Scripture, Targum, and Talmud as Instruction: A Complex Textual Story from the *Sifra*

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A common question in the practice of translation is whether or not, or to what degree, the translation text shares in the authority and status of the translated text. This is acutely problematic when the translated text is understood to be sacred, inspired, or revealed, as in the case of Scripture. For example, we know from the various versions of the story of the translation of the Hebrew Torah into Greek (the Septuagint), that there circulated within the Alexandrian Jewish community different understandings of how close the Greek translation was – in accuracy, authority, and inspiration – to its Hebrew original.\(^1\) Similarly, the many rules and narratives found in early rabbinic literature regarding the practice of Aramaic translation of Scripture (targum) seek to delineate the status of the translation and translator relative to the Hebrew original and its reader.\(^2\) The question of the status of targum pertained not only to the context of the synagogue, where targum was recited as an accompaniment to the Sabbath scriptural lection, but also to the context of rabbinic study, where targum served as a bridge between scriptural

\(^1\)For a comparison of the three major accounts (Aristobulus, Aristeas, and Philo), and their rhetorical implications for scriptural interpretation, see Janowitz 1991.  
text and its oral interpretive instruction. Its status, as both text and
discursive practice, needed to be defined not only in relation to Scripture,
but to the various types of rabbinic oral teaching with which it
interacted. Here I would like to examine one rabbinic passage that bears
on this question, a passage which in its own difficult textual history
affects to the problematic status of targum, vis-à-vis Scripture on the one
hand and rabbinic instruction on the other.

The text is from the early rabbinic commentary Sifra, interpreting Lev
10:10-11, which after forbidding the priests alcoholic beverages at the
time of their service in the Tent of Meeting, states: ‘‘That you will be able
to distinguish between holy and profane, between the impure and the
pure, and that you will be able to teach the children of Israel all the laws
which the Lord has spoken to them by the hand of Moses.’’ Let us begin
with the commonly printed version of the Sifra,4 which I have divided
into numbered lines to facilitate analysis and comparison with other
versions:

[1] ‘‘To distinguish between holy and profane’’: These are the
valuations (of Temple offerings).
[2] ‘‘Between the impure and the pure’’: These are purities and
impurities.
[3] ‘‘To instruct the children of Israel’’: These are the (juridical)
instructions.
[4] ‘‘All the laws’’: These are the interpretations.
[5] ‘‘Which the Lord has spoken to them’’: These are the laws.
[6] ‘‘By the hand of Moses’’: This is Scripture.
[7] Could targum also be included in this prohibition? (No.)

Scripture, Targum, and Talmud as Instruction

In typically midrashic fashion, our commentary atomizes the biblical
passage so as to attribute specific meaning to each of its components in
turn. In lines 1 and 2, parts of the verse are taken to denote specifically
priestly functions relevant to sacrificial worship: valuating offerings
dedicated to the Temple and determining states and degrees of ritual
purity and impurity. For both of these functions the priest’s mental
alertness cannot be compromised by alcoholic beverage, since a
misjudgment could have significant cultic consequences. Line 3 makes a
transition from specifically priestly expertise to juridical instructions
(hórādāt/hórāyāt) more generally, which in Second Temple times were
principally the purview of the priesthood, but which thereafter (and
retrospectively) were claimed as rabbinic prerogatives.5 These too were
of serious consequence since they directed people’s practical observance
of the commandments, i.e., what was permitted and what was forbidden.
In lines 4-6, the successive scriptural phrases are understood to refer to
other types of instruction which were part of the rabbinic curriculum of
study: laws derived by means of reasoned scriptural interpretation
(midrasha), laws stated independently of scriptural interpretation
(halakah), and laws stated plainly in Scripture itself (miqrasha). Following
upon (and perhaps viewed as subtypes of) ‘‘juridical instructions,’’ it is
presumed that these too could not be enunciated by someone who was
intoxicated, again because of the serious practical consequences of
possible error. Finally, the commentary asks rhetorically whether
targum, the Aramaic translation of Scripture, is similarly to be included
in the scriptural prohibition. The very asking of this question is
significant, since, in contrast to the preceding declarative interpretations,
it implies an uncertain attitude toward targum: Was it too a type of
rabbinic instruction with practical consequences that should not be
performed by one who was intoxicated? The rhetorical way the question
is asked (yākōl) anticipates a negative response, which is given by citing
the verse’s verb ‘‘to instruct’’: targum does not fall within the rubric of
juridical instruction (hórādā) and hence is excluded from those types of
teaching prohibited to one who had drunk alcohol. Presumably, the
reasoning is that targum, as an aid to study and understanding of
Scripture, is not itself a source of legal teaching which might lead people
to err.6

