

The origin of the name Sepharad: a new interpretation¹

Abstract

Since the period of Roman Antiquity, after the Peshitta of the 2nd century, Spanish Jews gave the name Sepharad to the Iberian Peninsula. The descendants of Iberian Jews refer to themselves as Sephardim and identify Spain as Sepharad in modern Hebrew.

The name Sepharad appears for the first time as a biblical place-name of uncertain location in the Book of Obadiah (1: 20). There are, however, Persian inscriptions that refer to two places called Sparda: one an area in Media and the other Sardis, the ancient capital of Lydia, in Asia Minor. Furthermore, some scholars defend the theory that the biblical Sepharad could be situated in Libya. The most widely accepted hypothesis is that it could have been Sardis. But the connection between the name Sepharad referring to the Iberian Peninsula and the Sepharad that appears in the Bible is not clear; neither has the idea that Sepharad could be identified with Sardis been satisfactorily explained. Finally, even in the case that we accept that Sepharad was Sardis, it is difficult to explain the relation that there could have been between the Iberian Peninsula and the ancient capital of Lydia.

In this paper I want to shed some light on all these unresolved questions.

Introduction

The question of the source of the name Sepharad and its referring to the Iberian Peninsula has not been satisfactorily explained and scholars have speculated widely on this matter (s. Koehler-Baumgartner 1995³: 725; Reicke-Rost 1966: 1772). In order to analyse the problem properly, it is important to make a clear distinction between the different meanings of the name and the places where it appears. The name Sepharad is used in three different ways: *a*) as the name that Spanish Jews gave to the Iberian Peninsula, *b*) as a biblical place-name of uncertain location, and *c*) as three ancient place-names, one in Media, the other in Lydia (both transcribed as *Sparda* by the Persian inscriptions), and the third in Lydia.

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The connections between these three meanings are, as far I can see, not satisfactorily explained and that is why the source of the name Sepharad referring to the Iberian Peninsula is unclear. In order to shed some light on this problem, in this paper I will give a separate analysis of these three different things. Only then will it be possible to explain the connection between the name Sepharad of the Iberian Peninsula, the biblical Sepharad and the Sepharad of Media, Libya and Lydia, to finally to arrive at my conclusions.

1. The name Sepharad as the Jewish Iberian peninsula

According to Jewish tradition, Sepharad (Hbr. ספָרַד) is the name that corresponds to the Iberian Peninsula. The descendants of Iberian Jews refer to themselves as Sephardim and in modern Hebrew Spain is still identified as Sepharad (s. Neiman 1963). Although it is true that strictly speaking, Sepharad should be identified not as the whole Iberian Peninsula, but only as the Muslim region of al-Andalus including territories of Spain and Portugal, and excluding, among others, the Christian territories of the Crown of Aragon and Catalonia, and since it is not the purpose of this paper to take part in this discussion, I will use the term Sepharad as a conventional and neutral name, regardless of whether or not it refers to the whole Iberian Peninsula.

The name Sepharad referring to Hispania appears for the first time in the Targumim, the Jewish Aramaic translations of and commentaries on the Bible (s. Cathcart-Gordon 1989; Churgin 1983; Gordon 1994). The Aramaic translators of the Torah translated the biblical term Sepharad (Obadiah 1: 20) into Hispania. It seems that the *Targum Jonathan*, the official Aramaic translation of the prophetic books written by Jonathan ben Uzziel, is the first work where this Aramaic translation appears (s. Cathcart-Gordon 1989: 103; Churgin 1983; Gordon 1994). According to Sperber's edition (1992: 434), Sefarad is translated as *spmy*' (*Tg.*), '*spmy*' (Mss), i.e., *Ispania*, also Hispania. Although there is no consensus on the date of this work, there is no doubt that it was written during the first centuries A.D. The preponderance of evidence points to the period after A.D. 70 as that when significant work of the composition of *Targum to the Prophets* was carried out, although it had an oral prehistory and occasional features of *Targum to the Minor Prophets* seem to be more satisfactorily explained on the basis of a pre-A.D. 70 date of origin (s. Cathcart-Gordon 1989: 16-18). Sepharad is also translated as Hispania ('*spny*', i.e. *Ispania*) in the Peshitta (ed. Gelston 1987), the standard version of the Syriac Christian Bible which was probably written in the 2nd

century A.D. The Old Testament of the Peshitta was translated directly from Hebrew (s. Weitzman 2005 and Jenner 1980).

From that moment on it is usual to find in the post-biblical Hebrew literature the name Sepharad referring to the Iberian Peninsula. It appears in the works of Sephardic Jews such as Isaac Abrabanel (15th-16th century A.D.) and Solomon ibn Verga (15th-16th centuries A.D.), and is also referred to by the Spanish Christian authorities (s. Reyre 1995).

According to archaeology, paleography and modern scholars, the presence of the Jews in Sepharad must be dated after the destruction of the second temple of Jerusalem, during the government of Titus (70 A.D.) (s. Wigoder 1993: 1376), and not in the time of the destruction of the first Temple by Nebuchadnezzar (6th century B.C.), as claimed by Jewish tradition (s. Reyre 1995: 31). It is important to retain this date in order to come to a conclusion.

