

# Unforeseen Miracles along the Banks of the Arnon River

Num 21:10-20 in the Vulgate and in Rabbinic Traditions

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**ABSTRACT** • The paper examines Jerome's translation of Num 21:14-15.16-20, asking in particular about the reasons for the significant differences between the Hebrew Text and the Vulgate. These are – as will be shown – not to be explained by the existence of text-critical variants, but rather derive from a thorough reception of Jewish Rabbinic interpretations of Num 21:14-20.

**KEYWORDS** • Numbers 21:10-20; translation techniques, Targum, Rabbinical exegesis

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG** • Der Aufsatz untersucht Hieronymus' Übersetzung von Num 21,14-15.16-20 und fragt insbesondere nach den Gründen für die signifikanten Unterschiede zwischen dem hebräischen Text und der Vulgata. Diese sind – wie sich zeigen wird – nicht durch die Existenz textkritischer Varianten zu erklären, sondern entspringen einer gründlichen Rezeption jüdisch-rabbinischer Interpretationen von Num 21,14-20.

**SCHLAGWORTE** • Num 21, 10-20; Übersetzungstechniken, Targum, rabbinische Exegese

Israel's days in the wilderness have nearly reached their end when the people witnesses two remarkable events in the deep gorges of the Arnon Valley, east of the Dead Sea: On the one hand, the river valleys at the Arnon become the scene of an impressive miracle of rescue, comparable only to the famous one that took place at the Sea of Reeds, and on the other hand, a well miraculously (re)appears to accompany the Israelites on their remaining journey to the borders of the Promised Land. All these events are described in Num 21:14-20, an often neglected text in the Book of Numbers. But – to be clear – the short summary of this pericope applies only and exclusively to Num 21:14-20 in the *Vulgate*. In the Hebrew Text however the very same verses essentially contain an itinerary that traces the stages of Israel's wanderings through the regions east of the Dead Sea, combined with some rather sober descriptions of the geography of the Arnon Valley in Num 21:14-15 – obviously a completely different content.

But how are these differences between the Hebrew Text and the Vulgate to be explained? Do they point to textual critical variants – or do they owe themselves to an elaborated exegesis of the Hebrew Text? These are the main questions that the following article will address, but first a brief consideration shall be given to Num 21:14-20 (resp. Num 21:10-20) in the Hebrew Text.

## 1. To the vicinity of the Arnon Valley (Num 21:10-20)

As already stated above, Num 21:10-20<sub>MT</sub> contains a travel itinerary, that traces Israel's wanderings through the regions east of the Dead Sea from south to north highlighting two stages in particular: The first one is the Arnon Valley with the notice of Israel's arrival in this area in Num 21:13 being combined with a poem – marked as a quotation from the "Book of the wars of JJ" (ספר מלחמת יי) – in Num 21:14-15 that (in the HT) sketches the geography of the Arnon Valley and at the same time hints to the political significance of this area. The second stage is a well that Israel reaches after its departure from the Arnon Valley that is said to be promised (and given) to Israel by God (Num 21:16) and that is praised by Israel in a poem quoted in Num 21:17-18.<sup>1</sup> These features, two poetic texts in Num 21:14-15.17-18 and the quotation of a speech of God in Num 21:16, mark Num 21:13-18 as the core of the itinerary Num 21:10-20. In Num 21:10-12.19-20 however, this core is framed by listings of the stations of Israel's wanderings south of the Arnon valley (cf. Num 21:10-12) and along the border between the land Moab and the territory of the Amorites (cf. Num 21:19-20), before the subsequent pericope, Num 21:21-35, reports Israel's conquest of the two kingdoms of the Amorites just north of the Arnon Valley.<sup>2</sup> Of particular interest in this paper are Jerome's renderings Num 21:14-15 and Num 21:16-18, that seem to deviate from its Hebrew *Vorlage* in an interesting way.

## 2. "As he did at the Red Sea, so will he do at the Arnon" (Num 21:14-15)

The first of these passages to be examined is Num 21:14-15, a poem, that by its introducing verse (Num 21:14a) is marked as a quotation from the "Book of the Wars of JJ" (ספר מלחמת יי) – a book, staged as important and authoritative but nevertheless *not* being tangible to us as an independent text besides this passage of the Torah.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ashley, Timothy. *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids-Cambridge 1993, 408; Levine, Baruch. *Numbers 21-36. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AncB 4A), Doubleday, New York-et al. 2000, 91.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Achenbach, Reinhard. *Die Vollendung der Tora. Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Numeribuches im Kontext von Hexateuch und Pentateuch* (BZAR 3), Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2003, 353; Ashley. *Numbers*, 409-412.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Achenbach. *Vollendung*, 355; Ashley. *Numbers*, 411; Levine. *Numbers*, 91.

## 2.1 On borders and geography – Num 21:14-15 in the Hebrew Bible

In the Masoretic text, this song (Num 21:14b-15) reads as follows:

"Wahev in Sufa and the wadis at the Arnon and the cliff of the wadis, that spreads out to rest in Ar; and (that) leans to the territory / border of Moab. <sup>4</sup>	אֶת־זוֹהַב בְּסוּפָה וְאֶת־הַנַּחֲלִים אֲרֹנוֹן; וְאֶשְׁד הַנַּחֲלִים אֲשֶׁר נֹטָה לְשֵׁבֶת עַר וְנֹשֵׁעַן לַגְּבוּל מוֹאָב: <sup>4</sup>	14b  15a 15aR <sub>1</sub> 15aR <sub>1l</sub> 15aR <sub>2</sub>
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In its (narrower) context, this song supports the statement of the narrative voice in Num 21:13c, according to which the Arnon Valley, the area that Israel has reached, is the border between the land of Moab and the territory of the Amorites: "for the Arnon is the border of Moab (גְּבוּל מוֹאָב) between Moab and between the Amorite" (Num 21:13c). Two interlocking aspects are important here:

(1) The assumption that the Arnon marks the border of the land of Moab is emphasized not only by the biblical narrator (cf. Num 21:13), but also by the poem itself (cf. Num 21:15), so that in consequence the poem can function as an authoritative *proof-text* supporting the narrator's point of view.<sup>5</sup>

(2) Additionally the poem traces the (geographical) course of this boundary defined, a boundary that will be important for Israel itself once the Amorite territory is conquered by Israel (as opposed to the land of Moab, which Israel is not allowed to inherit; cf. Dtn 2:9) and the Arnon thus will become Israel's own frontier towards its Moabite neighbors<sup>6</sup> – and as such it is to be fixed in a binding manner from the very beginning, also via the quotation from an (otherwise inaccessible) authoritative text. In the Hebrew Text, thus, we find ourselves in some kind of an "international law"-discourse on borders and territorial claims. This however is not what the Vulgate does make of our poem...

