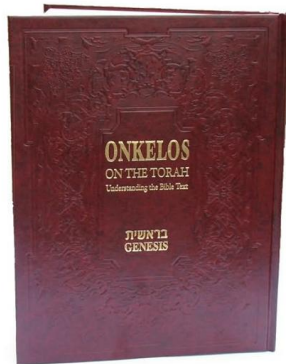


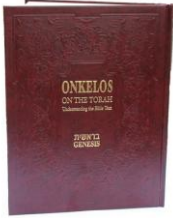
# LET'S STUDY *ONKELOS*



**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.**



## PREFACE

### HELPFUL WAYS TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

We wrote *Let's Study Onkelos* especially for rabbis and teachers, to use in classroom settings, to prompt discussions and enhance the understanding of the Torah through an appreciation of *Onkelos'* extraordinary contributions. Yet we wrote it with the average person in mind, Jew and non-Jew, so that it can be read and understood in a non-classroom setting. We made sure to use language that even people studying alone can understand. Thus, for example, we translated Hebrew terms.

We organized the Study Guide according to the *parashat hashavua*, the weekly synagogue Torah reading, but people using the guide will find it useful even if they ignore this structure.

All of the citations in *Let's Study Onkelos* are taken from our *Onkelos on the Torah*, published by Gefen Publishing House, but all of these passages are included in the Guide so that people who do not have a copy of the set will have no difficulty understanding what we are saying.

We placed one central lesson in each Guide, followed by questions designed to stimulate thinking and discussion to enhance the understanding of the style, intent, and orientation of *Targum Onkelos*, as well as the Torah text itself. We also wrote a section to encourage thinking about broader biblical issues. We will reinforce some of the lessons in other Study Guides, using different scriptural examples. Since we cannot possibly review all of the interesting and fascinating *Onkelos* translations that have enriched our understanding of Torah for sixteen hundred years, we provided a section called "For Further Study," referencing a few interesting *Onkelos* comments in each *parashah* found in our *Onkelos on the Torah*.

We urge those who find this *Study* inspiring to acquire this five volume work, which includes a commentary on almost every verse in the Torah, a valuable and lengthy appendix, "*Onkelos* Highlights," a "Beyond the Text" section with other intriguing and provocative questions prompting thought and discussion, and Haphtarot translated from the *Targums* to the Prophets, each with special introductions.

It may be useful to have different English translations of the Bible at your disposal while using the Guide, although this is not required. Comparisons will make the quest for understanding exciting.

While we have raised questions that we feel ought to be discussed, we have attempted to avoid challenges to traditional biblical assumptions and beliefs.

Welcome to the world of *Targum Onkelos*!

## INTRODUCTION

We were very pleased with the reactions to our *Onkelos on the Torah* and we decided to supplement that set with a study guide. Our goal is to help increase our readers' understanding of the Torah by examining *Onkelos*' extraordinary contributions to the clarification of the Torah.

We wrote the guide for instructors, but we used language that will be easy for students to understand. Therefore we translated Hebrew terms that are familiar to many people. We organized the Study Guide according to the *parashat hashavua*, the weekly Torah reading, but we believe that people using the guide will find it useful even if they ignore this literary structure. Each Study Guide has one *Onkelos* lesson followed by questions designed to stimulate discussion and enhance the understanding of the Torah text. Since we cannot possibly review all of the interesting and fascinating *Onkelos* translations that have enriched our understanding of Torah for sixteen hundred years, we also provided a section called "For Further Study."

### WHAT OCCURRED BEFORE *ONKELOS*?

The word *Targum* means "translation" or "interpretation." Maimonides, in his *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Tefillah* (12:10), gives his understanding of the origin of the Aramaic *Targum* of the Torah. The process began probably orally with Ezra in the fourth or fifth century BCE, and ended years later with written Aramaic translations of the Torah. Ezra saw that his people, who had just returned from years of exile in Babylon, spoke Aramaic and very few of the general population were able to understand the biblical Hebrew.

Maimonides states that Ezra introduced the public reading of the Torah by using a *meturgeman*, a person who stood before the congregation and translated Torah passages into Aramaic immediately after the people heard it recited in Hebrew. Several passages were read in Hebrew followed by their translation; then the next several, until the end of the Torah reading.

