



LET'S STUDY *ONKELOS*

A Guide for Rabbis, Teachers and Torah Students to Study and Teach the *Parashat Hashavua* through the Eyes of its Most Important Translator

By Stanley M. Wagner and Israel Drazin

Based on the five volume, *Onkelos on the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy), Understanding the Bible Text*, by Israel Drazin and Stanley M. Wagner, published by Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem/New York, 2006–2010.

STUDY GUIDE

KORACH (CHAPTER 16:1–18:32)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

Korach, a Levite, together with leading Reubenites and two hundred fifty other Israelites, stage a rebellion against the leadership of Moses and Aaron; Moses challenges them by suggesting a test to determine whom God desires as leaders of the people; God punishes the rebels with an extraordinary death penalty; when the Israelites complain about the punishment of the rebels, God announces that He wants to destroy this unfaithful and ungrateful people; Moses and Aaron again intervene on behalf of the nation and perform a miracle to convince the Israelites that God has chosen the Levites for spiritual leadership; God repeats his charge to the Levites about their sacred duties and reminds them that they are entitled to Israelite gifts for their service, but they will not receive a land allocation in Canaan as do the other tribes.

THE LIMITATIONS OF *TARGUM ONKELOS* AND THE NEED FOR SUPPLEMENTARY INTERPRETATIONS

It has never once been suggested, either in our *Onkelos on the Torah* or in our *Let's Study Onkelos* that it is possible to truly understand Torah without the valuable contributions made by the Talmuds, *Midrashim*, and Bible commentaries. It is precisely for this reason that we included in our own commentary the wisdom and interpretations of many commentators.

The targumist, in his efforts to provide us with a helpful understanding of the biblical text, sometimes changes biblical words, phrases, and metaphors to clarify their intent. He removes many anthropomorphisms, depictions of God in human form. He protects the honor of Israelite ancestors. However, he does not attempt to provide interpretations of narratives or laws, or embellish biblical tales with *Midrashim*. He limits himself to one task, to translate, and he does so within the framework of his own particular style.

We would like to focus on chapter 16, which deals with the first part of the Korach rebellion, on *Onkelos'* self-imposed limitations (recognizing that *Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Neophyti* are also *targumim*, translations, without many of *Onkelos'* characteristic restrictions). We will cite examples of its simple and limited textual alternatives that are very helpful in understanding the biblical text. Yet, at the same time, we will demonstrate the value of *Midrash* and commentaries by showing how they shed light on complicated and problematic passages and events.

First, it should be pointed out, as we do in our appendix (page 393)¹ that we cannot always read the targumist's mind:

Numbers 16:1 states that Korach, who mounted an ill-fated rebellion against Moses, started the rebellion when he "took," but the object of this verb, what he took, is not specified. This obscurity stimulated a host of widely different speculations. Onkelos opted to paraphrase the action with "he separated himself," making the verb a reflexive referring to Korach himself. This interpretation is not unique. It is given in Job 15:12, Genesis 14:15, and Exodus 14:10.

While the targumic version is somewhat less obscure than Scripture's vague verb, it is nevertheless not entirely clear. The question remains, separated from what? The "separation" could have been physical (moving to the side) or an inclination (having a separate idea). There is no way to determine exactly what our targumist intended.

Nevertheless, Nachmanides states that Onkelos is reflecting the idea contained in the later Midrash Tanchuma: Korach took himself to one side to separate himself from the other Israelites so that he could argue with Moses about the priesthood that Moses had just recently conferred on Aaron and his sons.

This reading of Onkelos is reasonable in the sense that it may have been in the translator's mind. Yet, as stated above, there is no way of determining exactly what our translator intended.

Now, let us examine other views of other sources that attempt to clarify the meaning of the biblical "took," as found in our commentary on page 147:

Other commentators interpret the word more imaginatively. He "took" his "tzitzit," one strand of which had to be blue, and questioned Moses about the reasonableness of wearing blue if one was in a blue-colored room, or one's shawl or garment was blue. Moses responded that this requirement was a Divine command (Pseudo-

¹ All page numbers refer to the Drazin-Wagner *Onkelos on the Torah* volumes.