<sup>4</sup> Translation: M.E.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ashley. *Numbers* 411-412; Frevel, Christian. "Understanding the Pentateuch by Structuring the Desert. Numbers 21 as Compositional Joint" in: Frevel, Christian (ed.). *Desert Transformations. Studies in the Book of Numbers* (FAT 137), Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2020, 121-142, here 139-140. Levine. *Numbers*, 91; 127.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Levine. *Numbers*, 129-133. In the significance of the Arnon as a borderline (of Moab) and the "various shapes" of the territory of Moab in the Pentateuch resp. in the Book of Numbers cf. also Frevel, Christian. "The Various Shapes of Moab in the Book of Numbers: Relation Text and Archeology", HeBAI 8.3 (2019) 257-286.

## 2.2 On miracles at the sea and in the canyons – Num 21,14-15 in the Vulgate

14a	unde dicitur in libro bellorum Domini	על־כן יאמר בספר מלחמת יהוה	14a
14b	sicut fecit in mari Rubro	את־והב בסופה	14b
14c	sic faciet in torrentibus Arnon	ואת־הנחלים ארנון:	
15a	scopuli torrentium	ואשד הנחלים	15a
	inclinati sunt	אשר נטה	15aR <sub>1</sub>
15b	ut requiescerent in Ar	לשבת ער	15aR <sub>1</sub> I
15c	et recumberent in finibus Moabitarum. <sup>7</sup>	ונשען לגבול מואב:	15aR <sub>2</sub>

When comparing Num 21:14(b) in the Hebrew Text to the Vulgate's rendering, one notices that there is one elliptical sentence with an enumeration of two geographical designations in the Hebrew Text, "Wahev in Sufa" (את והב בסופה) and the "river arms / wadis at the Arnon" (את) (הנחלים ארנון)<sup>8</sup> which in the Vulgate is transformed into a conjunction of two verbal clauses. These relate *two* comparable acts of God, connected to *two* different places, in a parallelizing way (cf. *sicut ... sic ...*) as – according to Jerome's rendering – Num 21:14 first looks back to the Red Sea (and metonymically to the salvation of Israel connected with this place) in the *past* (cf. *sicut fecit*) before announcing a comparable event (i.e. also a salvation miracle?), that will take place at the torrents of the Arnon in the *future* (cf. *sic faciet*).

Crucial for the rendering of Num 21:14 in the Vulgate is especially the translation and interpretation of the first geographical designation of the Hebrew Text, את והב בסופה, to which corresponds the phrase *in mari rubro* ('by the Red Sea'). This phrase obviously takes up the keyword בסופה, but does not interpret it as a name for a region east of the Dead Sea, but rather relates it to the ים סוף ('Sea of Reeds') and ultimately connects this place name metonymically to the miracle Israel experienced there. The element את והב on the other hand – interpreted as the place name Wahev (והב) combined with the *nota accusativi* את in the (English) translation presented above<sup>9</sup> – at first seems not to have any equivalent in the Vulgate. Or is it possibly rendered in the words *sicut fecit* ('as he has done')? This would indeed be possible if, instead of reading two words, את והב, Jerome perceived only *one* – אתוהב – which can be interpreted as an (Aramaic!) verb and translated as "to be given" (יהב, 3.m.sg. AK itpeal).<sup>10</sup> "Thus the literal meaning of את והב בסופה is 'that which was given [to the Jewish people] at the Sea of Reeds', i.e., the miracles that Hashem performed for them there."<sup>11</sup> – provided one shares the assumption that סופה

<sup>7</sup> 14 Thus it is said in the Book of the Wars of the Lord: "As he did by the Red Sea so will he do by the torrents of the Arnon." 15The cliffs of the torrents inclined themselves that they rested in Ar and laid down at the borders of the Moabites. (Num 21:14-15Vg.) Translation: M.E.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Seebass, Horst. *Numeri. 2. Teilband: Numeri 10,11-22,2* (BK.AT), Neukirchner Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2003, 330-331.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Levine. *Numbers*, 91.

<sup>10</sup> The Apparatus Criticus of the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia marks this very reading as attested in several (not explicitly named) manuscripts of the Masoretic Text. Cf. also Ashley. *Numbers*, 407 (note 3); Seebass. *Numeri*, 331.

<sup>11</sup> Herzka, Eliezer; Morgenstern, Avraham (ed.). *Bamidbar/Numbers* (Onkelos – Zichron Meir Edition), Artscroll Mesorah Publications, Rahway 2020, 251 (note 26).

is to be associated with ים סוף ('Sea of Reeds'). If this is the case, Jerome did in the end not perceive Num 21:14b (MT) as one single elliptical clause but as a combination of one verbal clause (Num 21:14b) – את והב בסופה – and one elliptical clause (Num 21:14c) – ואת הנחלים ארנון. The latter one however he read as an announcement of a future action of God at the Arnon river being similar to the one at the Sea of Reeds, and he subsequently chose the translation *sicut fecit in torrentibus Arnon* ('so will he do by the torrents of the Arnon'), with the term of the Hebrew Text being quite closely rendered in the words *in torrentibus Arnon*.

Let's move on to Num 21:15. In the Hebrew Text, the sentence Num 21:15a (ואשד הנחלים) functions as the main clause, an elliptical clause that follows the phrase ואת הנחלים ארנון in v.14. Dependent on it are two relative clauses (v.15aR<sub>1</sub> / v.15aR<sub>2</sub>) – the former being additionally extended by an infinitive clause, v.15aR<sub>1</sub>I – that make statements about the river valleys and the slopes at the Arnon, especially about their geographical location on the borders of Moab. Thus, in the Hebrew Text Num 21:15 is essential to the pragmatics of the poem in its context, as – on the one hand – it has to prove authoritatively that the Arnon is indeed (and ever was) the boundary of the land of Moab, while – on the other hand – it is also prescribing the exact course of this very borderline.<sup>12</sup>

In the Vulgate Text however the phrase *scopuli torrentium inclinati sunt*, which is the main clause, corresponds to Num 21:15a-aR<sub>1</sub> in the Hebrew Text. Thus, in the Latin text – instead of an elliptical clause with a dependent relative clause – we find *one* single verbal clause on which two final clauses depend. The first of them, *ut requiescerent in Ar*, is an equivalent to the infinitive clause v.15aR<sub>1</sub>I<sub>MT</sub> and the second one, *et recumberent in finibus Moabitarum*, to the asyndetic relative clause v.15aR<sub>2</sub><sub>MT</sub>. Obviously, Jerome's rendering of Num 21:15 does not focus on the geography and the political significance of the Arnon Valley, but rather makes an alienating action of the cliffs towering above the ravines at the Arnon (cf. *scopuli torrentium*) the main action. In Num 21:15<sub>Vg.</sub> a downward movement of these cliffs is indicated, resulting in their coming to rest on the borders of Moab – a remarkable incident, though, not being (explicitly) tangible in the Hebrew Text.

On the other hand, however, it must be stated that, when translating the essential keywords of the verse, אשד (*scopuli*), נטה (*inclinari*), ישב (*requiescere*), and שטען-ני (*recumbere*), Jerome remains close to the semantics of every single of the Hebrew words. From this observation it may be concluded, that his translation of Num 21:15 is *not* intended as a merely loose one and certainly not as an embellishing (midrash-like) expansion. Instead, a proximity to the translated text is recognizably *one* goal of his translation. Furthermore, however, we can assume, that the translation points out – as clearly and as vividly as possible – what is (in Jerome's eyes) the actual meaning of the source-text, its *sensus*.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ashley. *Numbers*, 412.

