

“The Blessing of the Priests is not Read and not Translated”?

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Introduction: Instructions to Read Biblical Passages other than as Written

As early as the tannaitic period, when an inviolable *textus receptus* of the Bible had already coalesced, the idea emerged that certain words or passages should be skipped or modified during public readings. These fall into several categories.

Coarse or impolite words, the Sages ruled, should be replaced by euphemisms. For example, according to *b. Meg.* 25b (and the shorter version in *t. Meg.* 4:39):

Our Rabbis taught: Wherever an indelicate expression is written in the text, we substitute a more polite one in reading. [Thus for] ישגלנה ‘have intercourse with her’ [we read] ישכבנה ‘lie with her’ (Deut 28:30);¹ [for] בעפלים ‘posteriors’ [we read] בטחורים ‘hemorrhoids’ (1 Sam. 5:6); [for] חריונים ‘dove dung’ [we read] דביונים ‘dove droppings’² (2 Kgs 6:25);³ [for] לאכל את חריהם ‘eat their dung’ [we should read] ולשתות את מימי שיניהם ‘drink their piss’ [we should read] לאכל את צאתם ‘eat their excrement’ [we should read] ולשתות את מימי רגליהם ‘drink their urine’ (*lit.* water of their legs) (2 Kgs 18:27); [for] למחראות ‘privy’ [we should read] למוצאות ‘latrine’ (*lit.*: [place of] going out) (2 Kgs 10:27).

The Masorah notes these alternative readings in the margin of the text with the indication *qere* ‘read’ (though many medieval manuscripts contain the substitute word without this indication). This seems to be the most basic form of what later came to be the more general phenomenon of *kethib/qere*, which encompasses a whole set of phenomena whose common element is a

¹ The same *kethib/qere* substitution of שכב for שגל is found in Zech 14:2.

² For the meaning of דביונים / חריונים see M.Z. Kaddari, *Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006), 171 (Heb.). Kaddari mentions the view that חריונים is a plant used as food only in times of extreme famine.

³ In the Aleppo Codex: ק' דב; חרי יונים; BHS: דביונים; ק' דביונים.

⁴ The word מימי is not in the *kethib* in MT.

marginal note that provides a word (or words) other than that written in the body of the text. There are several types of these:

1. Words are missing in the text and must be supplied (such as פרת 'Euphrates' in 2 Sam 8:3); or words appear in the text but are considered to be superfluous (such as נא in 2 Kgs 5:18).⁵

2. An obviously corrupt word is emended, such as the replacement of ויקלהו by ויקהלו 'they assembled' (2 Sam 20:14) and of וגורניך by וגורניך 'your throat' (Jer 2:25).⁶

These marginal notes tell us what we should read, for various reasons, instead of what is written.

3. A marginal note provides extant alternative readings. Such notes were intended as an informational gloss and not to replace the words in the body of the text. Later generation, however, failed to distinguish this category from notes of the first two types. Because of this mistake, they related to all marginal notes, without distinction, as a mandatory instruction *qere* 'read!', even when the alternative version is absurd.⁷

In the present article we shall examine one type of instruction to ignore the written text, namely, the directive to omit a word or passage from the

⁵ See *b. Ned.* 37b, where this phenomenon is said to be *halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai* 'a law given to Moses at Sinai'; i.e., an ancient tradition whose origins and validity must not be questioned.

⁶ We may include in this group *qere* notes that are corrections of the grammatical form of the word in the text. Prominent in this category are second-person feminine singular verbs and pronouns ending in -תי, such as אתי הלכתי in 2 Kgs 4:23, where the marginal note is את הלכת 'you are going' (see also v. 26, and many others instances, mainly in Jeremiah and Ezekiel) as well as לכי and שכניכי (vv. 2,3), "corrected" in the margin to לך 'for you' and שכניך 'your neighbors' (see also v. 7 and similar instances elsewhere). The *qere* note "corrects" the ostensibly wrong form in the text (the *kethib*) by providing the standard grammatical form. In fact, the *kethib* is a perfectly correct archaic form. We cannot know whether the marginal note was originally intended as an emendation or only a gloss, but over time it came to be considered to be the correct reading. Some other cases with verbs ending in -תי should also be considered to be the second-person feminine singular, though there is no *qere* notation; e.g. Judg 5:7; Jer 2:20.

