TEXTUAL CRITICISM AND RABBINIC LITERATURE:
THE CASE OF THE TARGUM OF THE SONG OF SONGS

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I sometimes wonder whether we are witnessing the demise of textual criticism, at least in the field of early rabbinic literature. Classical textual criticism has had a brief and fitful life in rabbinics, and such life as its has had seems about to be snuffed out. Many involved today in publishing rabbinic literature do not appear to find the traditional procedures of textual criticism of much relevance to the material with which they have chosen to work. 1 If classical textual criticism is, indeed, about to pass away, its passing should not go unremarked, for if it is largely inapplicable to rabbinic literature then this is a highly significant fact which has something important to tell us about the nature and transmission of rabbinic texts.

Textual criticism in its classical form was one of the greatest achievements of the philological and historical approach to ancient texts. It offered a way of getting behind the received texts, of stripping off the accretions and distortions of centuries, and of restoring a work to the state in which it left the hands of its original author. The motivation for this research was not always simply academic: the purer, more authentic text recovered by philology and textual criticism could be used as a potent weapon to challenge the political status quo, since contemporary institutions, such as the Church, sometimes had a vested interest in the received texts. But textual criticism also served disinterested scholarly ends: it restored many a garbled and corrupt passage to its pristine, or near pristine,

1 By far the most important and sophisticated attempts at present to publish early rabbinic texts are the various projects of Peter Schäfer and his collaborators in Berlin. See, for example, Peter Schäfer and Hans-Jürgen Becker (eds), Synopse zum Talmud Yerushalmi, Band 1-5 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1991-92). As their titles imply these magnificent volumes adopt a synoptic approach. This provides scholars with the means to create their own editions, but it does not do the job for them. Even in classical studies textual criticism is in something of a crisis. Note the brilliant essay by Giorgio Pasquali, Storia della tradizione e critica del testo, second edition (Florence: Le Monnier, 1952), which attacks the highly rigorous and 'scientific' views of Paul Maas, Textkritik, first edition (Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1927; English translation: Textual criticism [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958]). For later work which continues the attack, see Sebastiano Timpanaro, Die Entstehung der Lachmannschen Methode, second edition (Hamburg: Helmut Buske, 1971).
condition; it laid a firm foundation for the study of language; and it encouraged scholars to reflect on the history of the transmission and the reception of texts.²

It was no accident that the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, which inaugurated the modern study of Judaism, was born in a period when the text-critical and philological method was reaching classical formulation in the work of J.J. Griesbach (1745–1812) and, especially, Karl Lachmann (1793–1851).³ The influence of classical scholarship on the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* is well documented. Zunz, for example, attended the lectures of F.A. Wolf and August Boeckh in Berlin and consciously transferred their methods to the study of Jewish literature.⁴ It is hardly surprising, then, that in due course attempts were made to apply classical textual criticism to the editing of early rabbinic literature. The editions of *Bereshit rabba* by Theodor and Albeck, of the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael* by Horowitz and Rabin, of *Sifrei* by Finkelstein, and of *Wayyiqra rabba* by Margaliot, to greater or lesser degree, espouse the canons of classical textual criticism. Even the massive œuvre of Solomon Buber is fundamentally classical in its orientation.⁵ Many of these works were regarded in their day as significant scholarly achievements. Why, then, is there a general feeling now that they are unsatisfactory? Why have their underlying principles been challenged, or ignored? There are a number of reasons.

The first is practical. The classical way of presenting an edition in the form of text above and critical apparatus below does not do justice to the complexity of the transmission of many rabbinic texts. A clear picture of the raw state of the tradition does not readily emerge from a neatly presented classical edition. If the text offered is eclectic, or embodies conjectural emendations, it may be extremely difficult for the user to establish what is actually attested in the manuscripts, and what has originated with the editor. The situation may be less problematic if the editor has chosen to present one manuscript 'warts and all' as his base text, but even this procedure is not totally problem-free, since it gives to the base manuscript an overwhelming predominance within the tradition.