<sup>13</sup> On Jerome's conception of *sensus* cf. Kraus, Matthew. *Jewish, Christian, and Classical Exegetical Traditions of the Book of Exodus* (VCS 141), Brill, Leiden-Boston 2017, 45-49; Weigert, Sebastian. *Hebraica veritas. Übersetzungsprinzipien und Quellen der Deuteronomiumsübersetzung des Hieronymus* (BWANT 207) Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2016, 44-59.

The context suggests that Num 21:15 describes the very saving action of God, announced in Num 21:14. It is striking, however, that the action v.15 focusses on (cf. cliffs inclined themselves), is formulated in the perfect tense and is thus identified as an individual fact of the (completed) past, whereas in v.14 God's action at the Arnon is announced in the future tense. This incongruity suggests that in the Vulgate (in contrast to the Hebrew Text) Num 21:15 is *not* to be read as part of the poem quoted from the "Book of the Wars of JJ"; the poem thus is limited to v.14bc and announces a future action of God. Num 21:15 on the other hand is ascribed to the narrator's voice, elucidating how the announced salvation actually has taken place: "*scopuli torrentium inclinati sunt*". But what does it mean that rocks incline themselves? And what is the analogy to the salvation at the Sea of Reeds? Excitingly, the text (of the Vulgate) seems to assume that this is self-evident anyway, and consequently neither vv. 14-15 nor the narrower context give further explanations. As there is no compelling indicator that Jerome had before him a Hebrew *Vorlage*, that was significantly different from "our" Masoretic Text – on the contrary, all of his translatory decisions are fully comprehensible on the basis of the HT – it is necessary to ask for sources or exegetical traditions that could have inspired Jerome's translation. Here, in the first place, the Septuagint (together with the "*recentiores*") is to be considered.<sup>14</sup>

### 2.3 On God's wrath against Er – Num 21,14-15 in the LXX / Greek versions

14a	διὰ τοῦτο λέγεται ἐν βιβλίῳ	על־כן יאמר בספר	14a
(14b)	πόλεμος κυρίου	מלחמת יהוה	
(14b)	τὴν Ζωὸβ ἐφλόγισεν	את־זוהב בסופה	14b
	καὶ τοὺς χειμάρρους Ἀρνῶν,	ואת־הנחלים ארנון:	
15a	καὶ τοὺς χειμάρρους	ואשד הנחלים	15a
	κατέστησεν	אשר נטה	15aR <sub>1</sub>
15a1	κατοικήσαι Ἡρ,	לשבת ער	15aR <sub>1l</sub>
15b	καὶ πρόσκειται τοῖς ὄροις Μωάβ. <sup>15</sup>	ונשען לגבול חואב:	15aR <sub>2</sub>

As the LXX-Text of Num 21:14-15 differs significantly from both the Hebrew Text and the Vulgate, first the relationship between LXX and HT has to be discussed in more detail. The first thing to notice here is the expression πόλεμος κυρίου ('war of the Lord') as a rendering of the Hebrew "מלחמת", which strikingly is in the *nominative* case. Apparently thus the LXX did not read / interpret the Hebrew term "ספר מלחמת" ('Book of the Wars of JJ') as *one* (single) construct as in this case a rendering in the *genitive* case – (ἐν βιβλίῳ) πολέμου κυρίου – would have been expected. Instead the LXX understood the term "מלחמת" either (1) as the title of the mentioned book (i.e. a book called "πόλεμος κυρίου"; 'War of the Lord') or (2) it perceived it as the subject

<sup>14</sup> For this methodological assumption cf. Kraus, Matthew. "Rabbinic Traditions in Jerome's Translation of the Book of Numbers", JBL 136.3 (2017) 539-563, here 545-546.

<sup>15</sup> 14 Thus it is said in the book 'War of the Lord': "[The Lord] kindled Zoob and the torrents of Arnon." // 14 Thus it is said in the book: "The war of the Lord kindled Zoob and the torrents of Arnon" 15 And he has designated the torrents to let Er dwell there. And it (i.e. Er) lies near to the borders of Moab. (Num 21:14-15LXX) Translation: M.E.

of the following sentence (τὴν Ζωὸβ ἐφλόγισεν; Num 21:14b).<sup>16</sup> In this (second) case Num 21:14b<sub>LXX</sub> – unlike in the Hebrew Text – would thus not be an elliptical sentence, but would have both predicate (ἐφλόγισεν) and subject (πόλεμος κυρίου). At the same time however the expression ἐν βιβλίῳ, ‘in an [unspecified] book’, would remain enigmatic. In the first case, on the other hand, the wording of Num 21:14a would be more comprehensible while κύριος is to be assumed as the – in this case “only” *implicit* – subject of the elliptical sentence Num 21:14b.<sup>17</sup> In both cases the verb ἐφλόγισεν (‘he kindled’) is the predicate of Num 21:14b, while the term τὴν Ζωὸβ (‘Zoob’) and the phrase καὶ τοὺς χειμάρους Ἀρνῶν (‘and the river arms of the Arnon’) appear as (direct) objects with only the second one of these objects – καὶ τοὺς χειμάρους Ἀρνῶν – following the Hebrew Text quite closely (cf. ואת הנחלים ארנון).

The verb ἐφλόγισεν and the (first) direct object, τὴν Ζωὸβ, though, cannot be clearly correlated with the Hebrew *Vorlage*. One possibility would be to consider – based on the critical apparatus of the BHS – the direct object τὴν Ζωὸβ (‘Zoob’) to be a rendering of the Hebrew term אַתְּ הוּא (on the assumption that the translator read הוּא אַתְּ instead).<sup>18</sup> Consequently the verb ἐφλόγισεν is to be conceived as rendering of the Hebrew word בִּסּוּפָה, associated with the (Aramaic) verb קִפּוּס (‘to kindle’).<sup>19</sup>

As for Num 21:15, first of all, there is no equivalent for the Hebrew word אֶשֶׁר (‘cliff’) in the Septuagint rendering.<sup>20</sup> The result is that the central topic of the verse are no longer the cliffs at the Arnon (as in the Hebrew Text), but ‘Er’ (Ἐρ)<sup>21</sup>, whom – as we get to know in Num 21:15a<sub>LXX</sub> – *he* (i.e. God<sup>22</sup>) has granted the river valleys of the Arnon as a residence and who’s settlements are reaching out till the borders of Moab (cf. Num 21:15b<sub>LXX</sub>).<sup>23</sup> So, if now – according to Num 21:14 – the Lord (or the war of the Lord) ignites the river arms at the Arnon, he in the end turns against Er, inhabiting the very regions affected by the divine intervention. The reasons for this and the exact circumstances however are not clarified in the text.