⁷ E.g., the *qere* היצא in Gen 8:17 and the *qere* ביר (Jer. 6:7), both involving the interchange of *waw* and *yod*.

oral translation into the vernacular of a public reading or to omit it totally from public reading, even in the original Hebrew. The referent of one such instruction will be the particular focus of this study.

The Sources

According to the Mishnah:

The story of Reuben (Gen 35:22) may be read but may not be translated. The story of Tamar (Gen 38) may be read and translated. The first account of the Golden Calf may be both read and translated, the second may be read but may not be translated. The Blessing of the Priests [*birkat kohanim*] [and] the story of David and Amnon (2 Sam 14) may not be read and may not be translated.⁸ The Portion of the Chariot (Ezekiel 1) may not be read as a *haftarah*, but R. Judah permits this. R. Eliezer says the portion “Make known to Jerusalem” (Ezek 16) may not be read as a *haftarah*. (*m. Meg.* 4:10; quoted in *Sofrim* 9:9)

It seems clear that “read” means “read in the synagogue” – referring to the public reading of the Torah and Prophets—because only in such a case is there any sense to whether or not a particular passage is “translated” (into the vernacular). Indeed, the version in the Tosefta (see below) concludes “but the *sofer* [*lit.* scribe; i.e., teacher] teaches normally.”

An expanded version of this passage, offering many more details, is found in *t. Meg.* 4:31–38 (ed. Zuckerman, p. 228)⁹ and *b. Meg.* 25a–b. That text lists other biblical passages that may or may not be read and translated. Several points are clarified (e.g., what is meant by the “first” and “second” accounts of the Golden Calf; see below) and relevant incidents involving several sages are recounted. But there are also significant differences between these two versions. Some of the details they add are not clear: What are the “warnings and punishments”? What does “blessings and curses” refer to? It can be seen that these variants accreted layer by layer; for

⁸ See below.

⁹ See also the variants readings and commentary in Saul Lieberman, *Tosefet Rishonim* (New York and Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1937 [Jewish Theological Seminary, 1999]), 239–240; idem, *The Tosefta according to Codex Vienna* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1955–) 5:302–303.

example, the Babylonian Talmud incorporates excerpts from what seems to be another source, introduced by כרתניא, whereas in the Tosefta these are part and parcel of the main text. These variants have been studied widely most recently in a comprehensive study by David Henshke, who lists all the variants readings in each text and their successive avatars.¹⁰ Henshke also reviews his predecessors' research. Because here we are interested only in the "Blessing of the Priests" I see no point in repeating his discussion. Furthermore, we are interested chiefly in why a certain topic was included in this discussion of what should not be translated (or even read in public) and less in the final *halakhic* verdict of each of the sources and its variants. For the reader's convenience, however, the text of the Mishnah and the expanded versions in the Tosefta and the Babylonian Talmud are presented here side by side:¹¹

Mishnah	Tosefta	Babylonian Talmud
		Our Rabbis taught:
	Some [portions of Scripture] may be read and translated, some may be read but may not be translated, and some may neither be read nor translated. The following may be both read and translated:	Some [portions of Scripture] may be read and translated, some may be read but may not be translated, and some may neither be read nor translated. The following may be both read and translated:
	The account of the	The account of the

¹⁰ D. Henshke, "What Should Be Omitted in the Reading of the Bible? Forbidden Verses and Translations," *Kenishta – Studies of the Synagogue World*, (ed. J. Tabory; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2001), 13–42 (esp. 39–42, Appendix: "The Prohibition of Reading the Priestly Benediction," (Heb.). See also P.S. Alexander, "The Rabbinical Lists of Forbidden Targumim," *JSS* 27 (1976): 177–191; A. Shinan, *The Biblical Story as Reflected in the Aramaic Translations* (Tel Aviv: Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 1993), 31–36 (Heb.) (Shinan does not discuss the Blessing of the Priests); R.B. Posen, *The Consistency of Targum Onkelos' Translation* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004), 80–81 (Heb.).

¹¹ To emphasize the parallels and facilitate comparison, passages that appear in a different place in the same text have been inserted a second time, printed between angle brackets.

