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Two or Three in the Bed?

Jerome's Interpretation of Isaiah 28:20 Reflecting Jewish Traditions

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ABSTRACT • “The bed is so narrow that one of the two must fall out, and the short covering cannot cover both” (Isa 28:20, Vg). The Hebrew text supposes only one person in bed, but Jerome's translation assumes that a couple sleeps in a bed that is too narrow for them. The notion of the couple echoes Jewish midrash – a midrash that even knows of three people in the one bed.

KEYWORDS • Isa 28:20 – mistranslation – Jewish tradition – aggadic interpretation – idolatry

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG • „Das Bett ist so schmal, dass einer von beiden herausfallen muss, und die kurze Decke kann nicht beide bedecken“ (Jes 28,20, Vg). Der hebräische Text geht davon aus, dass nur eine Person im Bett liegt, aber Hieronymus' Übersetzung unterstellt, dass ein Paar in einem Bett schläft, das zu schmal für es ist. Die Vorstellung des Paares lässt sich als Echo des jüdischen Midrasch verstehen – eines Midrasch, der sogar von drei Personen in dem einen Bett weiß.

SCHLAGWORTE • Jes 28,20 – Übersetzungsfehler – jüdische Tradition – haggadische Interpretation – Götzendienst

Readers of translated Bibles must assume that an apparently mistranslated text indicates a special interpretation. The Vulgate is an example of such a problem.

Jerome's Latin translation, which became the basis of the Vulgate, was not well received by many Christians at the time for two principal reasons.¹ First, the “Old Testament” was not the Hebrew Bible for Christians, who deemed the Septuagint to represent a divinely-inspired translation. Thus, they found it difficult to accept Jerome's translation, which seemed to ignore the Septuagint (in reality, Jerome approved of the Septuagint to some extent). Second, Jerome took advice from the “Hebrews” (probably, Jews who had converted to Christianity) when translating the

¹ Kato, Tepei, „Hebrews, Apostles, and Christ: Three Authorities of Jerome's *Hebraica Veritas*“, VigChr 73 (2019) 420–439.

Bible; thus, his translation was thought to excessively exhibit Jewish influence. Jewish leaders created Aggadas, or non-legalistic interpretations of the Bible, to explain contradictions and inconsistencies in the biblical narrative. They sought to extract new meanings from biblical texts by adding explanations and remaking them into ethical instructions intended to guide people.² Most of Jerome's Christian contemporaries regarded these Jewish traditions as ridiculous fiction, but he recognized their value as historical material and actively sought to incorporate them into his interpretation of the Bible.³ Therefore, we must consider the possibility that passages in his translation that do not correspond verbatim to the Hebrew text reflect aggadic interpretations.

A possible Jewish influence was observed in Isa 28:20.⁴ Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein noted the Jewish influence on this passage, but the present study examines the interpretation in more detail, scrutinizing materials not mentioned by him.⁵ The Hebrew text (MT) and Latin text (VG) of the verse are as follows:

MT	כִּי-קָצֵר הַמִּצֵּעַ מִהִשְׁתַּרְעַע וְהַמִּסְכָּה צָרָה כְּהִתְכַּנֵּס:
	For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on it, and the covering is too narrow to wrap oneself in it. (NRSV)
VG	<i>coangustatum est enim stratum ita ut alter decidat et pallium breve utrumque operire non potest</i>
	The bed is so narrow that one of the two must fall out, and the short covering cannot cover both. (The English translation is mine.)

The Vulgate described the bed as being so narrow that "one of the two" (*alter*) would fall out and explained that the cover was too short to cover "both of the two" (*uter*). Hence, the Vulgate implicitly assumed that two people were sleeping in the bed, whereas the Hebrew text did not indicate the presence of two individuals.

The Babylonian Talmud (Yoma 9b), a compilation of Jewish biblical interpretations, unpacks this passage from Isaiah as follows:

² Joseph Heinemann, "The Nature of the Aggadah", in Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (eds.), *Midrash and Literature*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1986, 41–55.

