בישתא די אמר למייתיה על עמא:

12 Turn now from the anger of your wrath before you and relent of this evil that
you have said you will bring upon your people.

14 And there was penitence before the Lord for the evil which He said to bring upon the people

14 והוה תהו מן-קדם יי על בישתא דחשיב למעבר לעמיה:
Ex 32:12 (T. Ps. Jon.) טוב מתקוף רוגזך ויהוי תוהו קדמך על בישתא דמלילתא למעבר לעמך:

12 Turn from your strong anger, and let there be relenting before you over the evil that you have threatened to do to your people.

14 And there was relenting before the Lord over the evil which He had thought to do to His people.

14 ותב יי מן בשתא¹ דמליל² דחשיב למעבר לעמיה:
Ex 32:12 (T. Onk.) טוב מתקוף רוגזך¹ ואחויב מן בשתא¹ דמלילתא למעבר לעמך:

12 Turn from the strength of your anger, and revert from the evil which you have threatened to do to your people.

14 And the Lord did turn from the evil which He had threatened to do to the people.

ANALYSIS OF THE TERMS *MEMRA* AND THE PREPOSITION *QDM*

Before dealing with the texts themselves, it is important to define two of the terms that appear in almost all of the Targumic translations of the texts from Genesis, but not in the Hebrew text: the word *memra* or *memra* (מימרא, מימרא) and the prepositional phrase “before/from before” (מקדם/קדם). They are crucial for understanding the mindset of the Aramaic translators.

The Word Memra

The word is of Aramaic origins and it probably derives from the form מִמְרָא. In its literal sense it means “word” or “speech.”²⁷ As we will show later, the translators often used it to connote God’s presence or power, or as a linguistic mediatory term substituting for the “word” of God. Now, the Targumic authors employed *memra* not only in relation to actions that God performs, but also to

²⁷ The *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College, 2019. Bible Works 10 Module). See also M. Jastrow, מִימְרָא, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1996), 775; Michael Sokoloff, מִימְרָא, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 670

describe the response of human beings to God. For example they believed in the Memra (Exod 14:31), they were murmuring against it (Exod 16:8) or they were supposed diligently to accept the *memra*.

Scholars have noted several possibilities concerning the function of *memra* in the Targums. The word appears some 28 times in Targum Onkelos on Exodus, for example, out of which 23 times it relates directly to an action that otherwise God would have done.²⁸ As such, Sabourin shows that earlier scholars believed that *memra* was seen as a “divine hypostasis” which allowed the Jews to satisfy “he ever intensifying demand for a transcendent, purely spiritual interpretation of God. Such were figures like the Spirit, the Wisdom, the Shekinah, and the Word (*memra*) of God.”²⁹ Koehler too understood the translators to have used *memra* as the “manifestation of the divine power, or as God's messenger in place of God Himself, where the predicate is not in conformity with the dignity or the spirituality of the Deity.”³⁰ One would note that at times the *memra* “wipes out the worship of Baal-peor” (T. Neofiti, T. Ps-Jon. to Deut 4:3) and it may conclude a covenant and enjoin the people (T. Neofiti to Deut 4:23).³¹ Along similar lines, a number of scholars have explored the concept of *memra* in relation to the notion of “intermediaries,” the most common of which would be the symbol of Christ in the Old Testament. This remains a viable dimension to be explored in the larger context of “*memra*” studies, but it falls outside the given purpose and limits of this paper.³²

Scholars like D. L. Munoz and L. Sabourin dismiss the idea of *memra* as divine hypostasis, and in turn view it as a “Jewish attempt to express God’s creative

²⁸ Paul Bohannon, *Targum Onkelos to Exodus: an English Translation of the Text with Analysis and Commentary* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1990), 27-28.

²⁹ L. Sabourin, “The Memra of God in the Targums,” 79, in the *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 6 (1976):79-85. Here Sabourin quotes W. Bousset, as the representative of the German Protestant school. See *Kyrios Christos* (E.T., New York, 1970), 288. See also the references to Munoz in the introduction.