2. *The name Sepharad in the Bible*

Sepharad also appears in the Bible as a place-name of uncertain location, although it has been identified by some scholars as the ancient Sardis or some region in Media or even a city in Libya (s. below). It is a *hapax legomenon*, being mentioned only once in the Old Testament, in the Book of Obadiah 1:20:

Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (ed. Alt 1997⁵):

וְגֵלְתֵי הַחַלְהָנָה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־כָּנְעֲנִים עַד־צָרְפַת
וְגֵלְתֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם אֲשֶׁר בְּסֶפְרַד יִרְשׁוּ אֶת עָרֵי הַנֶּגֶב

English Standard Version (2001):

The exiles of this host of the people of Israel shall possess the land of the Canaanites as far as Zarephath, and the exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad shall possess the cities of Negeb.

Containing only 21 verses, the Book of Obadiah is the shortest in the Bible. It is an oracle concerning the divine judgment against Edom for its violent actions towards its brother nation, Judah, during an invasion (vv. 1-16) and the future restoration of Israel (vv. 17-21). In the Jewish and Christian traditions, its authorship is attributed to a

prophet called Obadiah (which means ‘servant of the Lord’), who lived during the Assyrian period.

The date of this book’s composition is controversial among scholars due to the lack of information about Obadiah and his historical context. The only way to determine the date of its writing is therefore by examining the text itself. According to the prophecy, Edom must be punished for its failure to defend its brother nation, Judah, when it was being attacked. Such an act could have been committed by the Edomites in two historical contexts: when Jerusalem was invaded by Philistines and Arabs (853-841 B.C.) during the reign of Jeroboam (recorded in 2 Kings 8:20-22 and 2 Chronicles 21:8-20) and when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, attacked Jerusalem, which led to the Babylonian exile of Israel (recorded in Psalm 137), during the years 605-586 B.C.

If we take the earlier period as the true historical context, then Obadiah would have been a contemporary of the prophet Elisha, and on the contrary, if we consider the second period as valid, then Obadiah would be considered a contemporary of Jeremiah. According to the *communis opinio* however, the later period seems to be the best candidate in determining a date for the composition of the text. By comparing the prophecy of Obadiah with those of Jeremiah (25: 15-17, 21, 27-29; 49:7-22) and Ezekiel (25:12-14; 35:1-15), it seems reasonable to think that this happened during the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army. Scholars have paid special attention to the parallelism between Obadiah 1-9 and Jeremiah 49:7-22. The passage in Jeremiah dates from the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim (604 B.C.), and Obadiah seems to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (586 B.C.).

It is more likely that Obadiah and Jeremiah together were drawing on a common source unknown to us than that Jeremiah was drawing on the previous writings of Obadiah as his source. According to this, v. 20 seems to refer to the time of the Babylonian captivity (when the Jews of the ancient Kingdom of Judah were held captive in Babylon), and to the Jewish Diaspora that followed the destruction of Jerusalem in 607 B.C. Nevertheless, there are scholars who support both dates and even some who support another, different to both major dates presented here. Sellin (1929: 276) and Gray (1953/4: 54), for instance, suggest that the passage including v. 20 could be an interpolation and conclude that, in any case, the *terminus ante quem* was 190 B.C., by which time Ben Sira attests the fixation of the prophetic canon. That is why, in

my opinion, any date proposed for the composition of the prophecy of Obadiah should be considered with caution.

According to Obadiah 20, there seem to be two different kinds of exiled Jews: *a*) those deported from Israel that shall possess Canaan as far North as Şarephath, located between Tyre and Sidon, and *b*) the deportees of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, who are in Sepharad and will possess the cities of the Negeb, which, in the period of the Hebrew monarchy, had been the territory of the Amalekites in the interior and the Philistines towards the coast (s. Gray 1953/4: 53). The prophet is, according to this passage, assuming that all of Palestine which had been actually occupied by Israel and Judah should be re-occupied. Thus the re-occupation of the North and the South is related to the deportation from the Northern and Southern kingdoms respectively. In any case, it is important to note that some habitants of Jerusalem lived in Sepharad at that time.

The question now is to identify this place-name, which is currently unknown. Indeed, one might have expected a reference to Babylon as the domicile of Jewish exiles, but instead a mysterious Sepharad is mentioned. The various identifications assigned to the place underscore the insufficiency of present knowledge. The ancient translation of the Bible into ancient Greek (the Septuagint) translates directly from Hebrew (ספרת) but using the word Εφραθα (ed. Rahlfs 1935):

καὶ τῆς μετοικεσίας ἢ ἀρχὴ αὐτῆ · τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραὴλ γῆ τῶν Χανααίων
ἕως Ζαρεπτων καὶ ἡ μετοικεσία Ἱερουσαλημ ἕως Εφραθα, καὶ κληρονομήσουσιν
τὰς πόλεις τοῦ Ναγεβ.