³ See Reynolds and Wilson, *Scribes and scholars*, 209–11; Kenny, *The classical text*, 100–4. Griesbach never seems to get the credit in the history of textual criticism which he deserves.


⁵ Details of these editions may be found in H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to Talmud and Midrash* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991).
The integrity of the other text-witnesses is ignored; they are exploded, and only fragments of them are cited in the *apparatus criticus*. The skills of the textual critic should be part of the basic competence of every scholar of antiquity — whether philologist, historian or literary critic — whose work depends on written sources. It is not sufficient simply to accept a printed edition, however authoritative. All scholars will, from time to time, have to perform their own textual criticism on crucial pieces of written evidence, and for this purpose they will require the tradition to be presented in a user-friendly form. Most convenient, of course, are synoptic editions which set out the manuscripts in full side by side. Such synopses, however, become impractical (and over-expensive) if the material is large. The need to compress the information will arise — a need which the annotation systems of classical textual criticism valiantly attempted to address. There is no ideal way to present editions of ancient texts. Each text has to be assessed on its own merits in the light of the tradition which lies behind it. In general, however, it is fair to say that classical text-critical editions suffer from over-compression and too much editorial intrusion, while synoptic editions suffer from over-diffusion, coupled with an abnegation of the traditional critical responsibilities of the editor.

There is a second, more theoretical, reason why classical editions of rabbinic literature are often unsatisfactory. Put very simply it is this: the paradigm which lies behind classical textual criticism is of questionable validity when applied to rabbinic texts. Classical textual criticism works best on authored texts. Its aim is to find its way back along a *stemma codicum* to an original which, hopefully, will be close to, or identical with, the text composed by the original author — be he Plato, or Euripides, or Plutarch. Classical textual criticism also works best when it has to cope with problems of mechanical transmission, in which differences between manuscripts can be attributed to accidental miscopying. But both these conditions are of dubious relevance in the field of rabbinic literature. There is undeniable evidence that, save in the case of very special canonic texts (such as Scripture), Jewish scribes did not feel themselves obliged slavishly to copy what was before them. A proportion of our surviving copies of rabbinic texts were probably produced by scholars for their own private use (that is to say, they were not professional copies destined for the open book market), and as a result the copyists intervened freely to improve and adapt the originals to serve their personal needs and interests. The original was in no sense sacrosanct. Moreover, the concept of an ‘authored text’ is itself highly problematic. Many of our rabbinic texts are not authored texts in the way that, for example, Plato’s *Phaedo* is an authored text. They are compilations which lack a strong redactional identity. By nature they are open-ended and invite modification. And they were transmitted in a culture which saw
them as part of a larger tradition of Oral Torah which is undergoing a continuous process of unfolding to meet changing historical circumstances. Even if we were dealing with authored texts, it is hard to see how classical textual criticism can handle a situation (by no means unknown) in which an author issued several versions of his work over a period of time. In this case many significant variants within the tradition might well go back to the author himself. Attempts to recover the definitive version of such a work would be highly speculative. How could we tell which version (if any) was intended by the author as definitive and final? The actual conditions under which texts were created and transmitted in antiquity in many cases suggest that an original may prove to be unrecoverable, if not, in fact, chimerical.

In all fairness it should be said that classical textual criticism was not unaware of these problems. They are alluded to in the standard manuals.⁶ But in practice they are largely ignored. The simple model of an original corrupted by miscopying is so seductively elegant and has produced such spectacularly convincing results in certain paradigmatic cases⁷ that the writers of the manuals tend to ignore the fact that it applies only to certain texts, which represent merely a fraction of the literature which has been handed down from antiquity. Classical textual criticism has tended to function in an ideal world divorced from the messiness of history. It is astonishing still to find manuals of textual criticism which say little or nothing about palaeography, and which give the impression that the actual conditions under which ancient texts were created and transmitted – the nature of authorship in antiquity, ancient attitudes towards texts and sources, the means and methods of copying texts, the character of the ancient book trade, and so forth – are of little concern to the abstract business of textual criticism.⁸