	Creation may be read and translated.	Creation may be read and translated.
	The story of Lot and his two daughters may be read and translated.	The story of Lot and his two daughters may be read and translated.
The story of Reuben may be read but may not be translated.	<The story of Reuben may be read but may not be translated.>	<The story of Reuben may be read but may not be translated.>
The story of Tamar may be read and translated.	The story of Tamar and Judah may be read and translated.	The story of Tamar and Judah may be read and translated.
The first account of the Golden Calf may be both read and translated.	The first account of the Golden Calf may be read and translated.	The first account of the Calf may be read and translated.
	Warnings and penalties (?) may be read and translated.	The curses and blessings may be read and translated.
	The curses and blessings may be read and translated.	Warnings and penalties may be read and translated.
	...	
	The story of the concubine in Gibeah may be read and translated.	<The story of the concubine in Gibeah may be read and translated.>
	The story of Amnon and Tamar may be read and translated.	The story of Amnon and Tamar may be read and translated.
	The story of Absalom with his father's wives may be read and translated.	[The story of Absalom may be read and translated.]
	<The story of the concubine in Gibeah may be read and translated.>	The story of the concubine in Gibeah may be read and translated.
<R. Eliezer says:		
The portion “Make	The rebuke of Jerusalem	The portion “Make

¹² Cf. the opinion in the Mishnah below.

known to Jerusalem” may not be read as a <i>haftarah</i> .>	may be read and translated. ...	known to Jerusalem her abominations” may be read and translated. ... ¹³
<The Portion of the Chariot may not be read as a <i>haftarah</i> .>	The Portion of the Chariot may be read in public. ¹²	
		The following may be read but may not be translated:
<The story of Reuben may be read but may not be translated.>	The story of Reuben may be read but may not be translated. ...	The story of Reuben may be read but may not be translated. ¹⁴
The second [account of the Calf] may be read but may not be translated.	The second account of the Calf may be read but may not be translated. ...	The second account of the Calf may be read but may not be translated. ¹⁵
The Blessing of the Priests [may not be read and may not be translated]. ¹⁶	The Blessing of the Priests [may not be read and may not be translated]	The Blessing of the Priests may be read but may not be translated.

¹³ Here the Tosefta and the BT offer, in opposition to this view, the story about Rabbi Eliezer, who harshly criticized a man who read this section in his presence. Instead of dealing with the abominations of Jerusalem, he castigated him, he should deal with the abominations of his mother. Thus it seems that the question as to whether this passage should be read and translated was caused by apprehension of disrespect to Jerusalem. Another possibility is offered below. The Mishnah (see below) mentions only R. Eliezer’s opinion and does not explain what is problematic about the chapter. The Mishnah adds merely that the Portion of the Chariot in Ezek 1 may not be read as a *haftarah*, and that according to Rabbi Eliezer Ezek 16 may not be read as a *haftarah*.

¹⁴ Here the Tosefta and the BT present the story of Rabbi Hananiah b. Gamaliel, who instructed the translator to render only the second half of this verse when it was read.

¹⁵ Here the Tosefta and the BT explain that the second account of the Calf means Exod 32:21–24 (the Tosefta includes v. 35 as well), and follow this with the moral to be learned. Neither source raises the possibility that the second account of the calf is the repetition of the story in Deut 9:11–29 (although the term “the second tables” does refer to the version of the Ten Commandments in Deut 5:1–18 [*b. Bab.*

[and] the story of David and Amnon may not be read and may not be translated.	and the story of David with Bathsheba may not be read and may not be translated.	The stories of David and Amnon may not be read or translated.
The Portion of the Chariot may not be read as a <i>haftarah</i> , but R. Judah permits this.	<The Portion of the Chariot may be read in public.	
R. Eliezer says: The portion "Make known to Jerusalem" (Ezek. 16) may not be read as a <i>haftarah</i> .	The rebuke of Jerusalem may be read and translated.>	The portion "Make known to Jerusalem her abominations" may be read and translated."
	And the teacher teaches normally...	

In the passage introduced "Our Rabbis taught," the BT discusses various details and explains why certain passages require an explicit statement that they may be read or may not be read. There is also an attempt to resolve other difficulties, such as the ostensible contradiction (which exists only according to the text in the BT) between "the story of Amnon and Tamar may be read and translated" and the subsequent (in the BT) "the stories of Amnon and David may *not* be read and may *not* be translated." In fact, the correct version is that found in the Tosefta, "the story of David and Bathsheba" (see further below).

The Jerusalem Talmud (*y. Meg.* 4:11 [74c]) does not know the expanded version of either the Tosefta or the BT and discusses only the details found in the Mishnah.