Jonathan here and in 15:38; the Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 10:1; and Tanchuma). He “took” advice from others and then separated himself from Moses’ leadership (a Fragmented Targum and Radak). He “took” people by persuasion to join him (Numbers Rabbah). He “took” to creating discord in the Israelite camp (Numbers Rabbah and Tanchuma). He “took” upon himself a bad and ultimately unsuccessful bargain (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 109b). He “took” bad advice from himself (Zohar). He advanced against Moses and Aaron (Saadiah). He spoke (Septuagint). Korach “took” men (ibn Ezra), or “took” Dathan and Abiram (Chazkune), or Korach, Dathan, Abiram, and On “took” two hundred fifty men and stood before Moses and Aaron and confronted them.

In verses 16:3 and 7 (pages 146 and 147; 148 and 149), we find another example of the need for commentary to understand the text. A phrase is used by the rebels against Moses and Aaron, *rav lakhem*, which can be translated in a number of ways: “It is too much for you!” (ArtScroll); “You take too much upon yourselves” (Hirsch); “You have gone too far” (Kaplan). While in both verses, the targumist translates the phrase as “It is enough for you,” he does not suggest what this means. It requires an elucidation such as we provide in our own commentary on verses 3 (page 146) and 7 (page 149):

Verse 3: IT IS ENOUGH FOR YOU. Onkelos and Rashi define Scripture’s “rav lakhem” differently. Onkelos, as well as Saadiah and ibn Ezra, translates “rav” as “sagi,” “enough,” as he does in Deuteronomy 3:26. Rashi suggests that while in Deuteronomy, “rav” may be translated as “enough,” here it means “too much.” The rebels complain to Moses, “You have taken too much for yourselves.” Bechor Schor elaborates on this idea; you overtaxed the people by demanding that they furnish splendid clothes for Aaron and his sons and that the people give them twenty-four gifts. Yet, God called all the Israelites a priestly people in Exodus 19:6.

Verse 7: IT IS ENOUGH FOR YOU. Onkelos is consistent, here and in verse 3, in translating Scripture’s “rav lakhem” as “it is enough for you.” Rashi also continues to understand the phrase as “you take too much upon yourself.” The use of this statement here may be a literary device intended to have Moses throw Korach’s identical words back at him. However, Sforno and Bechor Schor read into Moses’ accusation “too much” that while members of the other tribes participated in the rebellion, the behavior of the tribe of Levi was most egregious since they had been shown special favor by God who selected them to function in the Tabernacle.

Sometimes one single letter makes a difference to the targumist in understanding a text. In verse 16:5, in Moses’ response to Korach, he states *boker veyoda Adonay et asher lo. Boker* means “morning,” but contemporary Hebrew would have *baboker*, “in the morning, the Lord will show who it is.” The targumist adds the letter *bet* in his translation for clarity, but he still does not explain why it was necessary to wait for the morning for God’s response. Note in our commentary (page 149) how others fill in the gap:

Onkelos and Pseudo-Jonathan, but not Neophyti, attach the implied letter “bet,” “in,” to “the morning,” as in Exodus 16:7. Moses mentions that the lawsuit would be

litigated in the morning because in ancient Israel litigation was not adjudicated at night. The Torah does not have vowels and the Masorites introduced the vocalization of the biblical text centuries later. Thus, the Septuagint reads the word with a “chirik” and a “tzeirei” (“biker”) instead of a “chulam” and “segol” (“boker”), which causes the three consonants “b-k-r” to mean “(the Lord) investigated.” Rashi, taking another approach, states that Moses was stalling for time, hoping that by morning the rebels would reconsider and the conflict would be resolved (based on Tanchuma).

So, too, do we find the targumist adding one word in two of the following verses that somewhat clarify them, or, in the third verse providing a non-literal translation of a word. Yet, despite the additions, the verses still require more elaborate interpretations:

Verse 14. “Will you send (“send” is an Onkelos addition) to blind these men?”

A literal translation of the biblical Hebrew is obscure. The word “you” in “will you blind these men?” refers to Moses whom Dathan and Abiram are criticizing, but it is unclear who will actually do the blinding, who will be blinded, and why. Onkelos enhances the meaning somewhat, but not entirely, by adding “send.” Saadiah and Rashi, both of whom derived much of their biblical interpretations from our Targum, as well as ibn Ezra, explain it: “Even if you threaten to send men to physically blind us if we refuse to come to you, we will not come!” Other commentators understand the verse differently. The conspirators were referring to the Canaanites, “blind them so that we can conquer them” (Pseudo-Jonathan); or spectators, “do you think the onlookers are blind and will not see your improper behavior?” (Rashbam); or a metaphor for deception, “are you trying to blind (deceive) us?” (Chazkune, Sforno, Bechor Schor, and Ehrlich).