English translation (Sir Brenton 1851):

‘And this *shall be* the domain of the captivity of the children of Israel, the land of the Chananites as far as Sarepta; and the captives of Jerusalem *shall inherit* as far as Ephratha; they shall inherit the cities of the south’.

In spite of the appearance of Εφραθα, others manuscripts show other two variants: Σεφραθα (G^A) and Σφραθα (G^Q) (s. Rudolph 1931: 226). Since Εφραθα (אפרתה) is the ancient name of Bethlehem (Gn. 35: 19, 48:7; Rt. 4: 11; Mi 5: 2), and it seems like a *lectio facilior*, it has no connection in the context of Obadiah, and consequently, in my opinion, the other variants Σεφραθα and Σφραθα should be

considered as closer to the original. In fact, they are a transliteration of the Hebrew סַפְרָד and neither name appears anywhere in *ThLG*. This hesitation in the rendering of the place-name, as well as the transliteration itself, suggests, in my opinion, that the ancient Greek translator did not identify hbr. סַפְרָד with Sardis, the capital of Lydia, which in Greek was Σαρδεῖς (as testified already by archaic lyric poetry, s. Sappho, *Fragmenta* 98a, l. 11; Anacreon, *Epigrammata* 11, 47, 2; Alcman, *Fragmenta* 16, 5, etc.), and furthermore, since no ancient place-name called Εφραθα, Σεφραθα or Σφραθα is documented in ancient Greek (Εφραθα appears only in the Septuagint), he probably did not identify this place-name with any real place and therefore decided to transliterate it directly from Hebrew (in case of Σεφραθα/Σφραθα).

Something similar happened with St. Jerome, who translated hbr. סַפְרָד as *Bosforus* (s. *Vulgate*, ed. Weber 1983³):

et transmigratio exercitus huius filiorum Israhel omnia Chanaenorum usque ad Sarapham et transmigratio Hierusalem quae in Bosforo est possidebit civitates austri.

Here the translation of *Bosforus* is presumably explained by a misunderstanding of the hbr. text בסַפְרָד: St. Jerome interpreted hbr. *bsfrd* as if all the consonants were a place-name, without taking into consideration that, in fact, *b* is the Hebrew preposition ‘in’. That is the reason why he identified *bsfrd* with Bosforus (s. Reicke-Rost 1966: 1772). However, it is also possible that Jerome followed an exegetical tradition passed on by his Jewish mentor (Allen 1976: 171).

In any case, it is important to mention that neither the Septuagint nor the Vulgate identify Sepharad with any of the four places that are usually identified with this place-name: Hispania, Sardis, the Sparda of Media and the Hesperides of Libya. Since the Greek translation is a transliteration and does not refer to any ancient Greek place-name and since the Latin translation is probably a misunderstanding (see above), we must obviously consider that neither the Septuagint nor the Vulgate can shed light on this problem and therefore they should not be taken into consideration when reaching our conclusions.

With regard to the localization of the biblical Sepharad, three different places have been proposed by modern researchers: one in Media (s. Schrader 1883²: 445), one in Libya (s. Gray 1953/4: 57ff.) and the third in Lydia (Kornfeld 1955: 180-86; Rudolph 1971: 315; Lipiński 1973: 368-370 and 1975: 153-161; Smolar & Aberbach 1989: 122;

Cathcart-Gordon 1989: 102), which is the most widely accepted among scholars. The first and third hypotheses are based on Persian, Aramaic and Assyrian inscriptions where the name 'Sparda' appears referring to the abovementioned ancient place-names. It is important to see to what extent these cities were important for the Jewish community.

3. *The Sepharad of Media*

Schrader (1883²: 445 ff.) suggested that סְפָרָד might be identified with the *Šuparda* mentioned in inscriptions of Sargon II of Assyria as a district in south-west Media, and this was accepted by Friedrich Delitzsch, Lenormant and G. A. Smith. People of the Northern kingdom were exiled to Media (2 Kings 17:6) and the assumption is that Judeans were too. But, as Gray observes, there is a phonetic discrepancy between the two names (in Hebrew it should be written שְפָרָד) and, as he admits, "it would be strange, indeed, that, when the writer wishes to refer in the broadest sense to the dispersion, he should have selected such a locality, which has been rescued from its native obscurity by Schrader's researches in the painstaking details of the Assyrian annals. Located in south-west Media this locality would hardly be the geographic limit of the Jewish Dispersion, on which grounds alone could it be admitted in Obadiah" (Gray 1953: 55). In my opinion, for these two reasons, the Sefarad that appears in Obadiah should be looked for in other places that bear better witness to a well-known ancient Jewish settlement.

4. *The Sefarad of Libya*

Gray (1953/4) proposed a southern location of *Sepharad*, following a geographic parallelism which he believed to be vital to the passage in Obadiah: whereas the Israelite exiles from Mesopotamia would re-occupy the North, the exiles from Judah that lived in Sefarad would occupy the Negeb. Thus, in Gray's view, the re-occupation of the North and the South is related to the deportation from the Northern and Southern kingdoms respectively. This parallelism would also be extended to the areas from which the deportees were to be restored, namely Mesopotamia, and Egypt in the case of the exiles from Judah.