Qama 54b). See also the references cited above. The possibility that the calves of Jeroboam (1 Kgs 12:28-33) are meant can be ruled out, since if so the first account of the calf would be more contemptible and it should be the first account of the Calf that is "read but may not be translated."

¹⁶ These words appear in the Mishnah as cited by Maimonides, in the Columbia MS of the BT, and in an unknown printing of the Mishnah; see Henshke, "What Should Be Omitted," p. 14 n. 8.

This halakhah, as understood by the Amoraim (see below), has left its mark on the Palestinian targumim. Targum Neofiti transcribes the Priestly Blessing (Num 6:24–26) in the original Hebrew rather than translating it. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan includes the Hebrew text along with an expanded Aramaic exegetical translation. In the story of Reuben (Gen 35:22), Neofiti does not use its normal verb for sexual intercourse **שמש** (which it also employs for sodomy and bestiality in Lev 18 and 20), but the Hebrew root **שכב**; viz. **ראובן וישכב ית בלהה ואזל** (and similarly in the Peshitta **ושכב** instead of **ודמך**). Tg. Ps.-J. recasts the story according to the interpretation given in *b. Šab.* 55b (“Scripture blames him as if he had lain with her”; see further below). Onqelos (in Sperber’s edition, *The Bible in Aramaic* [Leiden: Brill, 1959]), leaves the Priestly Blessing in Hebrew rather than translating it. Although it is translated in the standard printed editions and some MSS,¹⁷ the rendering of v. 26 – **יטב ה’ אפיה** – provides grounds for doubting its authenticity: the Aramaic is both painfully literal and anthropomorphic, unlike Onqelos’ normal style. In the previous verse, for example, “His face” is rendered “His *shekhina*.”¹⁸ In the LXX of Numbers 6 (except in the Hexaplaric recension), v. 27 (“they shall put My name”) follows immediately after v. 23 (and concludes, “and I the Lord will bless them”). There is no way of knowing whether this has anything to do with the issue we are discussing here, though we may hypothesize that originally the LXX had no translation of the three verses of the blessings and they were later inserted in the wrong place. But it is equally plausible that it is the translation of v. 27 that was inserted in the wrong place. One can also attribute this order of the verses to a textual variant rather than a corruption. There are many such differences in the order of verses and topics between MT and LXX.

¹⁷ Some MSS contain a marginal note to Tg. Onqelos on Gen 35:22, “this may be read but may not be translated in public.” For details, see: M.L. Klein, “Not to Be Translated in Public,” *JSS* 79 (1988), 80–91; R. B. Posen, “Priests in Onqelos,” *Megadim* 41 (5765): 19–31, esp. nn. 8–10 (Heb.).

¹⁸ See Posen, “Priests,” 30–31.

As for the stories of Bathsheba and of Amnon in the book of Samuel, the Aramaic targum is literal and makes no attempt to camouflage the gory details.

Why Should the "Blessing of the Priests" be Left Untranslated?

It is astonishing that these lists include the "Blessing of the Priests." Why should this passage even be discussed in this context? Even more astonishing is that this passage is one of those that is not to be translated, and according to one version is not even to be read,¹⁹ with the implication that during the public reading of the Torah the "Blessing of the Priests" was skipped over.

The rationale provided by the BT is that "it contains the words, **יְשָׁא פָנָיו** 'May [the Lord] lift up His countenance toward you.' " Rashi explains the logic as follows: "that [the uneducated] not say that the Holy One Blessed Be He favors (**נוֹשָׂא פָנָיו**) Israel, for they do not know that Israel deserves to be favored. ..." The same explanation is offered, more briefly by R. Menahem Hameiri in his commentary on the Mishnah. In his commentary on the Mishnah, Maimonides writes: "The Priestly Blessing is not to be translated, because it says **יְשָׁא ה'** 'the Lord will show favor' and the masses will think that this contradicts **אֲשֶׁר לֹא יֵשָׁא פָנָיו** 'Who shows no favor' (Deut 10:17)." Although there is no doubt that Rashi faithfully reflects the meaning of the Talmud, this is a bizarre reason for not translating (and perhaps not even reading) the passage in public. Many verses pose much more serious theological problems, but there are no restrictions on reading them. The problem that the BT finds in our verse is specious, because the word **יְשָׁא** in this passage does not mean showing partiality toward Israel but rather lifting up a shining countenance on Israel; and what is wrong with that? Even if the Amoraim did think that **יְשָׁא פָנָיו** in the Priestly Blessing means favoritism, the interpreters could easily have emended this