An interpretation of the Hebrew Text quite similar to the one in the Septuagint is also to be found – as far as can be discerned – in the “*recentiores*”, on which Jerome’s philology frequently

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Seebass. *Numeri*, 330; Ziegert, Carsten. *Diaspora als Wüstenzeit. Übersetzungswissenschaftliche und theologische Aspekte des griechischen Numeribuchs* (BZAW 480), de Gruyter, Berlin-München-Boston 2015, 224.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ziegert. *Diaspora*, 224.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ashley. *Numbers*, 407 (note 3); Ziegert. *Diaspora*, 224.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Seebass. *Numeri*, 331; Karrer, Martin; Kraus, Wolfgang (ed.). *Septuaginta Deutsch: Erläuterungen und Kommentare zum griechischen Alten Testament, Vol. 1: Genesis bis Makkabäer*, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 2011, 479; Ziegert. *Diaspora*, 225.

<sup>20</sup> On possible reasons for an “omission” of אֶשֶׁר in the Old Greek cf. Seebass. *Numeri*, 331; Ziegert. *Diaspora*, 225.

<sup>21</sup> The place name Er (Ἐρ) corresponds to Ar (אֶר) in the Hebrew text (cf. Num 21:15aRI).

<sup>22</sup> The subject to κατέστησεν (Num 21:15a<sub>LXX</sub>) – most plausibly it is God – is not explicitly mentioned in the text. Cf. Ziegert. *Diaspora*, 225.

<sup>23</sup> The verb πρόσκειται (Num 21:15b<sub>LXX</sub>) is referring back to Er (Num 21:15a).

relies.<sup>24</sup> Here one reading differing from the Old Greek text and attributed to Symmachus has been preserved in the syrohexaplaric tradition:

<sup>14</sup>Propter hoc dictum <est> in numero bellantium: dominus ad quidem 'w'b in procella vallium autem ad arnon;

<sup>15</sup>effusio enim vallium inclinavit usque ad habitationem (d)r et posita <est> super terminum moab<sup>25</sup>

This rendering can be judged as an attempt to implement a Greek translation that is closer to the wording of the Hebrew Text than the LXX itself. So, while Num 21:15<sub>Syh</sub> follows the Hebrew *Vorlage* very closely, Num 21:14 speaks of a 'storm' (*procella*) in which God turns against 'w'b – the Wahev of the Hebrew Text (?) – and the valleys at the Arnon. Here, the keyword *procella* can be interpreted as a rendering of the Hebrew term סופה, which – as it seems – is not interpreted as a place name, but in this case as a (Hebrew) noun with the meaning 'storm', pointing to the circumstances of the divine epiphany.

In the end, it is to conclude, that the Septuagint as well as Symmachus – just as the Vulgate – interpret the song cited in Num 21:14 as a testimony to a divine intervention. The great difference between the renderings / interpretations however is, that in the Greek translations this divine intervention is *not* related to the miracle at the Sea of Reeds and thus is not primarily conceptualized as a miracle of rescue (in favor of Israel). Rather – probably triggered by the keyword 'war (of God)' in v.14a – it is to be grasped as a divine judgment directed essentially against the settlements of Er located at the Arnon – for whatever reason. Given the distinctly different interpretations of the Hebrew Text, it is to be assumed with good reasons that it was not the LXX and not the Greek tradition in a broader sense that inspired Jerome's translation, which is characterized by the fact that he relates an action of God at the banks of the Arnon with the miracle at the Sea of Reeds. Interestingly, however, a very comparable idea can be found in Jewish-Rabbinic traditions, which shall be examined in detail next.

## 2.4 Ancient Jewish Traditions

A first look shall be taken at the *targumim*, among which the Targum Onqelos (TO) stands out, showing clearly greater similarities with the Vulgate's rendering (especially in Num 21:14) than, for example, the translations of the Greek tradition discussed above, notwithstanding the fact that there are also important differences between TO and the Vulgate.

<sup>24</sup> For Jerome's *recentiores*-rabbinic philology cf. e.g. Kraus. *Exodus*, 15-42.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted from Wevers, John William. *Numeri* (Septuaginta. Vetus Testamentum Graecum Auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis editum Vol. III.1), Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, Göttingen 1982, 257.



	<b>Num 21:14-15 (Vulgate)</b>	<b>Num 21:14-15 (TO)</b>	
14a	unde dicitur in libro bellorum Domini	על כין יתאמר בספרא	14a
14b	sicut fecit in mari Rubro	קרבין עבד יי על ימא דסוף	14b
14c	sic faciet in torrentibus Arnon	וגבורן על נחלי ארנון:	14c
15a	scopuli torrentium	ושפוך לנחליא	15a
	inclinati sunt	דמדברין	15aR
15b	ut requiescerent in Ar	לקביל לחית	
15c	et recumberent in finibus Moabitarum	ומסתמיר לתחום מואב: <sup>26</sup>	15b

Similar to the LXX (see above), but unlike the Vulgate, the TO does not interpret the Hebrew phrase "ספר מלחמות יי" ('book of the wars of JJ') as one single construct and instead makes "מלחמות יי" ('wars of JJ') the subject of the song line in Num 21:14b. By this way, "the battles, that JJ has done" (יי) ("קרבין דעבד יי") or his "mighty acts" (גבורן) are made the defining theme of the song, while the quoting in Num 21:14a becomes quite nebulous as it refers to a very certain book that, however, is not specified in any way.

Yet, an interesting similarity the rendering of the TO shares with the Vulgate (against the Greek variants) is that the TO also reads the Hebrew סופה as referring to the ים סוף ('Sea of Reeds') and – based on this – relates JJ's acting at the Arnon to the one at the Sea.

As in the Vulgate, however, it is impossible to draw any conclusion from Num 21:14-15 itself regarding what exactly JJ did at the Arnon and in what the claimed similarity with the miracle at the Sea of Reeds consists.

Since the TO may have been compiled somewhat earlier than the Vulgate, but in Babylon and not in the Land of Israel, it cannot be assumed that it directly influenced Jerome's translation. Both texts are more plausibly conceived as parallels than being in a linear dependency, but the TO can convincingly show that the Vulgate's striking parallelization of the Sea of Reeds and the Arnon is rooted in the (rabbinic) Jewish tradition. Thus, a closer look at other texts from this stream of tradition can be taken, combined with the hope of discovering more details about the "Miracle at the Arnon". At first, the Targumim from the Land of Israel may be interesting in this context, each of which offers a "translation" of the Hebrew Text extended by a lengthy *aggada*. In what follows, the version of the Targum Neofiti (TgN) will be presented as one example. The Fragmentary Targum (FrgTg) and Targum Jerushalmi (TgJ), however, offer basically the same tradition – apart from minor variations – while Targum PsJonathan (PsJ) tells at least a quite similar story, but with slightly different accents.

<sup>14</sup>Thus, so it is said and explained in the Book of the Torah of JJJ, which is compared to a Book of the Wars (ספר קרבייה): "The miracles and the mighty acts that JJJ did with(in) Israel when they were standing by the Sea of Reeds and the mighty act he did with(in) them when they were passing the valleys of the Arnon."