Following Slouschz (1927: 69), Gray assumes that Sepharad in Obadiah is identical with *Hesperides*, in the vicinity of Benghazi, the ancient Berenice. According

to Josephus (*Contra Apionem* II, § 44), Jewish settlements in North Africa are attested to earlier than in Anatolia, so that the theory that סַפְרָד in Obadiah refers to a Jewish settlement in North Africa rather than in Asia Minor has, according to Gray, the merit of drawing upon explicit evidence of a Jewish presence at least one century nearer the period to which Obadiah ostensibly refers (Gray 1953/4: 57). But Gray also regrets that he cannot declare the antiquity of the Jewish settlement in Benghazi because he did not have the privilege of exploring it. Nevertheless, he cites the famous stele from Benghazi, which is probably to be dated at 13 B.C., and the presence of the ‘archons’ of the Jewish community that appear in it.

But Gray does not mention a fact that should not be neglected, that is, that the name Hesperides referred to this ancient city of Libya, which is also attested to for the first time as Euesperides (Herodotus *Historiae*, Book 4, section 171, l. 3, s. *ThLG*, s.v.). Furthermore, the parallelism in Obadiah that Gray uses in order to defend his hypothesis is not, in my opinion, compelling; on the contrary, it seems to be an *ad hoc* argument in order to defend his premise. Therefore, it would be better to search for another candidate for the biblical Sefarad, and the Sepharad of Lydia seems indeed to be the best candidate for the reasons that I will show below.

5. *The Sefarad of Lydia*

Sardis (Lidian *Šfar(i ?)*, *šfarda*- ‘inhabitant of Sardis’ and *šfardēti*- ‘of Sardis’ [s. Gusmani 1980, s.v.], Greek Σαρδεῖς, Hebrew-Aramaic סַפְרָד) was the capital city of the ancient Kingdom of Lydia (7th century B.C.). It is traditionally remembered as the city of the legendary rich king Croesus (560- c. 546 B.C.). In the 6th century B.C. Sardis was considered the “glittering” capital of Lydia, because a lot of gold was found in the sand of the river Paktolos, which demonstrates its important commercial relationship and accounts for its wealth. The temple of Artemis, on the banks of the Paktolos, was famous as a place of worship (s. Reicke-Rost 1966: 1670-1671).

Sardis was conquered by Cyrus the Great in 547 B.C. For the Persians, Lydia and its subsidiary Ionian Greek territories remained a key satrapy until the destructive military campaigns of Alexander III of Macedon in 334 B.C. (s. Balcer 1984: 33). Lydia was dominated indeed by different foreign rules until it was conquered by the Romans and incorporated into the Roman Empire in 133 B.C., when it became the administrative center of the Roman province of Lydia (s. Popko 2008: 109). A devastating earthquake in 17 B.C. completely destroyed Sardis and the city had to be

reconstructed by the Romans. Sardis enjoyed a long period of prosperity under Roman rule and again as part of the Byzantine Empire, until its destruction by the Mongols in 1402.

The first Jewish settlements in Sardis were supposedly in the 3rd century B.C., when the Seleucid King Antiochus III (223-187 B.C.) encouraged the Jews from Babylonia and other countries to inhabit the city of Sardis. However, an Aramaic inscription discovered at Daskyleion to the north of Sardis, and variously assigned by scholars to a date from c. 450 or c. 400 B.C., gives evidence of the presence of a rich Jewish family there (cfr. Lipiński 1973: 368-370 and Allen 1976: 171). In the 1st century A.D., Josephus mentions the Jews of Sardis, while referring to a decree of the year 50-49 B.C. of the Roman proquaestor Lucius Antonius: “Lucius Antonius, son of Marcus, proquaestor and propraetor, to the magistrates, council and people of Sardis, greeting. Jewish citizens of ours have come to me and pointed out that from the earliest times they have had an association of their own in accordance with their native laws and a place of their own, in which they decide their affairs and controversies with one another; and upon their request that it be permitted them to do these things, I decided that they might be maintained, and permitted them so to do.” (*Ant.*, XIV:10,17).² Among scholars there is a general consensus in interpreting “a place of their own” as a synagogue serving the local Jewish community of Sardis. Josephus also comments on the decree of the Roman proconsul Caius Norbanus Flaccus at the end of the 1st century B.C., who confirms the religious rights of the Jews of Sardis, including the right to send money to the Temple of Jerusalem (*Ant.*, XVI:6,6).