¹⁹ This variation between the Palestinian and Babylonian versions was noted by Henshke, "What Should Be Omitted," 39, n. 100, who suggests that it stems from differences in the traditional halakhah in the two communities.

in their translation, as they did with regard to many anthropomorphisms and verses that pose serious theological difficulties. Finally, even if **ישא פניו** was sufficient reason to omit v. 26, why shouldn't the first two verses of the blessing be read and translated? (For that matter, do these Sages intend that the entire passage, including the introduction and conclusion, vv. 22–27, should be skipped during public reading of the portion?)

On the other hand, the Jerusalem Talmud (*y. Meg.* 4:11 [74c]) quotes the Mishnah as follows: "The 'Blessing of the Priests' and the story of Amnon and Tamar may not be read and may not be translated." R. Jose's explanation follows: " 'Thus shall you bless' (Num 6:23): it was given for a blessing but was not given to be read" [75c]. Thus, according to the Jerusalem Talmud, even reading the Priestly Blessing is not permitted.

R. Jose's comment makes no sense. Nowhere is it even intimated, with regard to some other passage recited in a ritual context (e.g., the confession of the first fruits [Deut 26:3–11], the blessings and curses recited at Mount Ebal [Deut 27:14–26], the father's replies to his sons concerning the Passover [Exod 13:8,14–16; Deut 6:20–25], the ceremony of the *soṭah* [woman suspected of adultery] [Numbers 5]) that it was given for that specific ritual (and especially regarding a one-time ceremony, like the blessings and curses at Mount Ebal) but "not to be read."

Chanoch Albeck, in his commentary in the Mishnah, notes: "According to our text [of the Mishnah] and the explanation in the Jerusalem Talmud – 'it was given as a blessing and not to be read' – we are forced to say that when the passage was read the priests stood up and recited the 'Priestly Blessing' and the reader did not read the blessing. But the [Babylonian Amoraim] seem to have had a text [of the Mishnah] with the reading, 'may be read but may not be translated.'"²⁰ In fact, if R. Jose's statement that it was given to

²⁰ Albeck, in the notes at the end of his commentary on the Mishnah (Jerusalem, 5719), 505 (Heb.). Saul Lieberman conjectured that in Palestine, where the weekly Torah reading was of short portions (*sedarim*), the *seder* of one week ended before the Priestly Blessing and that of the next week began after it. See S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-fshutah* (2nd ed.; Jerusalem 5753-1932), 5:1220, n. 153. But see the comment by Joseph Heinemann, "The Priestly Blessing ... Is Not Read and Not

serve as a blessing but not for reading, was based on a widespread custom, we would expect to find it mentioned explicitly in other sources. And surely the Mishnah would be phrased somewhat differently: "The 'Blessing of the Priests' is recited by the priests when they lift up their hands [to give the blessing]."

Joseph Heinemann conjectures that the original version was "the 'Blessing of the Priests' is not read," meaning that the priests did not read it from a written text, despite the general rule that a written text may not be recited by heart (*b. Tem.* 14b; *b. Giṭ.* 60b), and totally unrelated to the issue of translation during public reading.²¹ Were this the intention, however, we should expect something like "the 'Blessing of the Priests' is recited orally," as is stated with regard to the short passage beginning "On the tenth day of the seventh month" (Lev 23:26–32) on the Day of Atonement, which the High Priest recited by heart (see *m. Yom.* 7:1; *m. Soṭ.* 7:7). Furthermore, there is a technical difficulty here: how could the priests read from a written text when they were raising their hands above their heads or to the level of their shoulders (*m. Soṭ.* 7:6)?

According to Alexander,²² the ban on translating the "Blessing of the Priests" is to be associated with the halakhah (*m. Soṭ.* 7:2) that the "Blessing of the Priests" is to be recited only in Hebrew (the Mishnah there also mentions the blessings and curses recited on Mount Ebal, another passage to be read only in Hebrew). According to him, the Sages were apprehensive that if the translator rendered the "Blessing of the Priests" into Aramaic, the priests might come to deliver it in the vernacular. This explanation is tenable only for the version that the "Blessing of the Priests may be read but may not be translated," but not for the variant "is *not* read and is not translated." Alexander also ignores the other passage in the Tosefta and in

Translated: Clarifying the Plain Meaning of a Mishnah," *Bar-Ilan Annual of Jewish Studies* (5728): 33–41 (= idem, *Studies in Prayer* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 5741], 90–98), on p. 36 (Heb.).