<sup>26</sup> 14 Thus it is said in the book: "Battles, that JJ has done at the Sea of Reeds and mighty acts, that [he performed] at the valleys of Arnon" 15And the outpouring of the valleys/streams that lead towards Lechajjat. And it (i.e. Lechajjat) leans itself on the border of Moab (Num 21:14-15TO). Translation: M.E. For the Aramaic text of TO cf. Targum Onqelos to the Pentateuch (CAL Targums), Hebrew Union College, Logos Research Edition 2005.

<sup>15</sup>When Israel was passing the valleys of the Arnon, the Amorites hid themselves in the caves of the valleys of the Arnon (and) said: "When the Sons of Israel will pass by, we shall go forth against them, and we shall kill them." But the Lord of all the world, JJJ, who knows what is in the hearts, as before him is uncovered what is the kidneys, he gave a sign. He gave a sign to the mountains (טוריה) and their heads here and there were brought together, and they crushed the heads of their (i.e. the Amorites) mighty ones, and the valleys were overflowed with their blood (שטיפו נחליה מן אדמהון). They (i.e. Israel), however, did not notice the miracles and the mighty acts, that JJJ did with them in the valleys [...]. But afterwards it was explained to them. And they went to the place of Lechawwat, the city, that did not join their counsel und that was saved. And behold, it leans towards the confines of the Moabites. (Num 21:14-15<sub>TgN</sub>)<sup>27</sup>

The fascinating thing here is first of all that the translation of Num 21:14 (and especially of the song line, i.e. Num 21:14<sub>bHT</sub>) – like that of TO – is quite close to the rendering of the Vulgate. The only difference is that in the Vulgate the miracle at the Arnon is marked as a future event, so that the song ultimately announces a miracle that is still pending, but which is supposed to be comparable to the events at the Sea of Reeds. In TgN, on the other hand, two miracles of JJJ that have already happened in the past are compared respectively related to each other:

"The miracles and the mighty acts that JJJ did with(in) Israel when they were standing by the Sea of Reeds ( ימא דסורף ) and the mighty act he did with(in) them when they were passing the valleys of the Arnon (נחלי ארנונא)."  
(Num 21:14 TgN)

Unlike in the Vulgate and also in TO, however, where the miracle at the Arnon was not clearly grasped, in TgN it is unfolded in an extensive *aggada* in Num 21:15: We are told that the Amorites<sup>28</sup> are preparing an ambush in the deep and narrow gorges of the Arnon and are hiding themselves in the caves there so that they can attack Israel as soon as it tries to cross the river valleys and slay it there. But prior to Israel being able to reach the Arnon and become victims of the ambush, God instructs the "mountains" (טוריה) – presumably the two sides of the canyon(s) – to move towards each other. This in turn brings about two effects: For one, the enemies hiding in the caves of the Arnon Gorge are crushed between the mountains, the ambush is thus foiled and the blood of the enemies streams down the valleys of the Arnon. Here, the last sentence, שטיפו נחליה מן אידם ('and the valleys were overflowed with the blood'), is probably adapted from the beginning of Num 21:15<sub>HT</sub> (ואשד הנחלים).

The second effect, however, is that Israel can easily pass above the (closed) Arnon Gorge across the mountains that were pushed together, without even perceiving the threat as well as the divine miracle at all. Excitingly now, the translation of Num 21:15 in the TgN and in the Vulgate differ significantly. Thus, TgN reads the opening words of Num 21:15 (אשד הנחלים) as referring to the flowing down of the blood of Israel's enemies who were crushed between cliffs; the noun אשד is consequently connected with the verb שטף, 'to flow'. For Jerome, on the other hand, אשד signifies – as shown above – the cliffs of the ravines at the Arnon that shall incline themselves.

Despite these differences, yet, the Targum can give an important clue as to what Num 21:15<sub>Vg.</sub> is all about. For it is reasonable to assume that the cliffs (אשד) inclining themselves in the

<sup>27</sup> Translation: M.E.; based on the Aramaic text of *Targum Neofiti to the Pentateuch* (CAL Targums), Hebrew Union College, Logos Research Edition 2005.

<sup>28</sup> In TgJ the enemies mentioned are not Amorites but Moabites.

rendering of Jerome are no other than the “mountains” (טוריה) in the Targum converging by divine command to crush the enemies and to provide at the same time a way for Israel over the deep gorges. Against this background, though, it would also be easy to understand why a miracle at the Arnon, which consists of the cliffs inclining themselves, should be comparable to the famous miracle at the Sea of Reeds: In both cases Israel is challenged by a combination of two problems – a deadly threat by its enemies, be it the Pharaoh or the Amorites, and a topographical obstacle that is difficult to overcome, be it a sea or a ravine – that are solved in one single divine act as in both cases the annihilation of Israel’s enemies simultaneously opens a unconventional path to overcome the topographical obstacle.

It thus seems plausible to assume that Jerome, in his translation of Num 21:14-15a, not only knows and presupposes a Rabbinic interpretation of the passage, but also considers it so much self-evident that he saw no need for any explanation – for example in form of a gloss<sup>29</sup> – to illustrate, what really happened, when cliffs inclined themselves.

At the same time, though, it should be noted that Jerome clearly differs from the Targum with regard to the second half of Num 21:15 as the Targum renders Num 21:15aR<sub>1</sub>-aR<sub>2</sub> HT in the following way:

And they went to the place of Lechawwat, the city, that did not join their counsel und that was saved.

The targum here offers, in some sense, a counter-narrative to the miracle reported earlier by referring to the example of the city of *Lechawwat* (לחווט) or *Lehajjat* (לחיית) – it corresponds to Ar (ער) mentioned in the Hebrew Text (cf. Num 21:15aR<sub>1</sub>HT) in all of the Targum tradition (including the TO)<sup>30</sup> – which did not join the conspiracy of Israel’s enemies and was therefore saved from annihilation. Based on Num 21:15aR<sub>2</sub>, then, this city is located close to the border of Moab. In the Vulgate, however, Num 21:15aR<sub>1</sub>-15aR<sub>2</sub> HT is consistently linked to the tilting of the cliffs (cf. v. 15a), so that the locational references in these phrases ultimately insinuate the geographic extent of the miracle rather than invoking the targumic *Lechawwat*-tradition.

Besides this variant of the narrative of Israel’s salvation at the Arnon, which is represented by TgJ, TgN and FrgTg, the rabbinic tradition also formed a slightly different variant of the very same story, which is to be found in the Targum PsJ, as well as in some *midrashim* (NumR 19:25; Tan Chuqqat 20) and in the *gemara* of Talmud Bavli (bBer 54ab). This narrative variant focuses on two lepers bearing the names Et and Hev<sup>31</sup> who, because of their leprosy, have to walk at some distance behind the end (ףסו 32) of the camp. They see the blood of the enemies gushing out of the rocks and can thus afterwards testify to the miracle that the rest of the people of Israel would have failed to notice. The miracle itself, however, is described in the same way as in the parallel tradition.