In 1962, during the archaeological excavations conducted by the Harvard-Cornell Sardis Expedition, the Synagogue of Sardis was discovered. The unearthing of the ruins confirmed the reputation of the site: since its discovery, the Synagogue of Sardis has been considered the most outstanding Jewish monument from Antiquity in the entire region of Asia Minor and the Aegean Sea. The excavations shed light on a building of impressive dimensions (120 meters long by 18 meters wide), with a capacity for approximately 1000 people, with mosaics on the floors, walls of marble and over eighty inscriptions including six fragments in Hebrew, the rest being in Greek. According to researchers, the synagogue should be considered as belonging to the 4th

² Josephus Flavius. *Josephus. Jewish Antiquities, Books XIV-XV*. English Translation by Ralph Marcus and Allen Wikgren, Loeb Classical Library, 1998, London.

century A.D. However, recently some scholars suggest a later date for the building of the synagogue, most probably in the 6th century A.D. (Magness 2005).

The Synagogue of Sardis was destroyed in 616, when the city was captured by the Sasanian Persians. It was never rebuilt and the Jewish community of Sardis ceased to exist.

In the Assyrian documents, Sardis, the capital of Lydia, is mentioned as Saparda, and the Lydians are mentioned as Saparda(j)a, from the name of the capital Sardis. The Persians took over this name in the form Spardā (Popko 2008: 110).

In a Lydian-Aramaic bilingual inscription from the Achaemenian period (probably to be dated in the tenth year of Artaxerxes I Longimanus, also from 455 B.C.) from Sardis, the Hebrew-Aramaic place-name of Sardis, ספרד, appears in lines 2 and (probably) 3 (s. Torrey 1917/8: 186 and 188):

1 ב 5 למיהשון שנת 10 ארתחששש מלכא
2 בספרד בירתא זנה סתונא ומערתא דרהת
3 אתרתא ופרבר זי על ספרד זנה פרברה אהר

Littmann's translation (s. Torrey 1918: 188):

1. *On the 5th of Marḥešwān of the 10th year of King Artaxerxes,*
2. *in the city of Sardis. This stele and the cavern [and] the funerary*
3. *couches (?) and the fore-court which is above Sardis (?), this its forecourt, [they are] the property...*

Torrey's translation (Torrey 1918: 190):

1. *On the 5th of Marḥešwān, in the 10th year of King Artaxerxes,*
2. *in the fortress Sardis. This is the stele and the tomb-cavern, the fire-pillar (?)*
3. *and the vestibule, which are above Sardis. This is the vestibule of the descendants...*

The Hebrew-Aramaic name of Sardis ספרד is in fact the same that appears in Obadiah, v. 20, where the Greek has Σεφραθα and Σφραθα (a later transliteration from Hebrew) and several corrupt variants (s. above and Torrey 1917/8: 187). The correct identification, made chiefly on the basis of the Persian cuneiform inscriptions, in three of which the district *Sparda* is not only located in Asia Minor, but also placed next to *Iauna*, the "Ionians" (s. Schrader 1883²: 446 f.), would never have been questioned if

the fact had been more widely recognized that the Hebrew prophets, when they speak of “exiles”, usually refer to voluntary emigrants (s. Torrey 1917/8: 187).

According to Torrey (1917/8: 186), the discovery of this Aramaic document in Sardis, almost within sight of the Aegean Sea, is an event of great interest and importance. Apart from the fact that it helped to establish the rudiments of Lydian grammar (s. Melchert 2004: 601), it shows that the Aramaic language penetrated Asia Minor, as other Aramaic inscriptions found in other regions of Asia Minor also corroborate. Furthermore, according to this scholar, the very fact of the text being bilingual is evidence that Aramaic was spoken in Sardis, as well as the parallel evidence of the Lycian Greek-Aramaic bilingual mortuary inscription from Limyra, also belonging to about this same period. According to Torrey, travel was much freer and commerce and emigration much more extensive in this early period than usually has been accepted by historians, and he claims that colonies of Jews were in all the principal cities of Asia Minor as early as the beginning of the Achaemenian rule (Torrey 1910: pp. 153, n. 23; pp. 293-97), and these were the “exiles” about whom the Old Testament prophets are constantly speaking; hence the allusion to Sardis in Obadiah 20 referred to above. It may be that the presence of Jews in Sardis contributed a great deal to the prosperity, richness and “shine” of the capital of Lydia (s. above).

According to this, we must conclude, as most scholars do, that the biblical Sepharad was probably Sardis, an identification suggested by the aforementioned Lydian-Aramaic bilingual inscription that refers to Sardis as *sprd* in Aramaic, which is the same word that appears in Obadiah 20. Compared with the Sepharad of Media and Lydia, Sardis is at least the hypothesis that best fits the biblical Sepharad.

From this conclusion we should make a second observation, that Tg. *spmy*’ (Mss. *’spmy*’, Syr. *’spny*’) for MT “Sepharad” are indeed incorrect. They have nevertheless been of transcendent importance in history, with the Iberian Peninsula being called Sepharad. The question now is to try to answer why the Jewish tradition identified biblical Sepharad with Hispania, because for the moment this question remains unanswered.

5. *The question of the identification of biblical Sepharad as Hispania*

As mentioned above, the name Sepharad is cited to refer to Hispania for the first time in the Targumim. The *Targum Jonathan*, the most recent one, should in fact be considered the source that allowed Jewish tradition to make the identification of the

biblical Sepharad with the Iberian Peninsula. However, the question of why the first Aramaic translators identify Sepharad as Hispania, remains unsolved.