²¹ See J. Heinemann, "The Priestly Blessing," 36.

²² See P.S. Alexander, "The Rabbinical Lists," 186.

the *baraita* in the Babylonian Talmud, “the blessings and curses may be read and translated,” even though this pericope is to be recited only in Hebrew.

The articles by Henshke and Posen offer other explanations of the Mishnah and *baraitot*, but none of them are truly satisfactory.

It seems to me that we must look for a radically different solution.

Without getting into the complex question of the relationship among these sources and the evolution of the list of passages, it is obvious that the core of this tradition involves embarrassing episodes to which, perhaps, the masses should not be exposed. The Sages had to determine which passages, despite their indelicacy, could nevertheless be read in public in a fashion accessible to all, that is, followed by a translation into the vernacular; which passages should be limited to serious persons, by the simple expedient of not rendering them into the vernacular; and what should be kept totally under wraps and skipped over during public reading. A similar idea, based on the fear that listeners might respond inappropriately, is represented by “Wherever an indelicate expression is written in the text, we substitute a more polite one in reading,” quoted above. Over the years the list of problematic passages kept expanding, augmented by other texts of this type as well as passages of other types. The stories of Lot and his daughters and of the concubine in Gibeah fit in here. Rabbi Eliezer may have believed that the portion of “Make known to Jerusalem” should not be read in public because of the coarse images it associates with Jerusalem. The Creation Account and the Chariot Account are another matter. Whether or not “Make known to Jerusalem” and the Chariot Account should be read as *haftarot* is still another separate issue. But the Tosefta and the *baraita* in the BT combined all of them under the heading of the public reading and translation of awkward passages and dropped the reference to not reading the Chariot Account as a *haftarah*. This is not the place to discuss whether all the passages from the Prophets mentioned in the *baraitot* were employed as *haftarot* on certain occasions, or as a complement to the topic covered in the Torah reading; or whether, instead, they were read and studied in public

but were not part of the liturgy. It is possible that the Creation Account belongs to the same category as the Chariot Account.²³

The proliferation of these items over time created uncertainty as to their original nature. This can be inferred from the corruption and deletion of one item in the *baraita*, as indicated by the list preserved in our text of the Tosefta: viz., the story of David and Bathsheba. In both the Mishnah and the *baraita* in the BT, "the story of David and Bathsheba" has been corrupted into "the story of David and Amnon", which is "neither to be read nor translated". This created a duplication (with the previous reference to the "story of Amnon and Tamar") that the Talmud overlooks as well as a contradiction that it tries to resolve: "But you just said that the story of Amnon and Tamar is both read and translated?" followed by the forced explanation that "the former statement refers to where it says 'Amnon son of David' [which is not to be read or translated]; the latter to where it says 'Amnon' simply [which may be read and translated]." According to this there are two different halakhot associated with the story of Amnon and Tamar. The astonishing result, however, is that an extremely sensitive episode, of major importance for the issue that the Talmud is considering here—the incident of David and Bathsheba—is simply not mentioned in the list in the BT, whether to permit or to ban reading and translating it.²⁴

In fact, this incident, and others that are similar (e.g. the story of Reuben and Bilhah) is discussed elsewhere in the BT, from a different perspective. In *b. Shab.* 55b–56b, a long list of such problematic tales are discussed, introduced by "Whoever maintains that ... [Reuben, the sons of Samuel, David, etc.] sinned is merely making an error; ... Then how do I interpret [here the problematic verse is quoted]? It means ..."—here the Talmud offers a different way of understanding the verse, one that eliminates or downplays the transgression and interprets the biblical text as hyperbole—

²³ A good example of the enlargement of lists, with a blurring of their initial nature and addition of items of new types, is the tradition of the 18 Scribal Emendations (*tiqqûnê sôferîm*).

²⁴ See the discussion in Henshke, "What Should Be Omitted," 14–16.

"but Scripture considers it as if they had done so [that is, evaluates the character's action according to the literal meaning]."