There is a further problem. Classical textual criticism is out of joint with the spirit of the times. It involves an historical approach to the interpretation of texts. The recovery of the original is regarded

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⁶ See, for example, Martin L. West, *Textual criticism and editorial technique* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1973), 16: 'Some kinds of text were always subject to alteration. Commentaries, lexic and other works of a grammatical nature were rightly regarded as collections to be pruned, adapted or added to, rather than as sacrosanct literary entities. When the rewriting becomes more than superficial, or when rearrangement is involved, one must speak of a new recension of the work, if not of a new work altogether. .'.

⁷ As a result of the work of Lachmann, the transmission of Lucretius has served as an influential paradigm, but Lucretius is an altogether exceptional case.

as important because the original expresses most exactly the intentions of the author, and it is authorial intention which is seen as decisive for the meaning of the text. However, the dominant modes of textual analysis today, which are increasingly affecting the study of rabbinic literature, are deeply ahistorical. The meaning of a text is not equated with the intention of the original author, and attempts to discover that intention are regarded as intensely problematic, if not as futile. More emphasis is now placed on the response of the reader, and on the creative uses to which a text can be, and has been, put. Critics engage holistically with the final form of the text which lies before them, and are little concerned with the history of its transmission, or with its sources. Modern analysis can be applied successfully to any form of the text which comes to hand. And there is little incentive to recover the original when the clever reader can invest even palpable errors with profound meaning. It is hardly surprising that in this intellectual climate, which harks back in some ways to pre-modern attitudes, the painstaking work of the textual critic no longer commands the respect that once it did, but tends to be dismissed as antiquarianism which has little to contribute to the understanding of literature.

Has, then, textual criticism proved to be a dead-end as far as rabbinic literature is concerned? Are its principles too remote from this kind of text? I would suggest not. In some rabbinic texts the attempt to recover a lost original may indeed be futile, or misconceived, but it would be wrong to assume from the outset that this is always the case. Each work should be considered on its own merits. There may be instances even in the field of early rabbinic literature where one can talk meaningfully of an author. And even when an original cannot be recovered at a global level (because the transmission is too fluid), it can often be recovered for localized areas of text. Mistakes can be eliminated from individual passages, texts ‘cleaned up’ and earlier states of the tradition reconstructed. All this requires the traditional skills of the textual critic. Textual criticism remains fundamental to the study of rabbinic literature, and any analysis – even broad-brush literary analysis – which ignores it is flawed. There is no virtue in basing a literary-critical reading of a text on gross and demonstrable errors. It remains true, however, that textual criticism should be applied sensitively to rabbinic texts. There are special factors to be borne in mind, and ways should be found of presenting these texts which take account of their literary character, the scribal culture in which they were copied and the immense complexity of their transmission history.

I shall try to exemplify some of these general assertions from one particular rabbinic text – the Targum of the Song of Songs. The Targum of the Song of Songs is extant, in whole or in part, in at least sixty manuscripts from all over the Jewish world, making it one of the best attested and most popular texts of the Jewish Middle
Ages. This large body of manuscripts falls into two groups: a Western group, comprising manuscripts written in North Africa and Europe, and a Yemenite group, comprising manuscripts of Yemenite provenance.

The Yemenite manuscripts have to date received the lion’s share of attention, and form the basis of R.H. Melamed’s pioneering text of *Targum shir ha-shirim* first published in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* in 1920–22.⁹ As Melamed correctly argues the Yemenite manuscripts form a textually distinctive group and appear to be all descended from a common exemplar. This is easily demonstrated by their agreements in error, for example where they display the same omissions through *homoeoteleuta*.