It is the aim of this paper to offer a new explanation for this question. We have seen that Jerome translated *bsprd* as *Bosforus*, and that probably this translation was a misunderstanding because he interpreted the Hebrew preposition *b* ‘in’ as a part of a whole word *bsprd*, which, without vowels is almost identical with the Latin word *Bsfrs*. Furthermore, Jerome translated a Hebrew place-name into a Latin place-name that has no parallel into Hebrew.

In a similar manner, it could be thought that Jonathan ben Uzziel, the first Aramaic translator of the Bible, when trying to translate *b-sprd*, could have thought of the mythological Greek name *Hesperides* (Ἑσπερίδες). As is known, in Greek mythology, the Hesperides were nymphs who tended a garden in a far western corner of the world. Some authors located it near the Atlas Mountains in North Africa on the edge of the encircling Oceanus, although, according to the Sicilian Greek poet Stesichorus³ and the Greek geographer Strabo,⁴ the Hesperides were in Tartessos, in the south of the Iberian Peninsula. But what is important for the purpose of this paper, is that the Hesperides were located in a far western place of the known world and that this name was also used to refer not only to the nymphs that lived there, but also, in a broader sense, to the place itself. If we consider all this, it would not be difficult to see the reason why Jonathan ben Uzziel decided to translate Sepharad into Hispania. The connection between Sepharad and the name Hesperides curiously emerges when we eliminate the vowels of Ἑσπερίδες, because it shows almost the same consonants as the Hebrew place-name: *sprd* / ספרדס. This coincidence could have caused an unconscious confusion in the mind of the translator, who related the Hebrew Sepharad (ספרד) with Hesperides (σπερδς), and finally translated it into Hispania (*spmy*’).

As is known, the Greek word Hesperides, that appears for the first time in Hesiod (*Theogony* 215, s. *ThLG*, s.v.), has a clear Indo-European etymology. It is in fact a derivate of the substantive ἕσπερος m. ‘evening’, which is identical with Latin *vesper* < *pie. *we-k^wsp-er-o-* ‘to(wards) the night, evening’ (s. Beekes 2010: 470). Of course, the Indo-European origin of *Hesperides* means that the Aramaic translator simply made

³ s. Stesichorus, *Fragmenta. Supplementum lyrucis Graecis* (ed. Page) Oxford Clarendon Press, 1974, Fragment S8, line 3.

⁴ s. *Geographica* 3, 2, 13, 48 in *ThLG*, s.v.

use of it as a foreign loan word. It is very common, indeed, that the languages use loan-words in order to refer to place-names, and this case would not be an exception.

As a Greek loan word, *Hesperides* does not appear in Hebrew, as I have searched for it in the whole Corpus of the *Responsa Project* of Bar-Ilan University of Israel (version 14).⁵ Nevertheless, in *ThLG* Jewish authors who wrote in Greek do appear who used the Greek word Ἑσπερίδες or at least used some related words, such as ἑσπερίος ‘of the evening, west’, substantivized as ἑσπερία ‘the West, Hesperia’, etc.⁶ They appear in Philo Judaeus (1st century B.C.-1st century A.D.), who uses the word ἑσπερία;⁷ Josephus (1st century B.C.), who uses the word ἑσπερίον⁸ and Adamantius Judaeus (5th century A.D.), who uses the word ἑσπέριοι.⁹ These words appear also in the *Oracula Sybillina*:

-ἀφ’ ἑσπερίοιο θαλάσσης (*Oracula* 3, 176; *Oracula* 12, 5; *Oracula* 12, 14)

-καὶ ἑσπερίη πολυόλβος (*Oracula* 5, 5; *Oracula* 12, 5; *Oracula* 12, 14)

-ἀφ’ ἑσπερίης μέχρις ἡοῦς (*Oracula* 12, 128)

-ἀφ’ ἑσπερίης ἐπεγερθείς (*Oracula* 12, 257)

-ἦδ’ ἑσπερίης πολυόλβου (*Oracula* 14, 133)

As is known, the Sibylline Oracles are a collection of oracular utterances written in Greek hexameters and are a valuable source of information about classical mythology and early first millennium Gnostic, Jewish and Christian beliefs. They consist of 12 books (although some scholars prefer to divide them into 14 books) of various

⁵ I would like to thank Mr. Jordi Casals and Dr. Eulàlia Vernet, both from the Departament de Filologia Semítica of the Universitat de Barcelona for having helped me in using this program, which contains the following books: *Bible, Mishnah, Tosefta, Minor Tractates, Talmud Bavli* (Babylonian Talmud), *Talmud Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem Talmud, Vilna ed.), *Talmud Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem Talmud, Venice ed.), *Halachic Midrashim, Aggadic Midrashim, Zohar, Ge'onim, Bible Commentaries, Mishnah Commentaries, Rishonim on Talmud Bavli (Rif & Commentaries, Rosh & Commentaries), Acharonim on Talmud Bavli, Yerushalmi Commentaries, Halachah and Minhagim, Sifrei Mitzvot, Mussar and Jewish Thought, Rambam* (Maimonides' *Yad Ha-Chazakah*), *Commentaries on the Rambam, Tur, Tur Commentaries, Shulchan Aruch, Commentaries on Shulchan Aruch, Shulchan Aruch Related Poskim, Sifrei Chasidut, Sifrei Kelalim and Seder Ha-Dorot*, Responsa Literature: Medieval Scholars (Rishonim), 17th to 19th Centuries and 20th century, Talmudic Encyclopedia (s. <http://www.biu.ac.il/jh/Responsa/books.htm>).