Thus, David did not commit adultery with a married woman, for, according to the homiletic interpretation, at the time Bathsheba was a divorcee; Uriah was guilty of *lèse-majesté* and deserved capital punishment; Reuben (Gen 35:22) merely moved his father's couch [from Bilhah's tent to Leah's] out of his zeal for his mother's honor; Samuel's sons did not take bribes (1 Sam 8:3), but were lazy and waited for petitioners who needed help to come to them; and so on. And here, in the middle of this list of those who need this species of apologetics we find the two sons of the high priest Eli (1 Sam 2:12–17, 22; 3:13), and the homilist, Rabbi Samuel b. Nahmani in the name of R. Jonathan, defends them as well. In their case, too, according to this apologetical interpretation, the biblical text intentionally exaggerates their transgressions. Their failing was only that they explicitly demanded their share of the sacrificial meat, thereby showing disrespect for the offerings to the Lord (cf. 1 Sam 2:12–17); they demonstrated insufficient alacrity in dealing with the sacrifices of paltry value (birds) that had to be offered by women after they had given birth, forcing the women to wait around unnecessarily in Shiloh instead of returning home to their husbands promptly – and this is why the text says that Hophni and Phinehas lay with them (1 Sam 2:22).²⁵

Here we have a different method for dealing with embarrassing episodes. Instead of omitting them, whether in reading or translation into the vernacular, they are interpreted in a way that whitewashes the awkward details. We may assume that skilled or experienced translators knew how to render problematic texts – and not just those mentioned here – in keeping with the apologetic exegesis proposed by some of the Sages.²⁶

²⁵ A similar apologetic interpretation of the conduct of the sons of both Eli and Samuel is advanced by *Gen. Rab.* 85:12 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 1047–1047); see also the textual apparatus there.

²⁶ For example, according to Tg. Onqelos and the other Aramaic Targumim, Jacob came *בְּחֹכְמָתָא* 'shrewdly' and took Esau's blessing (Gen 27:35); similarly Jacob's sons spoke to Shechem and Hamor *בְּחֹכְמָתָא* (Gen 34:13), whereas the

Thus one of these embarrassing stories that made the Sages uncomfortable has to do with the priests Hophni and Phinehas.²⁷ God accuses their father that "he knew that his sons were מקללים להם ('cursing themselves' [or for their own sake?]) and he did not restrain them" (1 Sam 3:13). Here the Septuagint reads ὅτι κακολογοῦντες θεόν, i.e., מקללים אלוהים 'cursing God'. The traditions of *kinnah hakkatûb* and *tiqqûnê sôḥrîm* – euphemisms and scribal emendations – mention this verse as one of those in which the text has been modified out of respect.²⁸ In both biblical and talmudic literature, when the object of the verb קלל and the noun קללה is God, they are

Hebrew text in both places has במרמה 'with guile'. Similarly Esau's complaint about Jacob is rendered וחכמני 'outsmarted' instead of the MT ויעקבני 'defrauded, robbed' (Gen 27:36); Rachel "took" (נסב) rather than the MT "stole" (גנב) her father's idols (Gen 31:19, 32); but the Targum has no problem with reporting that Laban "lied" (שקר) to Jacob, where the Hebrew is "deceived" (רמה) (Gen 29:25). See E.Z. Melamed, *Bible Commentators: Their Approaches and Methods* (2nd ed.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), 174–178 (Heb.); Posen, *The Consistency*, 88–92. According to the Aramaic Targum, David and his men "burned" (rather than MT "carried away") the Philistine idols (2 Sam 5:21; harmonizing with the account in 1 Chron 14:12). Here I ignore the Palestinian Targumim on the Pentateuch, which date from a later era.

²⁷ The stories of Lot and his daughters, the concubine in Gibeah, Amnon and Absalom, although also dealing with sexual immorality, to which some readers or listeners might react inappropriately, do not involve important and respectable people whose conduct ought to be impeccable. This, apparently, is why they did not bother the Sages: they could be read and translated and there was no reason for apologetics on the lines of "Whoever maintains that Amnon/Absalom sinned is merely making an error."