By way of contrast the Western group of manuscripts has been rather neglected. For the Western text Melamed simply relies on Lagarde, who prints, with minor emendations, the text of the first Bomberg Rabbinic Bible.¹⁰ The Bomberg text is an excellent representative of the Western tradition, but it cannot have the status of a printed manuscript, and it must always be suspect till its textual authority is clarified. All the manuscripts of the Western group which I have studied so far have a strong family likeness and are probably descended from a common exemplar, though one occasionally finds in them ‘Yemenite’ readings, just as ‘Western’ readings appear from time to time in the Yemenite manuscripts.

In his introduction Melamed provides a detailed comparison of the Western and Yemenite traditions. He demonstrates clearly that there are numerous and substantial differences between the Western and Yemenite texts, and that each group represents a distinct recension of the Targum of the Song of Songs. Some of the differences are systematic. For example, Western manuscripts have a penchant for analytical *di* where the Yemenite manuscripts have enclitic *d*. And Western manuscripts prefer fuller and more sonorous titles. At first sight the Targum of the Song of Songs conforms to the widely assumed norm for rabbinic literature: it presents so fluid a tradition that any attempt to recover a lost original is doomed to failure. At this point most scholars are inclined to give up, and thankfully to wash their hands of any serious attempt to apply to the text the principles of textual criticism. However, on closer inspection order begins to emerge from the chaos. It becomes clear that many of the differences, even

⁹ ‘The Targum to Canticles according to six Yemen Mss. compared with the “Textus Receptus” (ed. de Lagarde)’, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, NS 10 (1920), 377–410; 11 (1921), 1–20; 12 (1922), 57–117. Also reprinted as a separate volume.

the substantial differences, can be reduced to miscopying. In fact, it has been perfectly obvious to most who have worked seriously on this Targum (including Melamed himself) that the Western text is far superior to the Yemenite. The bulk of the variants are Yemenite transcriptional errors. An original can be plausibly reconstructed. The Western tradition (if we ignore some late and superficial scribal styling and polishing) takes us much further back in the tradition, much closer to the lost archetype of the bifurcated transmission.

How should an edition of the Targum of the Song of Songs be presented so as to do justice to its textual transmission? I would suggest that an adequate procedure would be to print in full for each verse a representative manuscript of the two main recensions exactly as it stands, and to provide for each manuscript a satellite apparatus giving the variants from the other manuscripts belonging to the same recension. This will give a fair synopsis of the raw tradition. But we should also give for each verse a reconstructed text which would attempt to recover as far as possible the lost original from which the two surviving recensions descend. This reconstruction will be to some degree speculative and controversial: the text-critical, philological, exegetical and historical arguments which support it should be set out fully in an accompanying commentary. It is this final step which scholars seem so reluctant to take. Yet it should be taken. Anything short of a reconstructed text is simply a mechanical collation and cannot be regarded strictly speaking as an edition. Melamed, for all his hard work, went only a third of the way towards the goal, and did not in any proper sense of the word produce an edition of Targum shir ha-shirim.

Two contrasting verses will serve to illustrate the sort of analysis that is required. In each case the Western recension will be given according to Codex Urbinas 1 of the Vatican Library, and the Yemenite recension according to MS Or. 1302 of the British Library, London.

(1) SONG OF SONGS 4:9

*Masoretic Text (thereafter MT)*

לבככדניא אהוביה כלות
לבככדניא לבאתי (מאמצת) מייינוגיצ
במאתח הנרק מעריצ

*Targum: Western Recension*

כבר עת לו ללב רחבתי כתותין כנשתת דישרת (הל) דמהתי ServletException
כבר עת לו ללבとなって ודניך הזרת אתא מראק Maher מברני סדרתיות
וכרח ממלכי דביתי יהודה דהוה ייחוב כלילה דמלכותה על יואריית.
The precise meaning of the Hebrew *libbavtini* and of *'anaq missawweronayikh* has occasioned some discussion among the commentators, but the text of the MT is broadly speaking unproblematic and its general sense in no real doubt. The old Jewish Publication Society of America version renders: ‘Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my bride; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one bead of thy necklace.’