<sup>29</sup> On the use of glosses in the Vulgate cf. Kraus, Matthew. “Hieronymus und die klassische Glossentradition”, *Vulgata in Dialogue* 5 (2021) 1-4

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Seebass. *Numeri*, 332.

<sup>31</sup> The words אַתְּ-וְהֵב in Num 21:14b thus are interpreted as the (proper) names of the protagonists newly introduced into the story: Et (אַת) and (I) Hev (וְהֵב).

<sup>32</sup> The second place name of Num 21:14bHT, סוּפָה, here is echoed in the information that Et and Hev – as lepers – had to walk at the end (ףסו) of Israel’s camp.

In summary, Jerome presents a very accurate and literal translation of Num 21:14-15 which at no point gives any hint of (significant) textual-critical variants in Jerome's *Vorlage*. Thus, if he translated Num 21:14-15 in a different wording than modern translators would choose, the reason is not that he had before him a different text than we do, but because his preconception, shaped, among other things, by a self-evident knowledge of the rabbinic traditions presented above, led him to understand and to translate the poem in the way he did.

### 3. "From this place a well appeared to them" (Num 21:16-20)

In addition to the analysis of Num 21:14-15 above, the following section will provide a look at Num 21:16-20 and its rendering in the Vulgate.

#### 3.1 Journey resumed – Num 21:16-20 in the Hebrew Bible

<sup>16a</sup>And from there to a well (בארה) – <sup>16b</sup>it is the well <sup>16bR</sup>of which JJ (has) said to Moses: "<sup>16c</sup>Assemble the people (אסף את־העם) <sup>16d</sup>and I shall give them water (ואתנה להם מים)" <sup>17a</sup>Then Israel sang this song: "<sup>17b</sup>Come up, o well, <sup>17c</sup>call out on it! <sup>18a</sup>(O) well, <sup>18aR1</sup>that dug leaders, <sup>18aR2</sup>that excavated nobles of the people with a rod, with their staffs." <sup>18b</sup>And from the wilderness (וממדבר) (to) Mattana <sup>19a</sup>and from Mattana (to) Nachaliel <sup>19b</sup>and from Nachaliel (to) Bamot <sup>20a</sup>and from Bamot (to) the valley <sup>20aR</sup>that is in the field of Moab, <sup>20b</sup>(to) the head of the Pisga; <sup>20b</sup>and this is overlooking the face of Jeschimon.<sup>33</sup>

In the Hebrew Text, the section Num 21:16-20 opens with the elliptical sentence Num 21:16a, which continues the account of Israel's wanderings (cf. Num 21:11-13) interrupted in Num 21:13.<sup>34</sup> So, the adverbial מִשָּׁם ('from there') in this context refers to the Arnon River, the place of Israel's antecedent encampment, which the people reached in Num 21:13b and whose significance is reflected in Num 21:13c.14-15<sub>MT</sub>. The destination of this journey, however, is a "well" (cf. בארה) described more specifically in Num 21:16b-d, which Israel praises in a song noted in Num 21:17-18a<sub>R2</sub>.<sup>35</sup> This song, introduced by the narrative voice in Num 21:17a, is to be divided into two sections. The first one is made up by the sentences Num 21:17bc with two appellative speech acts, first the request to the well to go up (Num 21:17b) and second the request to Israel (i.e. a self-invitation) to praise the well (Num 21:17c). The second part of the song, though, are the sentences Num 21:18a-a<sub>R2</sub>, which unfold a poetic portrayal of the well that was dug out by the nobles and leaders of Israel.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, Num 21:18b-20 resumes the itinerary, i.e. the account of the various stages of Israel's wanderings through the regions east of the Dead Sea, specifically naming the stations following

<sup>33</sup> Translation: M.E.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Ashley. *Numbers*, 412-413; Levine. *Numbers*, 95.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Ashley. *Numbers*, 413; Frevel. "Understanding", 140.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Ashley. *Numbers*, 413; Levine. *Numbers*, 96-98.

the well.<sup>37</sup> Striking in this context is a minor incongruity as v.18b mentions a departure “from the wilderness” (ממדבר), while in v.16a the corresponding place of encampment is referred to as the “well” (באר).<sup>38</sup>

### 3.2 “O well, come up with us...” – Num 21:16-20 in the Vulgate

	Num 21:16-20 (Vg.)	Num 21:16-20 (HT)	
16a	ex eo loco apparuit puteus	ומשמ בארה	16a
		הוא הבאר	16b
16aR	super quo locutus est Dominus ad Mosen	אשר אמר יהוה למשה	16bR
16b	congrega populum	אסף את־העם	16c
16c	et dabo ei aquam	ואתנה להם מים:	16d
17a	tunc cecinit Israhel carmen istud	אז ישיר ישראל את־השירה הזאת	17a
17b	ascendat puteus	עלי באר	17b
17c	concinebant	ענוד־לה:	17c
18a	puteus	באר	18a
18aR <sub>1</sub>	quem foderunt principes	חפרוה שרים	18aR <sub>1</sub>
18aR <sub>2</sub>	et paraverunt duces multitudinis in datore legis et in baculis suis	כרוה נדיבי העם במחקק במשענתם	18aR <sub>2</sub>
18b	de solitudine Matthana	וממדבר מתנה:	18b
19	de Matthana Nahalihel de Nahalihel in Bamoth	וממתנה נחליאל ומנחליאל במות:	19a 19b
20a	de Bamoth vallis est in regione Moab	ומבמות הגיא	20a
	in vertice Phasga	אשר־בשדה מואב	20aR
20aR	et quod respicit contra desertum <sup>39</sup>	ראש הפסגה ונשקפה על־פני הישימן:	20a 20b

The table shows that the Vulgate deviates from the Hebrew Text in several interesting instances. Two of these issues will be discussed in more detail below, first the rendering of Num 21:16a and second the extent of the song introduced by Num 21:17a. The translation of Num 21:17b-18aR<sub>2</sub> HT in the Vulgate (and the LXX), however, will be left out of consideration.

As for Num 21:16a, the first observation is that Jerome completes the elliptical sentence of the Hebrew Text into a verbal sentence, but strikingly not by adding a verb like ‘to set out’, but by adding the verb *apparuit* (‘appeared’). At the same time, the noun *puteus* (‘well’) – being the equivalent of the Hebrew בארה – does not appear as an object (or a directional indication), but as the subject of the sentence. Consequently, in the Vulgate, the main topic of the sentence is the appearing of a well – an appearing that is further circumscribed by the adverbial phrase *ex eo loco*, ‘from this place’ which is the equivalent of ומשמ in the Hebrew text. Yet the mentioned

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Ashley. *Numbers*, 414-415.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Seebass. *Numeri*, 332.

<sup>39</sup> <sup>16</sup>And from this place the well appeared, of which the Lord has spoken to Moses: “Assemble the people and I shall give him water.” <sup>17</sup>Then Israel sung this song: “The well may come up” – they used to sing (together) – <sup>18</sup>“the well, that princes dug and (that) prepared leaders of the multitudes by the lawgiver and by their staffs, <sup>19</sup>from the wasteland (to) Matthana, from Matthana (to) Nahalihel, from Nahalihel near Bamoh.” <sup>20</sup>From Bamoth there is a valley in the region of Moab, near the peak of the Phasga, which looks out against the wilderness. (Num 21:16-20<sub>Vg</sub>) Translation: M.E.