³ Adam Kamesar, "Rabbinic Midrash and Church Fathers", in Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, vol. I, Leiden: Brill 2005, 20–40.

⁴ Bernhard Lang, *Handbook of the Vulgate Bible and Its Reception: Annotated Bibliography, Latin Glossary, Textual Notes*, Chur: The Vulgate Institute, 2023, includes a chapter with textual notes on the Old Testament, but there is no entry on Isa 28:20.

⁵ Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein, "Jewish Traditions in the Writings of Jerome", in Derek R.G. Beattie and Martin J. McNamara (eds.), *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in Their Historical Context*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1994, 420–430, esp. 430.

מקדש ראשון מפני מה חרב? מפני שלשה דברים שהיו בו: עבודה זרה, וגלוי עריות, ושפיכות דמים. עבודה זרה - דכתיב: "כי קצר המצע מהשתרע". מאי "קצר המצע מהשתרע"? אמר רבי יונתן: קצר מצע זה מהשתרר עליו שני רעים כאחד.

Why was the First Temple destroyed? Three reasons are given here: idolatry, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed. Regarding idolatry, it is written: "For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on it." What does this "the bed is too short to stretch oneself on it" mean? Rabbi Jonathan said, "This bed is too short for two neighbors to dominate it together."⁶

This section describes why King Solomon's Temple was destroyed for three reasons. Among these causes, Isa 28:20 is cited in the context of idolatry: the temple is likened to a "bed" in this instance. It does not allow stretching out, because both God and idols are positioned within it. Hence, idolatry should be avoided to ensure the appropriate worship of a single God.

Jerome is aware of this interpretation. Thus, he translated this text to clarify the aspects of the two people lying in a bed. Jerome stated in his *Commentary on Isaiah* (9.28.16-20):

"Coangustatum est stratum, ita ut alter decadat, et pallium breve utrumque operire non potest, illum habet sensum quem in apostolo legimus ... 'qui consensus templo dei cum idolis?' Loquitur autem sub ΜΕΤΑΦΟΡΑ mariti pudicissimi, qui adulterae dicit uxori: 'Unus lectulus me et adulterum tecum capere non potest, et pallium breve maritum et moechum operire non praevallet.' O igitur Hierusalem, ad quam et in Hiezechiel sub persona uxoris loquitur fornicantis, et quam in Osee principio scortum vocat et adulteram, si vis meis complexibus copulari, abice idola; si servieris idolis, me habere non poteris. Hoc iuxta hebraicum.

"The bed is so narrow that one of the two must fall out and the short covering cannot cover both." This has the meaning that we read about in the Apostle: "[...] What agreement has the temple of God with idols?" (2 Cor 6:16). Now he is speaking using a metaphor about a very chaste husband who says to his adulterous wife, "A single bed cannot have room for me and an adulterer together with you, and a short blanket is unable to cover both a husband and an adulterer." Therefore, O Jerusalem, to whom he speaks also in Ezekiel under the persona of a fornicating wife (cf. Ezek 16:15-63), and whom at the beginning of Hosea he calls a whore and an adulteress (cf. Hos 1:2; 3:1), if you want to be united in my embraces, get rid of your idols; if you serve idols, you cannot have me. This has been said in accordance with the Hebrew.⁷

A passage from Isaiah is quoted in the first half of this commentary, implying that, in the Talmud, two people are present in the bed. Interestingly, a version of this image with three people was introduced in the second half. God and idols are spoken of in the third person in the Talmud. In this instance, however, God speaks in the first person "I" to Jerusalem, who is invoked in the second person as "you." God asks whether they can share the bed with an idol, referenced in the third person as "an adulterer." The two people discussed remain unclear in the Vulgate, but this commentary clearly connects its interpretation with the idol story. Furthermore, Jerome

⁶ Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, *Koren Talmud Bavli: Yoma* (The Noé Edition 9), Koren, Jerusalem 2013, 37–38. The English translation is mine.