³⁰ K. Koehler, “Memra,” *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (Jewish Encyclopedia.com, the complete 1906 full text).

³¹ Israel Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Deuteronomy* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982), 40, and also Jastrow, *בימור*, 75, for the notion of the hypostized “word” that the Targums use “to obviate anthropomorphism.”

³² For a starting point see M. McNamara, “Logos of the Fourth Gospel and Memra of the Palestinian Targums,” *The Expository Times* 79.4 (1968): 115-117, for a plausible degree of indirect synagogal reading of the Targums on Johannine literature (Gospel of John 1:1). Likewise, D. Boyarin, “The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John,” *Harvard Theological Review* 94.03 (2001): 243-84; M.S. Wrobel, “The Gospel According to St. John in the Light of the Targum of Neofiti to the Book of Genesis,” *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 9 (2016), 4:115-130, H.A. Joseph, *Finding Christ in the Old Testament Through the Aramaic Memra, Shekinah, and Yeqara of the Targums*, SBTS Dissertation (<https://oatd.org/oatd/record?Record=handle/10392/4948>).

and redemptive activity in an appropriate way.”³³ By using this word, the translators removed “the anthropomorphical representation by saying that God acts and communicates through his *memra*.” As such we may encounter here a divine attribute, not a divine being per se, used here in a thoroughly monotheistic context which precludes any divine autonomy.

G.F. Moore understood *memra* not necessarily as a substitute for God, but as “command”, “will”, “teaching”, “inspiration”, “power”, “protection.”³⁴ Moreover, he argued that the word may have functioned mainly as a “buffer-word,” used in places where “the literal interpretation seemed to bring God into too close contact with his creatures.”³⁵ Seen in this way, the *memra* is “purely a phenomenon of translation, not a figment of speculation.”³⁶

A slightly different interpretation is offered by Robert Hayward. He, for example, reaches the conclusion that “originally a term bearing a particular and distinctive theology of the Divine Name and Presence, it was used sparingly in carefully chosen contexts.” But “at some point in the tradition the content of *Memra* was lost: how or why we do not clearly know.” Hayward believes that, if *memra* was originally used only with a few distinct verbs, later its use spread to “verbs of speaking, and thence *Memra* may be subject of virtually any verb, becoming a mere periphrasis or substitute for the Tetragram.”³⁷ As with other authors, Michael Kline concurs with Moore that the word *memra* is not a divine hypostasis, but a nominal substitute in place of God’s name or pronoun.³⁸ It is not clear whether Klein shares Hayward’s theory that *memra* may have been initially employed only with select verbs, but he agrees with Hayward that the use of *memra* “appears arbitrary and unmotivated by theological considerations.”³⁹ Perhaps we may never fully understand the worldview of the Aramaic translators with respect to *memra* and the possibility that God allowed mediators like that to work on his behalf. It still is plausible to say that the concept may have been used at times euphemistically in order to mediate the personal manifestation of God in unusual or sensitive situations.⁴⁰

³³ Sabourin, 85.

³⁴ Moore, “Intermediaries in Jewish Theology,” *HTR* 15 (1922): 41-61.

³⁵ *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge, 1927), 1:419. Moore adds that various other devices are employed to the same intent, such as the substitution of a passive voice for the active and the “frequent introduction of *קדם* and *מקדם*.”

³⁶ *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 1:491.

³⁷ R. Hayward, “The *Memra* of YHWH,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 25 (1974), 412-18.

³⁸ Klein, “Anthropomorphisms”, 172.

³⁹ Klein, “Anthropomorphisms”, 175, quoting Hayward’s article, pg. 413-14.

⁴⁰ Bernard Grossfeld, *The Targum Onkelos to Genesis*. The Aramaic Bible, vol. 6. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 19.

The Preposition “before/from before” (מקדם/קדם).