“locus” that the well appears from, is apparently the Arnon, the river(valley) discussed in detail in Num 21:13-15.

Furthermore, it is remarkable that Num 21:16b has no equivalent in the Vulgate, with the result that the relative clause Num 21:16b<sub>HT</sub> immediately follows Num 21:16a, an omission most plausibly to be explained by stylistic reasons.

Ultimately, in Num 21:16b<sub>R-d<sub>HT</sub></sub> resp. Num 21:16a<sub>R-c<sub>Vg.</sub></sub>, the Vulgate offers an obviously very literal rendering of the Hebrew Text, which nonetheless is quite remarkable. For, after all, the wording chosen in v.16b, *congrega populum*, echoes a phrase from Num 20:8. In Num 20:8 – being part of the narrative in Num 20:1-13 – we read the divine command to Moses to gather the people of Israel, who were at this time suffering and complaining from the lack of water in the wilderness, and then to command a (certain) rock to give water in front of the people gathered.

Num 20:8	Num 21:16
קח את־המטה ׀ והקהל את־העדה ׀ אתה ואהרן אחיך ׀ ודברתם אל־הסלע ׀ לעיניהם ׀ ונתן מימיו	אסף את־העם ׀ ואתנה להם מים
tolle virgam et ׀ congrega populum ׀ tu et Aaron frater tuus et loquimini ad petram coram eis et illa dabit aquam.	congrega populum ׀ et dabo ei aquam

As can be seen from the table, in the Hebrew Text there is no significant keyword reference between Num 20:8b (והקהל את העדה) and Num 21:16<sub>CHT</sub> (אסף את העם) – quite in contrast to the Vulgate, where Num 21:16c takes up the exact wording of Num 20:8. If this finding is judged not as a mere coincidence but as an intentionally set reference – an argument for this will emerge from the analysis of the Jewish exegetical tradition below – this would have significant consequences for the interpretation of Num 21:16b<sub>c<sub>Vg.</sub></sub>. For it would then be appropriate to read these sentences not as a rendering of a speech of God given at the Arnon on the occasion of the appearance of the well, but as a reference back to (i.e. a reminder of) the speech of God in Num 20:8. In this case, however, the well which is the topic in Num 21:16 would be identical with the spring mentioned in Num 21:2-13, that provided Israel with water and that now appears again (cf. *apparuit*) and is therefore praised by Israel? As in Num 21:14-15, we again find a rendering of the Hebrew Text in the Vulgate that at first seems quite curious, but which (again) may prove to be very reasonable against the background of the rabbinic interpretations of the passage, as will be shown below.

As for the rendering of the LXX, it provides a translation that follows the Hebrew text very closely. So, Num 21:16a, where the LXX even reproduces the elliptical phrase of the HT, is rendered as an itinerary notice that records the next stage of Israel's wanderings, just as it does in the HT. And also in the speech of God quoted in Num 21:16b-d, only one deviation is noteworthy, the infinitive πειν ('to drink') in Num 21:16d<sub>LXX</sub>, which has no parallel in the HT (nor in the Vulgate) and points to a purpose for the water given.<sup>40</sup> Thus it is to be noted that the peculiarities of Jerome's rendering of Num 21:16 cannot be explained by an influence of the LXX – nor by the influence of the “*recentiores*”, of which in Num 21:16 no readings deviating from the *Old Greek* are attested.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Ziegert. *Diaspora*, 226.

Before looking at the Jewish-Rabbinic interpretations of Num 21:16(-20), a second particular feature of the Vulgate Text shall be discussed. It is the extent of the song that Israel sings to the well: In the Hebrew Text it comprises the verses Num 21:17b-18aR<sub>2</sub>. In Num 21:18b, however, the itinerary resumes by depicting a further wandering stage after the one named in Num 21:16a – “from the wilderness to Mattana” (ממדבר מתנה) – followed by further ones in Num 21:19-20.

In the Vulgate, however, these verses are to be evaluated quite differently. Although Num 21:18b<sub>HT</sub> is translated literally by *de solitudine Matthana* (‘from the wasteland to Matthana’), this sentence can hardly be connected to Num 21:16a in the Vulgate – in contrast to the Hebrew Text, where Num 21:18b and Num 21:16a are formulated in exact parallel, so that v.18b is easily recognizable as a continuation of the itinerary. Num 21:16a<sub>Vg.</sub>, after all, deals with the appearance of the well and not with Israel’s wanderings (as Num 21:18b[-20] does). Further, it is unlikely that the phrase *de solitudine Matthana* in Num 21:18b is to be read as the prelude to a new unit (and thus as an elliptical clause), since Jerome – commonly able to deal freely with peculiarities of Hebrew style<sup>41</sup> – would otherwise presumably have set a verbal clause (with a verb for ‘to set out’) in sound Latin. This, however, is not the case here, so that it would seem appropriate, *not* to read the expression *de solitudine Matthana* just as Num 21:19 as independent sentences (or Num 21:18b-19 as a passage on its own), but to connect them syntactically to the preceding lines of Num 21:17-18. A connection to the first line of the song, Num 21:17a (*ascendat puteus*) seems most plausible, so that Num 21:17b.18b-19 – *ascendat puteus (...) de solitudine Matthana de Matthana Nahalihel de Nahalihel in Bamoth* – is to be read as one single sentence in which Israel poetically invites the well to ascend with them on their way up through the landscapes east of the Dead Sea.

Num 21:18a-aR<sub>2</sub>, on the other hand, is to be interpreted as an explanatory parenthetical insertion that characterizes the well in further detail. Finally, Num 21:20 offers a detailed geographical circumscription of the last place mentioned in v.19, Bamoth, and is thus more plausibly attributed to the narrative voice than to the song text. Thus, it can be stated that in the Vulgate (other than in the HT) the song on the well includes Num 21:17-19. What is exciting here is that the perplexing “mobility” imputed to the well in the call to go up with Israel (Num 21:17b), already became tangible in Num 21:16, where the Latin translation suggests that the spring of water that was given in the wilderness (cf. Num 20:2-13) (*re*)appears – and therefore must also have moved and followed Israel.

A closer look at the LXX reveals that also in this case Jerome’s rendering is not inspired by the Old Greek (or by the “*recentiores*”, where no text deviating from the LXX has been preserved). So, the LXX perceives Num 21:18b-20<sub>HT</sub> as an itinerary, even corrects the place of departure mentioned in Num 21:18b<sub>HT</sub>, ממדבר (‘from the wilderness’), to καὶ ἀπὸ φρέατος (‘and from the well’) to harmonize it with Num 21:16a, where this well was named as destination of Israel’s last foregoing wandering.<sup>42</sup> Thus, it may be concluded that influences from the Greek translations (again) cannot explain the peculiarities of the Vulgate’s rendering.