How does the Targum deal with this? Let us look first at the Western text.

1. MT’s *libbavtini* is clearly paraphrased first as *qebia’ al luḥ libbi rehimtikh* = ‘fixed upon the tablet of my heart is love for you’. Note that, in the light of the MT, which seems to speak of the lover’s affection for the bride, we should take the suffix on the Targum’s *rehimtikh* as objective, not subjective: the Targumist is speaking here of God’s love for Israel, not Israel’s love for God. The second occurrence of *libbavtini* in the MT is paraphrased in the Targum as *qebia’ al luḥ libbi hibbat zutar deveinaikh* = ‘fixed upon the tablet of my heart is affection for the least among you’. The substitution of the synonym *hibbeta* for *rehimta* on the second occasion is typical of this Targumist’s careful, rather self-conscious style.

2. The Targum renders MT’s ‘my sister, bride’ as ‘my sister, the Assembly of Israel, who is likened to a chaste bride’. As elsewhere in Targum Song of Songs, the obvious Aramaic *kalleta* for the Hebrew *kallah* is avoided, and the more recherché Greek loanword *ninfi = nymphē* used instead.

3. Following aggadic tradition the Targumist takes MT’s ‘eyes’ as ‘the eyes of the community’, the Sanhedrin (see Targum Song of Songs 4:1 and Song of Songs rabba 4.1.2). There may be a gematria behind the identification: *'ayin = 70*. He may also at the same time have employed an *'al tiqrei* and read *'enayikh* as *'aniyyayikh* = ‘your humble ones’. This yields the reading of the Hebrew: ‘you have ravished my heart with one of your humble ones as much as with one of your “eyes”’. The thought then becomes that God’s love extends to all Israel, to the righteous humble as well as to kings and scholars. Note that in the Aramaic of the Targum

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wehu ṣaddiqa is best taken as a circumstantial clause, and kehad min rabbanei sanhedrin construed as equivalent to keḥibbat had min rabbanei sanhedrin.

(4) It is not clear how precisely the Targumist has read MT’s ‘anaq missawweronayikh. I suspect he has taken it as meaning ‘a coil from one of your necklaces’: ‘anaq in the sense of ‘chain’ or ‘necklace’ can be supported from talmudic usage. The ‘necklace’ suggested to him the royal diadem, the mark of kingship. The Hebrew text speaks of ‘necklaces’, in the plural, hence there must be a reference to ‘kings’ in the plural. The Targumist thus introduces a second category of grandee – ‘the kings of the House of Judah’ – in contrast with the ‘humble’ of Israel.

To summarize: we may represent the Western recension’s reading of the biblical text with the following translation:

Hebrew
You have ravished my heart, O my sister, bride;
You have ravished my heart with one of your eyes
With one coil from your necklaces.

Targum
‘Fixed upon the tablet of my heart is love for you, O my Sister, Assembly of Israel, who is compared to a chaste bride. Fixed upon the tablet of my heart is as much affection for the least among you, if he is righteous, as for one of the chiefs of the Sanhedrin, or for one of the kings of the House of Judah, on whose neck is placed the diadem of kingship.’

The reading is totally coherent, and displays careful analysis by the Targumist of all the elements of the original text in their proper sequence.