One of the elements that, along with *memra*, seems to create a temporary buffer between God certain sensitive situations is the prepositional phrase “from before” (מן־קדם). For example, instead of saying “God regretted,” the Aramaic translators would render the Hebrew as “and there was regret from before the Lord.”

Klein shows that in its basic form the preposition קדם is used 196 in the Targum Onkelos with reference to God. In his view, the Aramaic translators employed קדם “out of deference to high office or nobility, and not related to the nature of the Deity.” As such, it is “used as an expression of respect.” Klein argues that this linguistic phenomenon occurs as the “natural result of the idiomatic variance between biblical Hebrew and Targumic Aramaic,” or “simply, as the translation of a biblical phrase that was understood figuratively.”⁴¹

A slightly different argument was made by Klein in “The Preposition קד (‘Before’): A Pseudo-Anti-Anthropomorphism in the Targums.” In his view, different scholars “assumed that these translational adjustments were a result of the refinement of Israel’s concept of the Deity.”⁴² The adjustments Klein refers to were meant “for the avoidance of Biblical anthropomorphisms, or for the obviation of direct relationship between man and God” (this echoes Moore’s “buffer-word” theory). Klein disagrees with this interpretation and, after a brief analysis of several sensitive verses, he concludes that the translators employed the preposition קדם or the prepositional phrase מקדם not only with reference to God, but also before verbs with human subjects. The use of the preposition “before” is a substitution for *the nota accusativi*, or for other more direct prepositions, and is “common in both the divine and the human contexts.” As in the case with the word *memra*, Klein denies the use of קדם/קד as a means of avoiding or circumvoluting anthropomorphisms.⁴³ True, it may function “as an expression of deference to a respectable person or institution,” but all such usages “apply equally in reference to man or God.”

⁴¹ Klein, “The Preposition *qdm* (Before): A Pseudo-Antianthropomorphism in the Targums,” *JTS* (1979): 502-507.

⁴² Klein, *Anthropomorphism in the Targum* (Jerusalem: Makor Publishing, 1982), xxiii.

⁴³ Klein, *Anthropomorphism in the Targum*, xxvi.

Analysis of Genesis 6:6-7

MT	Gen 6:6 6:7	וַיִּנְחָם יְהוָה כִּי נִחַמְתִּי
ONK	6:6 6:7	וְתָב יְיָ בְּמִימְרֵיהּ אֲרִי תְּבִית בְּמִימְרֵי
NEO	6:6 6:7	והוות תהו מן־קדם יי ארום הוה
PS JON	6:6 6:7	ותב יי במימריה ארום תבית במימרי

It is our view that, if we read closely the translations of Genesis 6, we can say that the Targums are intentionally consistent in using the *memra* or other forms of mitigating the verbs of repentance with God as a subject. This being said, the question still remains if in Genesis 6:6 and 6:7 the Targumic translators employed *memra* as a normal Aramaic literal device or as a means to possibly as a means to protect God from the charge of excessive human emotionalism.

The truth is that God is portrayed in Genesis as a hesitant Creator, whose creation has departed from his will to the point that it *grieves* him to his heart. The two verbal constructions used to express God’s feelings are וַיִּנְחָם and וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֶל־לִבּוֹ. As we already stated, the first form occurs in the Niphal and it has the sense of “feeling regret” or even that of “repenting.” In the Pentateuch it is the only verbal form used whenever God changes his mind with respect to a prior action or decision in relation to his people. In this case, one might say that “Yahweh’s *nhm* is an act of identification with human frailty.”⁴⁴ The expression וַיִּתְעַצֵּב is usually translated as “it grieved him” or “he worried [in his heart].”⁴⁵ Although

⁴⁴ H. Simian-Yofre, נחם, *TDOT*, 9:343.