⁷ Roger Gryson, Roger and V. Somers (eds.), *Commentaires de Jérôme sur le Prophète Isaïe*, Livres VIII-XI (VL 30), Freiburg: Herder 1996, 1036-37; the English translation follows, with some modifications, Thomas P. Scheck, *St. Jerome: Commentary on Isaiah: Including St Jerome's Translation of Origen's Homilies 1–9 on Isaiah*, New York: Newman Press, 2015, 439.

illuminates in the concluding remark that this interpretation was derived from the Jewish interpretation of the Bible.

A similar construal with three people in a bed was preserved in a midrash collection titled *Leviticus Rabbah* (17.7):

אמר רבי ברכיה קתיב: כי קצר המצע מהשתרע,
אין המטה יכולה לקבל אשה ובעלה ורעה כאחת

Rabbi Berekiah said: It is written, "the bed is too short to stretch oneself on it," meaning that the bed cannot accommodate a woman, her husband, and her lover together.⁸

Temples and idolatry remain issues in this interpretation, and there are three people in the bed. As Jerome attests, Jewish tradition encompasses versions of this narrative with two or three individuals. However, in this case, the figures in the bed are all represented in the third person: "a woman," "her husband," and "her lover." The context implies that the "woman" is Jerusalem, "her husband" is God, and "her lover" is the idol. *Leviticus Rabbah* views them from an external perspective, whereas Jerome's commentary shows God speaking to Jerusalem.

Another explanation exists on the Jewish side of this issue, evincing the same perspective as in Jerome's commentary. Rashi, a leading Jewish exegete of the Bible in the Middle Ages, commented on Isa 28:20 as follows:

והמסכה צרה [...] ורבותינו דרשוהו (יומא ט, ב) על עבודה זרה שהכניס מנשה להיכל: קצר המצע זה מהשתרע עליו שני רעים. ואני פירשתי לפי פשוטו, ובדרך זה תירגם יונתן. ואף מדרש רבותינו מיושב על אופן הדבור, כלומר: למה אני מביא עליכם פורענות זו? לפי שקצר המצע מהשתרע אני לבדי עליו, שנאמר "הנה השמים ושמי השמים לא יכלכלוך" (מ"א א, ח), וכל שכן בהכניסכם מסכה עמי, צר לנו המקום.

"And the covering is narrow." [...] Our Rabbis interpreted this verse as referring to the idol that King Manasseh put in the temple (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 9b). "The bed is too short to stretch oneself" on it for two neighbors. I myself interpreted this verse according to the literal sense, and (Targum) Jonathan translated it as such. However, the midrash of our Rabbis can be harmonized with the context. That is, "Why do I bring you this reward? It is because 'the bed is too short to stretch oneself' even if I sleep alone. As it is written, 'Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you' (1 Kgs 8:27). When you bring your idols with me, the place will be too narrow for us."⁹

⁸ Moshe A. Mirkin (ed.), *Vayyiqra' Rabbah*, part 1 (Midrash Rabbah 7), Yavneh, Tel Aviv: Yavneh 1961, 198. The English translation is mine.

⁹ Menahem Cohen (ed.), *Mikra'ot Gedolot 'HaKeter': Isaiah*, Ramat -Gan: Bar Ilan University Press 1996, 188. The English translation is mine.

Rashi introduced rabbinic interpretation in the Talmud without excluding the possibility of a literal interpretation (just like that of Targum Jonathan). In this reading, the word “covering” in Isaiah is interpreted as “idol” and two people are imaged in the bed. According to Rashi, the bed is too small to accommodate just “I” as God. Therefore, it will become even smaller if “you” bring your “idols” into its confines. This exemplary evidence shows that Rashi knew about the version of the bed with three people and was aware of the envisioning of the first-person God speaking to second-person Jerusalem about the third-person idol, as represented in Jerome’s commentary.

In conclusion, two versions of the story informed Jerome’s apparent mistranslation: one with two people sleeping in the bed and the other with three. Moreover, the latter account was further apportioned into two variations: a narrative in which everyone is referred to in the third person, and another in which the first-person God speaks to the second-person Jerusalem about the third-person mistress. At first glance, this example may appear to be a “mistranslation” by Jerome. Through this translation, we can glimpse the Jewish tradition that informs Jerome’s reading.