When we turn, however, to the Yemenite recension, the picture changes: the text there is confused and towards the end untranslatable. Comparing the two texts Melamed reached the conclusion: ‘The text of L[agarde] . . . seems better preserved, although it is not beyond possibility that the shorter text of Y[emen] may have the original reading’. This is too timid by half. A proper analysis of the text makes it perfectly obvious that the Western text is original and that the Yemenite text has arisen essentially through a series of transcriptional accidents. The corruption probably began with homoeoarcton: further back in the

12 Marcus Jastrow, A dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the midrashic literature (London: Luzac,1903), 1096b.
13 Melamed, Jewish Quarterly Review, 10 (1920), 394.
Yemenite tradition a copyist’s eye jumped from the first qebia’ ’al luah libbi to the second, resulting in the omission of the whole of the first sentence of the Targum. The copyist himself, or someone else, noticed the omission and added some of the missing words in the margin. These were subsequently incorporated into the text at the wrong place, thus giving rise to our present garbled Targum. MS Or. 1302 contains a further simple corruption: deveinaikh, as found in Codex Urbinas 1, has been misread, by a common graphical confusion, as rabbanaikh.

Even the best manuscripts may contain errors. What is striking here is that all the Yemenite manuscripts agree in error with MS Or. 1302, and all the Western manuscripts agree essentially with Codex Urbinas 1. This is a particularly striking example of the superiority of the Western text over the Yemenite, but it is by no means an isolated case. Time and time again in Targum shir ha-shirim the Western text is demonstrably better than the Yemenite. It is closer to the original. It represents an earlier form of the text than the Yemenite, a form from which the present Yemenite tradition evolved.

It is important for our present purposes to note that the process by which the Yemenite text evolved in this case is essentially mechanical, transcriptional and accidental. There are, as we noted earlier, examples of recensional differences between the Western and Yemenite forms of the Targum of the Song of Songs, but they are of a superficial, stylistic nature, and do not represent any serious attempt to ‘re-create’ the text. There is only one case of substantial recensional reworking, to which I shall turn in a moment. The vast majority of the differences between the Western and Yemenite manuscripts can be explained by the classical theories of text-transmission. The manuscripts can be arranged in a plausible stemma codicum and derived from a common source. The reconstructed text for this verse would be more or less identical to the Western recension. Nothing emerges from our detailed analysis to suggest that there is any serious corruption at this point in the Western text.

(1) SONG OF SONGS 5:14

**Masoretic Text**

 venez הלח תַּכּ

מעלאים הפרשים

מעלי משות טוב

מעלמ זכריים
The Targum to Song of Songs 5:14 is the one clear case, which I mentioned earlier, of substantial recensional activity in the text of the Targum. Textual criticism can never be divorced from exegesis, so before we deal with the text-critical problems of this verse we must first tackle a formidable exegetical problem.

This problem concerns the precise item of the high priest’s vestments to which the Targumist is alluding. The answer appears to be simple: he is referring to the breastplate on which, according to Ex. 28:15-21, twelve precious stones were arranged, each of which was inscribed with the name of one of the tribes of Israel. The names of the stones in the Targum are unquestionably derived from this biblical tradition. However, the Targumist in fact speaks not of the high priest’s breastplate (hoshen) but of the sis kelila dequdsha dedahava = ‘the golden diadem of the holy crown’. The sis appears to have been a flower-shaped ornament which was fastened by a blue lace to the front of the high priest’s ‘turban’ (misnefet) or ‘holy crown’ (nezer ha-qodesh) (Ex. 28:36; 39:30; Lev. 8:9). It is on this quite different ornament that the Targumist says the stones with the names of the tribes are set. Since there is no obvious biblical basis for this curious assertion it is tempting to assume that the Targumist has simply made a mistake: he has confused the sis with the hoshen. However, there may be more to the matter than meets the eye. He appears to repeat his ‘mistake’ at Song of Songs 7:2, ‘And their sons, the issue of their loins, are as comely as the jewels
that are fixed in the holy crown, which Bezaleel the craftsman made for Aaron the [high] priest.'