⁴⁵ Thus L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, עִצַּב, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000, Bible Works module); C. Meyers, עִצַּב, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G.J. Botterweck ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 11:278-80, for the sense of “mental distress... grounded in the acts of others,” and G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 144-145, for עִצַּב as “expressing the most intense form of human emotion, a mixture of rage and bitter anguish.”

this verb falls outside the topic of our study, it nevertheless adds a helpful dimension to the concept of divine emotions. In this case, out of the three versions only Pseudo-Jonathan feels obligated somehow to amend the MT to “he debated about them in his memra” (ואיריין עליהון במימריה).

In Genesis 7:6-7, to translate the Niphal form וַיִּנָּחֵם, the Neofiti employs the form הוּוּ of the verb “to be” followed by the noun “regret” (תהו) and the prepositional phrase “before the Lord”: והוּוּ תהו מן-קדם יי (“and there was regret before the Lord”).⁴⁶ As opposed to Neofiti, Onkelos and Pseudo-Jonathan use the verb תוב (“to turn back” or “regret”) with the prepositional phrase במימריה (“in his memra”): ותב יי במימריה: “and the Lord turned [regretted] [repented] in his memra.”⁴⁷ It is interesting to observe that in one form or another the verb נחם is found in other passages from all three Targums: Neofiti, Pseudo-Jonathan, and Onkelos. Likewise, the word appears in the larger body of Targumic and later Syriac literature, where it conveys the sense of “comforting” someone, an equivalent to the Piel of the MT.⁴⁸ What is rather interesting is that the term does not occur with the sense of “feeling sorry” [in oneself] or “regretting,” which we have already documented in the Hebrew text. This semantic particularity may be responsible for Targums choosing alternative modes to render the Niphal form of the Hebrew text. As a preliminary conclusion, we may say that in employing the concept of *memra* and choosing certain linguistic alternatives to a literal translation, the authors created an image of God that seems a bit different from the picture of Genesis 6:6-7.

Exodus 32:12, 14

MT	Ex 32:12 14	<p>שוב מחרון אפך והנחם על-הרעה</p> <p>וינחם יהוה על-הרעה</p>
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⁴⁶ M. Jastrow, תהי, *Dictionary of the Targumim*, 1649, for the verb תהי as “be astonished”, “pause” and “regret, repent.” Similarly, S. Kaufmann, wht, *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*. Note the equivalent קדמי תהו היה for the Hebrew נחמתי in verse 7: “there was regret before me.”

⁴⁷ Jastrow, תוב, *Dictionary of the Targumim*, for תוב as “to go back”, “return” and thus “to regret” something. Similarly, Kaufmann, תוב, *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*. Note the equivalent במימרי תבית for the Hebrew נחמתי of verse 7: “I regret in my memra.”

⁴⁸ Kaufmann, נחם, *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College, 2019); Jastrow, נחם, *Dictionary of the Targumim*, 895; L. Costaz, *nhm, Syriac-English Dictionary* (Beiruth: Imprimerie Catholique, 1997), 291.

ONK	12	חוב מתקוף ואתיב מן בשתא
	14	ותב יוי מן בשתא
NEO	12	חזור כען מן תקף ויהוי תהו קדמן ותנחם על בישתא
	14	והוות תוהו קד ייי
PS JON	12	חוב מתקוף ויהוי תוהו קדמן
	14	והוה תהו מן-קדם ייי

When we come to the passage in Exodus 32:12, we observe both similarities with, and differences from, the way the Aramaic translators operated in Genesis 6. Speaking of similarities, Targum Onkelos maintains the same preference for the verb חב, as an option for both Hebrew imperatives שׁוּב (“turn” or “change”) and הִנָּחֵם (“relent yourself”). Neither *memra* nor any intervening prepositional phrase are being used by Onkelos. The Aramaic translators do not seem to be bothered by the image of God changing his mind with respect to the punishment of his people.