3For targum as a component of rabbinic study, positioned between Scripture
(miqrasha) and rabbinic oral teaching (mišnād), see its only other occurrence in the
‘‘tannaitic’’ midrashim: Sifre Deut. 161. On this text, and for further bibliography
on the status and function of targum in study, see Fraade 1992: 262-63.
4Śemini, para 6:9. For text, see Weiss 1862: 46d. Weiss’s text is identical to that of
the editio princeps (Sifra 1545: 24c).

5Maimonides (Mishneh Torah, Hilikat bi’at hammimmida’s 1:3) draws a clear
distinction between the prohibition of the priests from entering the sanctuary
drunk, and that of ‘‘any person, whether priest or Israelite’’ from rendering
decisions (EHóhrōd) when drunk.
6For this understanding, see the commentary of R. Abraham b. David of
Posquières (Rabad; 1125-98) to the Sifra (in Weiss 1862: 46d): ‘‘This (targum) is not
Thus far, I have interpreted the text of the Sifra as it appears in the printed edition, and as it has been explained by most medieval and modern commentators. However, when we examine the earliest extant manuscripts and attestations of the Sifra, we find versions of our passage that are significantly different, particularly in lines 6 (Scripture) and 7 (targum). In fact, not a single manuscript confirms the text of the printed edition for these two lines together. Let us look at one such manuscript, which has the advantage of being attested in several later sources as well: MS Oxford Neubauer 151. Since lines 1-5 are essentially identical to the

hə̀rîdā, but a case of ‘go and learn it (from the Bible) in the school’” (cf. b. Keritot 13b). In other words, should the translator make a mistake, people of minimal scriptural knowledge would not be misled to follow it. In this regard, even though targum is clearer than Scripture, neither is a direct source of hə̀rîdā. Weiss, in commenting upon Rabad’s comment, makes the following interesting observation: “In his view, targum was, already in the days of the tanna’îm, written.” Thus, the reciter of the targum would have been following a set text, just like the reciter of Scripture. The problem with all of this, as I shall show presently, is that the text of the Sifra which Rabad was interpreting (unlike Weiss’s printed edition) most likely included targum as hə̀rîdā presumably because it was not a fixed written text, but a form of oral interpretation, more akin to midrash than to Scripture. Weiss goes on to suggest that perhaps the Sifra is not referring to the targum of Scripture, but to that of the mīṭārge’mān of the sage (otherwise known as an ‘āmārē’t), who publicly broadcast the sage’s homily. However, this is highly unlikely since the term tārgum is, to my knowledge, never used in this sense in early rabbinic sources.

7Line 6 of the printed edition appears in MSS Vatican Assemani 66, London Margoliot 341 (British Museum Add. 16,406, a film of which was kindly provided to me by the British Library), and Breslau (now Jewish Theological Seminary 2171; whereas line 7 appears in MSS Vatican Assemani 31 and Parma de Rossi 139 (where it probably reflects a scribal error; see below, n. 11). However, an interlinear gloss to MS Parma concords with the printed edition at line 6. For the possibility that the printed edition represents a scribal error of homoioteleuton, see below, n. 9. Wherever possible I relied on photographs or facsimiles of the manuscripts. Otherwise, I consulted Finkelstein (1945: 212-213), whose textual reconstruction, however, I found unfounded and unconvincing. For a catalogue with descriptions of the manuscripts and printed editions of the Sifra, see Kahana 1995: 60-88. According to Kahana’s inventory, no Geniza fragments have been identified that include our passage. For a chart of the principal manuscript variants, see the end of this article.