The biblical account of the high priest's head-dress seems to indicate a rather simple turban to which a diadem was tied at the front. Postbiblical tradition, however, envisages a much more elaborate construction. Josephus (Antiquities 3.7.6 [172-77]) claims that the high priest's headgear comprised seven crowns, each of which was modelled on a particular flower. A similar tradition may be reflected in the very fragmentary Dead Sea text, 11QNew Jerusalem (PAM 43,996). Moreover, the liturgical poet Yosei ben Yosei in his piyyut Azkir gevurot, line 181, states that Moses 'fastened and attached by a thong a golden šās surrounded by buds of pearls/precious stones to the [high priest's] holy crown' (šās paz muqqaf šišei peninim dibbeq wehibber behut lenezer ha-qedushah). The 'buds of pearls/precious stones' are not biblical.

There may be a deep significance in the Targumist's replicating of the stones inscribed with the names of the tribes on the šās. According to the explicit testimony of Scripture the šās was inscribed with the words 'Holy to the Lord' (Exodus 28:36; 39:30). This fact seems to have caught the attention of the magicians. A spell written on a šās was regarded as being particularly efficacious. The Targumist may have pictured the šās as consisting of a flower-shaped plate of gold on which was engraved the inscription 'Holy to the Lord', surrounded by inlaid precious stones on which were written the names of the tribes of Israel. This suggestion is, of course, highly speculative, but we should not jump too readily to the conclusion that the Targumist has made a crass mistake. His manifest general learning, and his intense interest in priestly lore make such a conclusion unlikely. From a purely text-critical point of view this particular case is interesting for two reasons. First, the fact that such a highly distinctive tradition is found both here at Song of Songs 5:14 and again at 7:2 is a small indication of the unitary authorship of this Targum. Second, the fact that no copyist seems to have attempted to correct the Targumist's rather obvious 'mistake' illustrates how little concerned the copyists were at this point to 'improve' the text.

The Western and Yemenite forms of the text agree at the beginning and end of the verse, but differ substantially in the middle, on two counts: (a) the order in which they list the tribes; and (b) the names which they give to the precious stones. The

conclusion is unavoidable that here the Yemenite and Western text-traditions represent two quite different recensions of this verse. In the Yemenite tradition the order of the tribes is given according to the order of birth, as implied in the narrative of Gen. 29-30 and 35 (save that Issachar and Naphtali are, possibly accidentally, switched round). The Western tradition follows precisely the order of the tribes given in Codex Neofiti 1 and the Fragmentary Targum to Ex. 28:17-20. This classified according to mothers, in the order: (a) sons of Leah (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun); (b) sons of Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid (Dan, Naphtali); (c) sons of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid (Gad, Asher); (d) sons of Rachel (Joseph, Benjamin). This listing does not actually occur anywhere in the Bible. It is, however, very close to the order of the names in Ex. 1:1-5, save that the Targumic order, more logically, puts Benjamin at the end (as the youngest and as Joseph's full brother).

The Yemenite tradition originally offered a list of stones identical (with the slight exception of *barqan* for *bareqef*) to that found in the Hebrew text of Ex. 28:17-20. This list has suffered contamination in all the extant Yemenite manuscripts from Western-type readings, resulting sometimes in the displacement of the original Yemenite reading (e.g. ‘*ahmar*), sometimes in conflate readings (e.g. *nofekh kohali* the first word is ‘Yemenite’, the second ‘Western’), and sometimes in the insertion of the ‘Western’ readings in the margins and between the lines (see Melamed's apparatus). By way of contrast the Western tradition offered contemporary identifications for the biblical names, though in one case the extant Western manuscripts have a conflate text – *barqan ze'afran* – in which the modern identification (*ze'afran*) is juxtaposed with the biblical/‘Yemenite’ name (*barqan*).