²⁸ With regard to *kinnah hakkatub* and *tiqqûnê soḥrim* and the question of whether the tradition means that the original author employed a euphemism or that the "scribes" actually emended the sacred text to make it more palatable, see at length M.A. Zipor, *Tradition and Transmission: Studies in Ancient Biblical Translation and Interpretation* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001), 79–165 (Heb.). It seems likely that the collocation מקללים להם was understood as מקללים את עצמם 'cursing themselves', which is in fact a euphemism for מקללים אלהים (cf. LXX) 'cursing (or abusing) God', 'desecrating God's name'. Compare *b. Git.* 56a: "Titus ... thought he had killed *himself*" – where the meaning is that he thought he had killed God; for similar cases see Zipor, *ibid.*, 155 and n. 156; see also pp. 140–141 and 163 n. 167. On מקללים להם, see *ibid.* 119, 151–153.

generally replaced by the euphemisms בִּרְךָ and בִּרְכָה 'bless, blessing' (e.g., 1 Kgs 21:10 and 13; Job 1:5 etc.). The same euphemism is standard in mishnaic Hebrew, in which "blessing the name" means "blaspheme."²⁹ It is plausible, then, that when speaking of the misconduct of Eli's sons the Sages would have employed a euphemism and said that they "blessed God."

My hypothesis, then, is that the בִּרְכַת הַכֹּהֲנִים 'Blessing of the Priests' (or something very close to that) that may [not] be read and may not be translated—just as the story of David and Bathsheba may not be translated, or, according to another version, may not even be read—is a euphemism for the misconduct of Eli's two sons (mainly the immorality described in 1 Sam 2:22). Over time the original meaning was forgotten and the words came to be understood literally, as if they referred to an actual benediction and specifically to Num 6:22–27, the passage referred to several times in the talmudic literature as בִּרְכַת הַכֹּהֲנִים 'the Blessing of the Priests'.³⁰ This led to the various explanations advanced in the two Talmuds. If this interpretation is correct, then the term "Blessing of the Priests" in our sources refers to the misdeeds of the sons of Eli—and this is a passage about which, similar to the other stories mentioned here—Lot and his daughters, Reuben and Bilhah, Judah and Tamar, David and Bathsheba, Absalom and his father's wives, Amnon and Tamar—doubts might well arise as to whether it should be translated into the vernacular for public consumption.

We can cite another example of two different concepts that go by the same name. The term Thirteen *Middot* 'measures' has two quite distinct referents:

²⁹ E.g., *b. Yoma*. 17b. See Zipor, *ibid.* 141–142, 152, and 163 n. 167.

³⁰ See also *m. Soṭ.* 7:8. In some places the "Priestly Blessing" is denominated נְשִׂיאת כַּפַּיִם 'raising of hands' along with the verbal equivalent "the priests raise their hands" (e.g., *m. Soṭ.* 7:8). Another idiom for this is עוֹלִים לְדוֹכָן 'going up to the platform'.

the thirteen *attributes* of God (as in *b. Roš Haš* 17b)³¹ and the thirteen *rules* used to expound the Torah (the *baraita* of Rabbi Ishmael, *Sifra*, *Petiḥta* 1:1).³²

Evidently the solution for the awkward passages, as offered by R. Samuel b. Nahmani in the name of R. Jonathan—that is, interpreting them as hyperbole rather than literally—was adopted by the later Aramaic Targumim to replace the solution of not rendering them in the vernacular. An indication of this can be found in Ps.-J. on Gen 35:22, which renders the incident of Reuben as follows: **ואזל ראובן ובלבל ית מצעא דבלהה פלקתיה דאבוי, דהוא מסדרא כל קביל מצעא דלאה אמיה, ואתחשיב עילוי כאילו שימש עמה** ("Reuben went and switched the bed of Bilhah, his father's concubine, which was placed where his mother Leah's bed had been, and he was considered to have had relations with her"). This translation, whose final redaction took place during the Muslim era, frequently has the characteristics of a Targum and deviates from the literal meaning of the Hebrew text. This is the only passage in the Pentateuch in R. Samuel b. Nahmani's list of those not to be understood according to their plain sense. All of the others are in the Former Prophets. But the only extant Aramaic Targum of the Former Prophets, *Tg. Jonathan*, is ancient and extremely literal (except for the expansions of lyrical passages), and literally renders embarrassing passages, even those that the Mishnah says are not to be translated.

³¹ This refers to the qualities of God mentioned in Exod 34:6–7. In the talmudic literature these are treated as "attributes (*מידות*) of mercy"; but the medieval commentators are hard put to identify precisely thirteen of them in these two verses. See the next note.

³² See also *b. San.* 86a. Here too it is hard to make the count work out. Thirteen is a typological number, especially with regard to Torah study. See Zipor, *Tradition and Transmission*, 89 and n. 36.