8A film of this manuscript was kindly provided to me by the Bodleian Library at Oxford. The text of this manuscript appears to have been identical to that of the Sifra used by Rabad in his commentary (even though he understands the text’s meaning differently). It is also identical to the text of Midrash Haggadot to Lev 10:10 (E. N. Rabinowitz 1932: 201; Steinsaltz 1976: 236-37; but see Steinsaltz’s critical apparatus for manuscript variants), which presumably drew upon the Sifra. Yalqut Shim’oni r. 529, both according to the Oxford MS and the Salonika printing, has the same reading, except that it has yākal (“is it possible”) instead of

Scripture, Targum, and Talmud as Instruction printed edition, as to the other manuscripts, I will not repeat them. But note that an additional line (8) is included at the end:

6 “By the hand of Moses”: This is dialectal study (talmid). Could this (include) Scripture? (No.) Scripture teaches, “to instruct.”

8 R. Jose b. Judah says: From whence (do we know that this includes) also targum? Scripture teaches, “to instruct.”

Unlike the printed edition, this manuscript includes talmud among the types of teaching prohibited to one who has drunk alcohol. The word talmud here refers not to a defined corpus of mishnaic commentary (the gēmara of the Babylonian or Palestinian Jerusalem Talmud), but to a method of oral legal study characterized by its dialectical method. Furthermore, unlike the printed edition, the Sifra according to this manuscript asks rhetorically whether Scripture might be included in the prohibition, excluding it on the grounds that the recitation (or teaching) of Scripture does not fall within the verb “to instruct,” not being a form or direct source of juridical instruction. Finally, in the name of R. Jose b. minnatayin (“from whence”) in line 8, resulting in the exclusion of targum from the prohibition.

The absence of this line in the printed edition alone is most easily explained as an error of scribal homoioteleuton, skipping from the word yākal of line 7 to that of line 8, according to some manuscripts (see below, n. 12). However, only the text as represented in the interlinear scribal corrections of MS Parma could have been the direct basis for this error in the printed edition. Alternatively, the printed edition could have been the product of homoioteleuton deriving from a text such as MS Vatican 66 (see below), jumping from the word ‘ap in line 7 to the same word in line 8. In either case, a good case can be made for viewing the printed edition’s omission of line 8 and consequent reading in line 7 as a corruption.

10The manuscripts and attestations are fairly evenly divided between interpreting “by the hand of Moses” to refer to Scripture or to talmud. In the former category, besides the printed edition, we have MSS Vatican 66, London, and Breslau, as well as Pesiqta T’bata (Midrash Legh ‘Qov), Midrash Hakkhamim, and an interlinear gloss to MS Parma. In the latter category, besides MS Oxford, we have MSS Parma and Vatican 31, Midrash Haggadot, Yalqut Shim’oni, the text of the Sifra as cited in Rabad’s commentary, as well as b. Keritot 13b, to be discussed below.

11The same text (line 7) is found in Rabad’s commentary to the Sifra, Midrash Haggadot, and Yalqut Shim’oni. Those manuscripts and attestations which had Scripture in the previous line here rhetorically exclude talmud (MSS Vatican 66, London, Breslau, Midrash Hakkhamim, and MS Parma in an interlinear gloss). The reading in MSS Vatican 31 and Parma in line 7 (excluding targum) is most likely
the scriptural verse, as are the other forms of oral instruction. Its inclusion in the prohibition appears less certain than the others, its status more liminal.13

Three other early manuscripts of the Sifra14 similarly include targum in the prohibition of teaching while intoxicated, even though they differ from MS Oxford with respect to Scripture and talmud (including the former and excluding the latter).15

Although this recension agrees with that of MS Oxford in including targum in the prohibition in line 8, its reversal of Scripture and talmud in lines 6 and 7 requires some explanation. I would suggest two factors: First, the scriptural phrase “by the hand of Moses” might be taken more simply to refer to the written Torah received and transmitted by Moses at Mount Sinai.17 In providing this interpretation, these manuscripts, like the printed edition, include Scripture among the teaching practices, which, if performed under the influence of alcohol, would have practical legal consequences.18 Second, the rhetorical exclusion of talmud in this

13On the ambiguous relation of targum to Scripture, in terms of its halakhic status, see Fraade 1992: 256, and texts cited there.


15This is similar to the reading of Midrash HaKhamim and two manuscripts of Midrash Haggadol (according to the critical apparatus in Steinsaltz’s edition, “Q” and “L”). Shlomo Naeh informs me that manuscript “M” of Midrash Haggadol (the manuscript upon which Steinsaltz is supposed to have based his edition), similarly includes Scripture (line 6) and excludes talmud (line 7).