⁶ In Greek and Roman antiquity, Hesperia was used in order to refer to Italy (Dion. Hal. *Ant.* 1, 35, 3; Verg. *Aen.* 1, 530), but also to Hispania (Sud. Ἰσπανία). Hispania appears also as *Hesperia ultima* in order to distinguish it from Italy in the Roman writers (Hor. *C.* 36, 4; Serv. *Aen.* 1, 530).

⁷ in *De Cherubim* 22,3; *de Somniis* (lib. i-ii) 175,7; *de vita Mosis* (lib. i-ii) 2,20,3; *In Flaccum* 45,6; *Legatio ad Gaium* 89,5.

⁸ in *Antiquitates Judaicae* 135,3; *loc. cit.* 15, 410; *loc. cit.* 15,411,4; *Contra Apionem* 65,2; *loc. cit.* 67,3; *De bello Judaico libri vii* 5,144,3; *loc. cit.* 6,151,2; *loc. cit.* 6,178; *loc. cit.* 6,221.

⁹ *Physiognomonica* 2, 31, 19; *loc. cit.* 2, 31, 22.

anonymous authorship, date and religious conception. They were given a final arrangement in the 6th century.

It is important for the purpose of this paper to mention that the oldest oracles seem to be books 3-5, which were composed partly by Jews in Alexandria. The third oracle seems to have been composed in the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor (ca. 186-145 B.C.). Books 1-2 may have been written by Christians, though again there may have been a Jewish original that was adapted to Christian purposes. The Sibylline Oracles are therefore a pastiche of Greek and Roman pagan mythology, especially from Homer and Hesiod, and Judeo-Christian legends.

Apart from these Jewish works where the words Hesperides or Hesperia are attested, there are some Greek writers that also used these place-names and who are important because at some moment of their lives they lived in Palestine, Syria or Alexandria and could have influenced the Jewish community, albeit indirectly: Eusebius of Caesarea (3^d-4th centuries A.D.);¹⁰ Iamblichus (4th century A.D.), the most representative neoplatonic philosopher from Syria;¹¹ Salaminius Hermias Sozomenus, historian of the Christian Church, born in Bethelia, Palestine, to a Christian family (5th century A.D.);¹² Procopius of Caesarea, Palestine, historian of Justinian I (6th century A.D.);¹³ Apollonius Rhodius, librarian of the Library of Alexandria (3rd century B.C.);¹⁴ Clemens Alexandrinus, who was teacher of Origenes and lived in Alexandria (2nd-3rd centuries A.D.);¹⁵ Vettius Valens, Hellenistic astrologer born in Antioch who lived in Alexandria (2nd century B.C.)¹⁶ and Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria (4th century A.D.).¹⁷

¹⁰ s. *Praeparatio evangelica* 2, 3, 23, 9; *loc. cit.* 4, 16, 18, 4; *loc. cit.* 13, 13, 64, 9; *Contra Hieroclem* 411, 2; *Vita Constantini* 25, 4.

¹¹ s. *Theologoumena arithmeticae* 24,3; *loc. cit.* 40, 22.

¹² s. *Historia ecclesiastica* 4, 16, 17, 2; *loc. cit.* 6, 6, 9, 5; *loc. cit.* 7, 22, 6, 5.

¹³ s. *De bellis* 3; *loc. cit.* 8, 5; *loc. cit.* 2, 3, 38, 3; *loc. cit.* 2, 3, 48, 2; *loc. cit.* 2, 10, 3, 2; *loc. cit.* 2, 16, 12, 2; *loc. cit.* 3, 3; *loc. cit.* 3, 4, 4; *loc. cit.* 3, 14; *loc. cit.* 3, 18, 3; *loc. cit.* 3, 2, 28, 6; *loc. cit.* 3, 2, 40; *loc. cit.* 3, 3, 4, 2; *loc. cit.* 3, 3, 10; *loc. cit.* 3, 6, 5, 2; *loc. cit.* 3, 7, 4, 2; *loc. cit.* 3, 7, 16, 2; *loc. cit.* 3, 7, 17, 4; *loc. cit.* 5, 2, 3; *loc. cit.* 5, 10, 3; *loc. cit.* 5, 15, 25, 3; *loc. cit.* 6, 7, 38, 3; *loc. cit.* 6, 22, 15, 2; *loc. cit.* 6, 22, 21, 3; *loc. cit.* 6, 29, 18, 2; *loc. cit.* 7, 33, 2; *loc. cit.* 8, 6, 2, 5; *Historia arcane* 12, 2; *loc. cit.* 19, 13, 2; *De aedificiis (lib. 1-6)* 2, 10, 8.