There is no way in which these two forms of the text at Song of Songs 5:14 can be derived mechanically from each other, or from a common archetype. They represent conscious editorial intervention: someone deliberately rearranged the order of the tribal names and, probably at the same time, changed the names of the precious stones. It is difficult to say which of the two recensions has priority. The case can be argued both ways. At first sight it is tempting to suppose that originally the stones were listed simply with their biblical names and that later someone provided ‘contemporary’ identifications. A number of the equivalents are patently Arabic in form: note e.g. ‘*ahmar*; others appear to be Persian (e.g. *ze'afran*), though in these instances the Persian words occur also as loanwords in Arabic. The identifications are, therefore, late and post-Islamic. This line of reasoning suggests that at this point the Western text is secondary to the Yemenite. But this would be contrary to the general textual picture in Targum Song of Songs. The possibility should, therefore, be considered that the Western equivalents were primary and were later replaced with biblical
names. Such ‘biblicizing’ (which would also explain the biblical re-ordering of the names) is not unknown in the transmission of the Targumim. We can be certain that the Western recension with its identifications was extant by the eleventh century, since it is quoted verbatim by Tobias ben Eliezer in his Leqah tov.

The double recension of Targum Song of Songs at 5:14 is the exception that proves the rule. Apart from this one verse the text of the Targum is highly stable and shows no signs of substantial reworking or re-creation. This stability is rather unexpected. The Targum, as we noted, was highly popular: it circulated widely in the Levant, the Yemen, North Africa and Europe, and it was enthusiastically copied and recopied over a long period of time. Why did different recensions not arise? Why is there no Targum sheni or Targum shelishi to Song of Songs?

The answer, I would suggest, lies in the peculiar nature of the text itself. To a degree that is most unusual in classic rabbinic literature the Targum of the Song of Songs constitutes a fully finished, closed composition. It offers a coherent reading of the Song of Songs which imposes on the book a consistent and well reasoned interpretation from its beginning to its end. Its exegetical schema is so distinctive and so complete that it is reasonable to postulate behind the Targum a single, creative mind. Copyists found it difficult to tamper with this schema. As a result there is only one Targum of the Song of Songs, which has come down to us substantially as it left the hands of its original author. We could add, or subtract, or rework material in Shir ha-shirim rabba, in Midrash shir ha-shirim, or in Aggadat shir ha-shirim and no-one would probably notice. The same cannot be said of Targum shir ha-shirim. The perfection of the Targumist’s work left only two realistic possibilities – either to accept his reading in toto; or to start again and to try and create a new historical reading of the text. Rashi effectively chose the former option; Saadya and Ibn Ezra the latter, though they do not succeed in working out their exegetical argument in the same convincing detail.

By way of conclusion I would like to make two observations, pertinent to the problem of the transmission of rabbinic texts, which arise out of the foregoing detailed analysis of Targum shir ha-shirim.

The first is in the nature of a warning against generalization. It has become increasingly clear in recent decades that many classic rabbinic texts do not constitute authored works in the modern sense of authorship. Moreover, those who transmitted the classic texts did not always feel bound simply to copy what was before them. At times they felt free to reshape the texts to suit their own ends. In the light of this it is imperative that we should consider carefully the tradition-history of the texts on which we build our history of Judaism in late antiquity. Those texts have come down to us in medieval copies, and there is a real possibility that they have been
substantially re-created in the Middle Ages. But we must not automatically assume that such re-creation took place, or that the Middle Ages form a dyke which cannot be crossed. Each text must be assessed on its merits. I have argued that in the case of one work, the Targum of the Song of Songs, the text appears to have remained remarkably stable over time, and we have every reason to believe that the original text of late antiquity has survived its medieval transmission very well.

The second observation is in the nature of a plea for the continuing relevance of the basic canons of classical textual criticism to the study of rabbinic literature. In the present intellectual climate the attitude may be fostered of treating every extant form of a text as autonomous, as being as good as any other form: all we need to do is publish the various forms of a text. To publish the manuscripts just as they are is a valuable service to scholarship, but it is only the beginning of the task. We must also try to explain how the manuscripts are related, and how the differences between them arose. Using traditional philological and redaction-critical methods, we must try and reconstruct the story of the transmission. The work may be difficult and involve subjectivity, but it remains a fundamental element of our critical responsibilities.