Verse 16. “You and your group are summoned before the Lord.” Onkelos and Pseudo-Jonathan, but not Neophyti, add “summoned,” but it is not clear how this addition enhances the clarity of the verse.

Verse 24. “Withdraw (“hei’alu”) from all around the dwelling of Korach, Dathan, and Abiram.” Here it is clear that the biblical word “hei’alu,” “get up,” requires explanation and it is provided by the Targums, Saadiah, and Rashi. But even then, ibn Ezra explains that “Korach had an additional “dwelling” a distance from the Levites, who were encamped around the Tabernacle, for his family and servants, near the dwelling of Dathan and Abiram, and therefore was able to instigate the conspiracy with them.”

It should be manifestly clear, therefore, that while translations, especially premiere translations like that of *Targum Onkelos*, play a vital role in understanding the biblical text, supplementary interpretations are indispensable in providing the insights necessary to appreciate the full power and magnificence of Scripture.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

The contribution of *Onkelos on the Torah* in the field of biblical studies is not to be underestimated. There are important commentaries, written in Hebrew on *Onkelos*, many of which we quote and, of course, there are excellent English renditions of some of the most important biblical commentators. But, we are proud that our *Onkelos on the Torah* is the first series that captures the literary style and the mission of the targumist, while providing an abridgement of the most important commentaries focused on the meaning of the biblical text in comparison with *Targum Onkelos*. This comparison and analysis helps to shed light on what bothered the Targum translator and the commentators, aids us in understanding the solutions offered by both, and heightens our understanding and appreciation of Scripture.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our “Beyond the Text” (pages 162 and 163) provides us with some thought provoking questions that have a very contemporaneous ring:

The rebellion of Korach (chapter 16) presents us with an opportunity to focus on an interesting and provocative issue. Everyone in the Israelite camp should certainly have been convinced that the spiritual and governing authority was vested in Moses and Aaron by God. The punishment of the rebels, therefore, was entirely justified. The transfer of leadership to Joshua was also mandated by God (27:1–20) and no one challenged that appointment. In Mishnah Avot 1:1 we find a description of the transfer of authority, in various historical stages, from Moses to the men of the Great Assembly (fifth century BCE). Thereafter, the spiritual and judicial leadership of the “zugot,” the “couples” (Mishnah Avot 1:3–12), is brought to our attention. That brings us to the first century CE. We then have a succession of spiritual leaders—the Tannaim, Amoraim, Saboraim, Gaonim, Rishonim, Acharonim—who may have disputed among themselves with regard to Jewish law, but whose opinions were regarded as valid and authentic in the spirit of “these and these are the words of the living God.” In contemporary times it is much more confusing when we seek to determine who are our authorities and, more than that, what are the boundary lines, if any, of their authority. Who do you look to for spiritual leadership, and why? Is a Jew expected to relinquish personal “autonomy” and accept rabbinic decisions even if it requires submerging one’s own conscience? Doesn’t Judaism require “surrender” to God’s law as transmitted by our rabbis and sages? Today, there are those who posit the concept of “da’at Torah,” that the guidance of our “gedolim,” “great ones,” extends to every aspect of life, from the most personal to the political arena. These sages, who embody Torah wisdom, know what is best for us, it is claimed. Would it be considered “rebellious” to disagree with them?

Korach and his followers were punished by being swallowed up by the earth and descending alive into "Sheol" (16:31–33). We have come across the word before (Genesis 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31) and concluded, in accordance with our commentators, that this was "a biblical term for the abode of the dead," the grave (see commentary on Genesis 37:35). Why doesn't the Torah provide us with more information about the World to Come? In the absence of any specific reference to the hereafter in Scripture, where did the sages derive their rather elaborate portrayal of "judgment," and "reward and punishment" in the afterlife? What evidence can you offer for the immortality of the soul? Indeed, what evidence is there for the existence of a soul?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 17:6 and commentary, "YOU CAUSED THE DEATH" (page 156). The targumist and others make a significant change in the biblical text.
2. See 17:10 and commentary, "FELL ON THEIR FACES" (page 159). Sometimes a literal translation of Scripture requires clarification, as it does here. *Pseudo-Jonathan*, Bechor Schor, and ibn Ezra come to the rescue.
3. See 18:19 and commentary, "COVENANT OF SALT" (page 168). What is a "covenant of salt?"