¹⁴ *Argonautica* Book 1, line 586; *loc. cit.* Book 1, line 915; *loc. cit.* Book 2, line 42; *loc. cit.* Book 3, line 311; *loc. cit.* Book 3, line 1129; *loc. cit.* Book 4, line 1399; *loc. cit.* Book 4, line 1406.

¹⁵ *Protrepticus* 2, 17, 2, 8; *Stromata* 5, 14, 133, 9, 2.

¹⁶ *Anthologiarum libri ix* 72, 21; *loc. cit.* 76,5; *loc. cit.* 119, 3; *loc. cit.* 280, 27.

¹⁷ *Apologia contra Arianos* 49, 2, 141; *Expositiones in Psalmos* 27, 325, 3.

Although the Greek place-names Hesperides or Hesperia are not attested to in the Hebrew literature, the fact that they were used by Jewish authors who wrote in Greek, as well as by Greek writers who lived in places with a significant resident community of Jews, implies that these words could have been perfectly well known by cultivated Jews, and, what is more important here, that Jonathan ben Uzziel could have had in mind this name when he translated the Bible into Aramaic. This affirmation is supported, indeed, by the presence of these words in the *Oracula Sybillina*, whose oldest hymns were written by Jews in Alexandria. According to my hypothesis, it would be not necessary to make any historical connection between the ancient Sardis of Lydia and the Iberian Peninsula, as Neimann suggested (1963: 128-132) some years ago. Furthermore, Neimann's hypothesis is untenable for other reasons. Firstly, he linked Tarraco with the Etruscans, something highly speculative because there is no linguistic evidence (apart from some etymological proposals such as a derivation of Tarraco from Tarchon), nor is there archaeological evidence (resulting more solid than some commercial objects), nor literary evidence (apart from the passage of Ausonius, the Late Latin writer who described Tarraco as "Tyrrhenica").¹⁸ Secondly, he directly related the Etruscans and the Etruscan language with ancient Anatolia, which is very controversial and has not yet been accepted by scholars. Finally, the affirmation that the 'camp de Sparta [sic]' (and not 'camp d'Esparta', as it must have been written in Catalan), mentioned by Neimann as a name of a place near Tarragona, should come directly from the Lydian name of Sardis is simply unacceptable, apart from the fact that I have not found this word as a place-name anywhere.

6. Conclusions

According to what I have set out in this paper, the biblical place-name Sepharad that appears only once in the book of Obadiah (20) has its most plausible candidate, as the *communis opinio* admits, in the ancient capital of Lydia, Sardis. This fact is corroborated by the Assyrian documents, where Sardis appears as Saparda and especially by a Lydian-Aramaic bilingual inscription from the Achaemenian period from Sardis, where the place-name of Sardis, ספרד, is attested to, also the same place-name that appears in Obadiah 20.

¹⁸ I would like to thank Dr. Adiego, Professor of Indo-European Linguistics at the Departament de Filologia Llatina of the Universitat de Barcelona, for his helpful comments on this matter.

For this reason, the identification of Sepharad as the Iberian Peninsula, although highly extended by Jewish tradition to this day, must be due to a misunderstanding that probably comes from the first translation of the Bible into Aramaic, from the *Targum Jonathan* written by Jonathan ben Uzziel, who translated Sepharad into *Ispamia* (Hispania). In this paper I have proposed an explanation for this misunderstanding that, as far as I have seen, has not been proposed before. I have suggested that the Jewish translator could have had in mind the Greek loan word *Hesperides* (Ἑσπερίδες), the nymphs who tend a garden located in a far western place of the known world.

The connection between Sepharad and the name Hesperides emerges curiously when we eliminate the vowels of Ἑσπερίδες, because it shows almost the same consonants as the Hebrew place-name: ספרד /σπρδ-ס (also *sprd*). A similar misinterpretation was made by St. Jerome, who translated בספרד as *Bosforus* (note here again that, if we omit the vowels, it shows almost the same consonants as the Hebrew: *Bsfr-s*). I have shown that, although the Greek loan word ‘Hesperides’ is not documented in the Hebrew literature, it and related words such as Hesperia ‘the west, Hesperia’ do appear in the Jewish authors who wrote in Greek, such as Philo, Josephus, Adamantius Juadeus and the *Oracula Sybillina*, whose oldest hymns were written by Jews in Alexandria. They appear also in Greek writers who lived in Palestine, Syria or Alexandria, and that could have influenced, albeit indirectly, the Jewish community or at least make the name Hesperides sound familiar to a Jewish writer. Therefore, according to this, Jonathan ben Uzziel could have had this name in mind when he translated the Bible into Aramaic.

The connection between the biblical Sepharad, Sardis and the Iberian Peninsula seems to be therefore satisfactorily explained, and without having to use forced historical, archaeological and linguistic explanations that directly link Sardis with Hispania.

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