16MSS London and Breslau have ה rather than א here, as do the manuscripts of Midrash Haggadol referred to in the previous note.

17However, elsewhere the Sifra (Behuqotay, peraq 8: 12) emphasizes that not just the written Torah, but its accompanying laws and interpretations, were revealed “by the hand of Moses” (Lev 26:46).

18A recently published text from the Dead Sea Scrolls attests to a similar concern: One (from the context, presumably a priest) who does not read the Book of the Torah loudly and clearly is disqualified from so doing “lest he cause an error in a capital matter.” See 4Q266 5 i-1; 3; 4Q267 5 iii-1-5; 4Q273 2 1. For discussion, see Baumgarten 1992. Elsewhere, Baumgarten (1996: 51) refers to J. T. Milik’s
set of manuscripts might result from the influence of a later, Babylonian version of our passage that is more ambivalent regarding the teaching of talmud as hórā'ā. The talmudic text (b. Keritot 13b), in the form of a bārayṭa (introduced by “our masters have taught”), reads as follows:

[line 6] By the hand of Moses: This is talmud.

[line 7] Could this also (include) the Mishnah? (No.) Scripture teaches, “to instruct.”

[line 8] R. Jose b. Judah says: Could this also (include) talmud? (No.) Scripture teaches, “to instruct.”

Line 6 agrees with MSS Oxford, Parma, and Vatican 31, and several early medieval witnesses in including talmud in the prohibition of teaching while intoxicated. However, line 7, excluding the Mishnah, is unique to the talmudic version. Mishnah (here referring not to oral tradition overall, but to the Mishnah) is excluded from the prohibition, presumably since the Mishnah is not considered here a direct source of practical legal instruction. Unique to this passage is the revisiting, in line 8, of the status of talmud, thereby focusing attention on its contested status as a form of juridical instruction, or a source thereof: the anonymous view of line 6 includes it in the prohibition of instruction by one who is intoxicated, while the view attributed to R. Jose b. Judah in line 8 excludes it. Significantly, with this shift of emphasis to the contested status of talmud, turgem here (and only here) has entirely dropped out of the discussion. As the ensuing talmudic discussion (and later talmudic commentaries) make clear, the dispute is now over whether teaching talmud in a state of intoxication has any practical legal consequences as hórā'ā. According to Rav (ca. 230), the halakham follows the view of R. Jose b. Judah, except in the case of an authorititive teacher (such as himself), whose teaching of talmud would be assumed to have practical halakhic consequences of hórā'ā, even if not articulated as such.

There are several grounds for regarding this talmudic partial parallel to our Sifra passage as a Babylonian (or fictitious) bārayṭa, that is, less as a witness to a variant Palestinian tannaitic recension of the Sifra than as a transmutation of that tradition in (and for the purpose of) a later, Babylonian discursive context. Here alone (at least in some versions of the passage), mishnah is considered, not as an expression for rabbinic oral tradition overall, as is the semantic practice in the tannaitic midrashim, but as a particular type of rabbinic teaching, as exemplified in the text of the Mishnah (of R. Judah the Patriarch). Here alone, the question of the possible status of targum as instruction receives no attention, perhaps because of the fact that turgem became earlier among the Babylonian sages than their Palestinian collegues a fixed, official text of translation, rather than a more fluid oral performance. Finally, the focus in this bārayṭa alone on the contested status of talmud may reflect the debate among the Babylonian amoraim as to whether turgem as a form of study was also a form or source of hórā'ā, juridical instruction. If I am correct, the version of the tradition found in the Babylonian Talmud cannot be used as a direct witness to the textual history of the Sifra. However, the Talmud’s transformation of that tradition for its own context could have exerted influence, whether direct or indirect, on the subsequent transmission of and commentary to the Sifra text by virtue of the authority eventually gained by the talmudic text. Such influence might be witnessed in those versions of the Sifra that omit or deny talmud and/or turgem as forms of sources of juridical

23See as well the addition to the Sifra parallel in Midrash Haggadol (probably deriving from Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilket b'rat hadamimiqad 1:4): “They only forbade one (intoxicated) from juridical instruction [lēhôd], but teaching [lēlammōd] is permitted. But if he was an established sage [bakām gābā’ō], he should not teach, for his teaching is considered juridical instruction [bārayṭa].”

24For this phenomenon see Jacobs 1971; Goodblatt 1979: 286-88.