Regarding Pseudo-Jonathan, if in Genesis 6:6-7 the translators chose the verb חוב both times to render the Niphal form וַיִּנָּחֵם, in Exodus 32:12 they use it only once out of three verbs of human emotions. And that is a direct, word-for-word equivalence: the Aramaic חוב for the Hebrew imperative שׁוּב. But this was to be expected. Where the translators differ from their Genesis 6 choice is in the way they translated the well-known יהוה יִנָּחֵם. As we indicated already, instead of using the formula ותב ייי במימריה (“and the Lord regretted in his *memra*”), they opted for the larger and more indirect phrase: והוות תהו מן-קדם ייי (“and there was regret before the Lord”). Evidently, we will never know whether the same hand or a different hand was responsible for this change. But the fact still remains that translation of Exodus 32 reflects a slightly different approach from that of Genesis 6, even though the picture of God is somewhat identical.

Neofiti, on the other hand, remains consistent with the terminology that it employed when in Genesis 6. The Aramaic translator did not opt for the verb חוב in Genesis 6 and is not opting for חוב here either, in spite of the fact that it had the verb at his disposal; חוב appears at least 16 times throughout Neofiti to the Pentateuch. First, for the Hebrew imperative שׁוּב Neofiti uses חזור (“turn back”),

in the formula חזור כען מן תקף רונוך (“turn back now from the might of your wrath”). In spite of the longer wording, the emphasis in Aramaic is just as strong as in Hebrew. Second, for the Hebrew imperative number two, וְהִנָּחֶם (“relent yourself”), Neofiti appeals again to terminology that it already used in Genesis 6: ויהוי תהו קדמך (“let there be regret before you”). This phrasing is more complex than in Hebrew and the preposition קדם also seems to put a bit of a distance between God and the emotions of regret that the Hebrew text implies. Finally, for the Hebrew וַיִּנָּחֶם Neofiti uses for the first time in our passages the direct equivalent נָחַם.⁴⁹ Neither Onkelos, nor Pseudo-Jonathan employed this verb in passages that describe divine “sorrow” or “regretting,” even though all three of the Targums had at their disposal the verb.

Version	Genesis		Exodus	
MASORETIC	6:6	וַיִּנָּחֶם יְהוָה	32:12	שׁוּב מִחֲרוֹן אַפָּי וְהִנָּחֶם עַל־הָרָעָה
	6:7	כִּי נִחַמְתִּי	14	וַיִּנָּחֶם יְהוָה עַל־הָרָעָה
ONKELOS	6:6	וְתָב יֵי בְּמִימְרֵיהּ	12	תּוֹב מִתְקוּף וְאַחִיב מִן בְּשִׂתָּא
	6:7	אַרְי תְּבִית בְּמִימְרֵי	14	וְתָב יֵי מִן בְּשִׂתָּא
NEOFITI	6:6	והוות תהו מן-קדם יי	12	חזור כען מן תקף ויהוי תהו קדמך ותנחם על בישתא
	6:7	ארום הוה	14	והוות תוהו קד יי
PSEUDO JONATHAN	6:6	ותב יי במימריה	12	תוב מתקוף ויהוי תוהו קדמך
	6:7	ארום תבית במימרי	14	והוה תהו מן-קדם יי

It is also worth noting that in Exodus 14:5 and 13:17 these distinctions seem to disappear when the subject of “changing one’s mind” is a human being, not God.

⁴⁹ It is worth noting that the Aramaic נָחַם appears 11 times in Neofiti to the Pentateuch, and yet the translators did not use it even once in Genesis 6:6-7, where the Hebrew direct equivalent נָחַם appears twice. At this point it is only a conjecture, but it is plausible that Neofiti to Genesis may have had a different translator than did Neofiti to Exodus.

In the second example, all three Targums change the meaning from “regret,” which was used by the MT both here in the previous passages (וַיִּנְחֵם), to “break one’s heart,” or “be afraid.” Since we do not know whether the Targums would have inserted the preposition “before” in this case as well, it is difficult to speculate whether the “divine” context would differ from the “human” with respect to the application of this verb. Finally, in Ex. 14:5 all versions use the Hebrew הִפַּךְ, with the sense of turning one’s heart from a previous decision. Here, then, the Targums agree literally with the MT.