<sup>41</sup> For a concise account of Jerome’s translation techniques cf. e.g. Kraus. *Exegetical Traditions*, 43-60 (esp. 45-49; 58-60).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Ashley. *Numbers*, 407 (note 8); Seebass. *Numeri*, 332; Ziegert. *Diaspora*, 228.



In summary, Jerome seems to interpret the Hebrew Text of Num 21:16-20 as implying that the well mentioned in Num 21:16, which is identical with the spring of Num 20:2-13, ascends, i.e. moves (actively), and is called upon by Israel in the song which – for Jerome – comprises the text of Num 21:17-19, to accompany the people on their onward journeys towards the Promised Land.

### 3.3 “Miriam’s Well” reappeared – Num 21:16-20 in Rabbinic traditions

The peculiar idea of a “moving well”, which is apparent in Jerome’s text, cannot be derived from the Greek translations, but, on the other hand, it does find interesting parallels in the Targumim from the Land of Israel (and in rabbinic Midrashim). This Jewish tradition on Num 21:16-20 shall be presented in the following on the basis of the Targum Neofiti, which offers the following “translation” of Num 21:16-20:

<sup>16</sup>And from there was given to them a well – it was the well of which JJ said to Aaron and to Moses: “Assemble the people and I will give them water.”

<sup>17</sup>Then Israel praised this song of praise: “Come up, o well”, they were singing to it – and it came up – <sup>18</sup>o well, that the great ones of the world from the beginning, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, dug, the wise ones of the people, the 70 excelled wise men, they completed it, the scholars of Israel, Moses and Aaron, they measured it with their staves. And from the wilderness it was given to them as a present (מתנה).

<sup>19</sup>And after the well had been given to them as a present, it again used to be for them (חזרת למהווי להון) like strong rivers. And after it became like strong rivers, it again used to ascend (חזרת למהווי סלקה) with them to the head of the mountains und it descended with them to the depth of the valley.

<sup>20</sup>And after it was ascending with them to the heads of the high mountains und descended with them to the depth of the valley, it was hidden from them in the valley, that was at the borders of the Moabites, the head of the height – and behold it was looking out till Bet Jeshimot. (Num 21:16-20<sub>TgN</sub>)<sup>43</sup>

The TgN does not present the well as *actively* going up in Num 21:16 (as the Vulgate does), but instead it characterizes it as being given (or returned) to Israel – as a gift or present (מתנה), as Num 21:18 adds. Num 21:19<sub>TgN</sub> now implies that the well, after being given to Israel, *again* (cf. חזרת) turns into an abundant stream supplying Israel with water in the wilderness – and that it (*again*) accompanies Israel on all their journeys, over mountains and through deep valleys, hereby actually becoming mobile. So here, as in the Vulgate, we find the idea of a “moving well”, which in the targum echoes the rabbinic tradition of the “Well of Miriam”. The latter assumes that Israel is given a spring of water shortly after its Exodus from Egypt (cf. Num 17:1-8), which from then on is wandering through the wilderness together with the people, but disappears after Miriam’s death (Num 20:1). Another miracle is needed (cf. Num 20:2-13) to return it to the people, and finally the Well of Miriam apparently disappears one more time at the Arnon – and it returns again, as TgN states (cf. Num 21:16-20<sub>TgN</sub>).<sup>44</sup> What remains unclear in the Targum, however,

<sup>43</sup> Translation: M.E.; based on the Aramaic text of *Targum Neofiti to the Pentateuch* (CAL Targums), Hebrew Union College, Logos Research Edition 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Herzka; Morgenstern. *Bamidbar*, 236 (note 9); 253 (note 30); Seebass. *Numeri*, 281; 333. Cf. also bTaan 9a; Sifre Devarim 305.4.



are the reasons and circumstances that led to the well's (second) disappearance at the Arnon. These can be seen, for example, in the Midrash Tanchuma Chuqqat 20.1 which attests to the very same tradition. Here we first find the interpretation of Num 21:13-15 presented above, according to which Israel is saved from an (Amorite) ambush at the Arnon by God pushing the walls of the Arnon Gorge together, crushing the enemies hidden in the caves, and giving Israel a convenient way beyond the depths of the valleys. Israel, though, does not at all realize this miracle...

...so the well descended to these caves (in which the enemies had been hiding) and brought out skulls, and arms, and legs without any number. Thus when Israel returned to seek the well, they saw it shining like the moon in the midst of the wadi, as it brought out limbs over limbs. And from where (do we know) that the well informed [Israel] about them? As it is stated: "*And the slope of the wadies...* (Num 21:15)" and so on... "*And from there to the well* (Num 21:16)". But was [the well] with them from there on? Had it not been with them from the beginning of the forty years [i.e. since the miracle in Refidim, cf. Ex 17:1-8]? It is simply that it had gone down to inform about the miracles? And Israel was standing on top of the wadies and said to it: "Come up, O well, sing to it... (Num 21:17)." (Tan Chuqqat 20)<sup>45</sup>

Differences between the rendering of the Vulgate one the one hand and the Targum Neofiti (resp. also the rest of the targumic tradition) or the midrash on the other hand are not to be neglected. For example, the midrash and the targumim always mention the well as being given, and not as (actively) ascending (as the Vulgate does), and then ("actually") accompanying Israel across mountains and valleys – and not just being told to do so (as in the Vulgate). Nevertheless, it can be clearly stated that in the end all of the peculiarities of Jerome's translation of Num 21:16-20 (and also the assumptions implicit in it) can be completely and properly explained if one assumes that he knows the tradition of the "Fountain of Miriam" (even though it will not be possible to determine the exact shape and wording he was familiar with): In Num 21:16c-d Jerome refers to Num 20:2-13, so he seems to assume that the well that appears at the Arnon has a connection with the water-giving rock of the wilderness. In Num 21:16a he has the well *ascending* from the Arnon valley, probably because he is aware that it previously had *descended* into the ravines, perhaps to wash the bodies of the crushed enemies out of the caves, and lastly, in his translation of the "Song of the Well" (v.17ff), he elaborates on the Rabbinic tradition of the "wandering well" that in the end will accompany Israel also through the valleys and over the mountains east of the Dead Sea, till the border of the Land of Israel.

In conclusion, Num 21:14-15.16-20 can serve as a wonderful example of a biblical text that causes problems for its interpreters or translators in many ways. Jerome solves these – as he obviously considers the Greek translations and recensions as not being very helpful – by drawing extensively on *Jewish*-Rabbinic exegetical traditions on Num 21:14-15.16-20, which find strong resonance in his translation, thereby becoming an essential part of a *Christian* translation of the Bible and immediately influencing *Christian* exegesis.

<sup>45</sup> Translation: M.E.; For the Hebrew Text cf. Buber, Shlomo (ed.). Midrash Tanchuma. Vol. 2, Wilna 1885 (reprint Jerusalem 1964). [www.sefaria.org/Midrash\\_Tanchuma%2C\\_Chukat.20.1?lang=bi&with=About&lang2=en](http://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Tanchuma%2C_Chukat.20.1?lang=bi&with=About&lang2=en) (31.10.2022).