25However, several talmudic manuscripts lack entirely this line (7) of the Babylonian bārayṭa. See above, n. 19.

26See Fraade 1992: 264-65. See also above, n. 6.

27For example, R. Elijah of Wilna (1720-97), in his emendations to the Sifra, suggests correcting it to agree with the talmudic text. Similarly, it is common for medieval commentators to the Sifra to discuss the better known parallel in the Babylonian Talmud and thereby to ignore completely the Sifra’s comment on turgem. See, ad loc: Ibn Hayyim 1608-9; Koloditzky 1960-61; Sifra 1959; Kahan 1911; Malbim 1860.
instruction. The only recension of our Sifra tradition to omit or deny both talmud and targum (like b. Keritot 13b) is that of the printed versions. However, the possibility of there having been other versions of the Sifra, which have not survived, and other influences that might have shaped diverse attitudes to these forms of teaching and their authority, should caution us against being too confident in reconstructing the lines of textual transmission and filiation.

I have shown that the textual variants in the recensions of our Sifra passage, especially with regard to the status of Scripture, targum, and talmud as forms or sources of legal instruction, reflect the ambivalent and shifting attitudes toward those forms of teaching as sources of juridical instruction. I have suggested that the earliest recoverable stage in the transmission of that tradition might have been that reflected in MS Oxford, in which talmud (as a type of study) was included as a form or source of such instruction, while Scripture was excluded. Targum, still fluid and performatively poised between Scripture and talmud, was included, but with some hesitation. Eventually, as the discourse of rabbinic learning became more widespread and textually accessible, juridical authority was institutionalized in the offices of rabbinic leadership, and talmud and targum (as performative texts) too ceased to be considered forms of authoritative legal instruction. In the end, the complex, nonlinear nature of these developments in the shifting nature of rabbinic teaching and authority in its several forms is reflected in the great variety of variants to our passage of the Sifra, irreducible as they are to a single "correct" text or textual history. Each variant, if given a fuller voice, might have a larger story all its own to tell.

28But this might reflect a more innocent scribal error of homoioteleuton, on which see above, n. 9. Those versions which omit or exclude talmud, but include targum (in the attribution to R. Jose b. Judah) are: MSS Vatican 66, London, Breslau, Parma (interlinear), some manuscripts of Midrash Haggadol, Midrash Hakhamim, and Pesiqa* Zutrfot*. Those which include talmud, but omit or exclude targum are: MS Parma, Vatican 31 (both seemingly corrupt as they exclude targum twice, probably due to a scribal error), and Yadqri Shimon 32.

29These attestations include the commentary of Rabad and Midrash Haggadol (but not all manuscripts). In raising this possibility, I am aware that overall, MS Oxford tends to display more influence from the Babylonian Talmud than does MS Vatican 66, generally thought to be the oldest manuscript of the Sifra. See Kahana 1995: 62-65. However, in addition to such overall tendencies, each textual case needs to be evaluated in its own right.

30Several colleagues read an earlier version of this paper and offered valuable comments and correctives: Christine Hayes, Martin Jaffee, Shlomo Naeh, Richard Sarason, and Avigdor SHinan.
Jacobs, L.

Janowitz, N.

Kahan, I. M., ed.

Kahana, M.

Koleditzky, S., ed.

Malbim, M. L.

Mirsky, S. K., ed.

Rabinowitz, E. N., ed.

Sifra


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Scripture, Targum, and Talmud as Instruction


Steinsaltz, A., ed.
1976 *Midrash haggadot...seper wayiqra*. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook.

Weiss, I. H., ed.
1862 *Sippur ḫorat ḫorat kohanim*. Vienna: J. Schlossberg.
### Chart of Variants to Sifra Šemini, paraša 1:9

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**Notes:**

To facilitate comparison, minor differences of orthography (e.g., מָמַי/מִמי) are not shown here. In lines 7 and 8, all end with לֵין לֵיהוָה, and in line 7, all begin with יִיָּהוּ אֲדֹנִי, however abbreviated.

On the absence of line 8 in the printed edition (ed. Venice 1545), see n. 9.

On the questionable version of line 7 in MSS Vatican 31 and Parma, see n. 11.

On the variant version of Midrash Haggadol, see n. 15.

On variants to line 7 in BT Keritot 13b, see n. 19.