CONCLUSION

We have noted in our review of secondary literature that a significant number of scholars do not think that the *memra* in Genesis 6 and Exodus 32 functions as a substitute for God. Even though adding the *memra* renders the translation a little bit awkward, neither Onkelos nor Pseudo-Jonathan seem to alter intentionally the Hebrew image of God. Targum Neofiti, on the other hand, does not employ the word *memra* but introduces more often the preposition מִן־קִדְמוֹתָא. We believe that the use of מִן־קִדְמוֹתָא/קִדְמוֹתָא in these cases falls outside of the context of “deference” presented by Klein. Even though these expressions appear as if they were intended to protect God from the weakness of “regret,” in reality the translators may never have intended to do this in the first place. As Simian-Yofre argued, what we have in God is a “change in purpose incidental to the circumstances, not a modification of the circumstance.”⁵⁰

As Michael Klein argued, the Targumic translators had to walk a “middle golden path” when choosing the best translation of the MT.⁵¹ One would understand their predicament, given the ominous tone of the Talmudic saying that “He who translates a verse literally is a liar; but he who adds to it is a blasphemer” (b. *Kiddushim* 49a). What we find, instead, is that when it comes to the central question of the avoidance of anthropomorphisms, “the targumim are not consistent.”⁵² Often times, texts that one would expect the authors to impose an anthropomorphism on were translated literally; and texts that would seem ordinary to a Jewish audience were not. It is plausible that overall there existed a hesitancy on the part of the translators that one did not find when the texts of

⁵⁰ Simian-Yofre, נגה, *TDOT*, 9:345. On a more theological note, D.K. Stuart, *Exodus*, 672, argues that “God never desired to destroy his people in the first place, so was willing to repent in response to Moses’ appeal.” As such, one need not reject “God’s flexibility and responsiveness as if he cannot change direction in accord with his own purposes.”

⁵¹ Klein, “The Aramaic Targumim: Translation and Interpretation”, in *Michael Klein on the Targums: Collected Essays 1972-2002*, Avigdor Shinan et al (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 4.

⁵² Avigdor Shinan et al, *Michael Klein on the Targums: Collected Essays 1972-2002*, xi ff.

Genesis 6 and Exodus 32 were first drafted. The lack of consistency in staying with a certain vision of translation makes this conclusion difficult to maintain.

The scholarly debate on the translation of anthropomorphisms by the Targum is as intensified today as it has ever been. On the one hand, Hayward believes that, since expressions like “memra,” or “[from] before the Lord,” occur in so many problematic passages and with so many different verbs, that it is impossible to know exactly how they were used in the early stages of the formation of the Targum. Klein too has shown that these concepts are used both in “human” and “divine” contexts, which makes almost impossible that the authors used them as buffer-words against strong anthropomorphisms. On the other hand, authors like Sperber and Sabourin, among many others, contend that the Targums used different ways to circumvent anthropomorphisms, or used the “memra” as an allusion to a divine hypostasis active in the world. The evidence presented here, I believe, illustrates this disagreement. We have seen examples where verbs like “to be angry” and “to regret,” while attributed to God, function so only indirectly, as if to create a functional distinction between the human and the divine experience of such emotions. In spite of this, the final meaning of the passage is unmistakably clear: the “regret” comes from God, and so does the “anger.” It is conceivable, then, that at the end this distinction may just reflect our failure to understand fully the mindset of the translators and the unique nature of the language. As Max Kadushin put it, “the Targum then is not consistent...The idea of God’s otherness is a very indefinite idea; it permits of exceptions and it ignores inconsistencies.”⁵³

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⁵³ *The Rabbinic Mind*, third edition (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1972), 330.

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