Ezra may have also democratized Jewish education by establishing a new class of interpreters of Torah called *Sopherim*, experts in Torah knowledge, who replaced the priests as teachers of the people.

Ezra was thus responsible for instituting measures that set the stage for a widespread understanding of Torah through translation and interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

## **THE FIRST WRITTEN *TARGUMS***

The oldest Aramaic *Targum* that has been discovered, but only in fragments, was found in Qumran. This translation is dated prior to the destruction of the Qumran community in 68 CE.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we can safely say that there was a written *Targum* in use during the first or second century BCE. We have today several other fragments of different *Targums*, composed during later periods, including fragments found in the Cairo Genizah, but we are unable to date these *Targums*.<sup>3</sup>

There are three currently-existing complete *Targums* on the Pentateuch. One is incorrectly called *Targum Yonatan*, which scholars call *Pseudo-Jonathan*, for Yonatan ben Uzziel, the alleged writer of this *Targum*, did not actually write a *Targum* on the Pentateuch.<sup>4</sup> The second is *Targum Neophyti*. The dating of these two *Targums* is subject to scholarly debate. These two *Targums* differ greatly from *Targum Onkelos* in that they include many *aggadic* insertions in their translations. *Targum Onkelos*, on the other hand, is in general a literal translation that omits rabbinical teachings, *halakhah*, and theology.

There are also *Targums* on the other books of the *Tanakh*, beside the five books of Moses.

The rabbis declared that only *Targum Onkelos* is to be regarded as the rabbinically authoritative and accepted Aramaic translation on the Five Books of Moses. They called it *Targum didan*, “our *Targum*” (Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 3a). It is important for us to understand why the rabbis considered *Targum Onkelos* to be so important.

When the Torah was translated into Aramaic orally, the translator was called *meturgeman*, as we stated previously. We will use the noun “targumist” for the translators that prepared written *Targums*.

## **THE REASON FOR THE RABBIS' VIEW OF *TARGUM ONKELOS***

In order to understand the uniqueness and significance of *Onkelos*, it is important to know that the interpretations of Torah, first by the Sopherim, then by the Pharisees

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<sup>1</sup> See *Nehemiah* 8:8 and 13:24 and the Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 3a and *Shabbat* 115a, Jerusalem Talmud, *Shabbat* 15c and *Tosephta*, *Shabbat* 14.

<sup>2</sup> J.T. Milik, “Tefillin, Mezuzot, et Targums (4Q128-4Q157),” *Discovered in the Judean Desert 6: Qumran Grotte 4, 11* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> Found in the Ben-Ezra Synagogue in Cairo. M. McNamara, *Targum and Testament*, Irish University Press, 1972.

<sup>4</sup> Azariah dei Rossi, 16<sup>th</sup> century, noted in his book *Me'or Enayim* that people misunderstood the Hebrew abbreviation TY as *Targum Yonatan* when *Targum Yerushalmi*, *Jerusalem Targum*, was intended. Many ancient Hebrew books used abbreviations before the printing press was invented to save scribal costs.

and, finally, by the tannaitic and amoraic sages, occurred between the fifth century BCE and the fifth Century CE. This was the period in which the rabbis produced highly important literary works, the *Mishnah*, Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, and collections of *halakhic* and *aggadic Midrashim*. These important rabbinical works expanded Jewry's understanding of the Bible.

The rabbinical understandings of the Bible, contained in these writings, divided rabbinical Judaism (which was originally called the teachings of the Pharisees) from Sadducean Judaism in the Second Commonwealth period, probably beginning around the second century BCE, and the Rabbanites from the Karaites in the early Middle Ages. Both the Sadducees and Karaites insisted on accepting only what is stated in the Torah and not the rabbinical interpretations of it.

It is important to note that although the expansion of the oral tradition, through exegesis and the application of hermeneutical laws of interpretation lay at the very foundation of rabbinical Judaism, the *Onkelos* targumist preferred to present the literal meaning of the Torah text in his translation. Nevertheless, the rabbis endorsed his decision by mandating that the Torah should be studied weekly, twice in the original Hebrew and once in the translation of *Targum Onkelos* (Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 8a and b).

It is clear that despite the importance of the rabbinic teachings found in the Talmuds and *Midrashim*, the sages felt it is even more important for Jews to know the simple meaning of the Torah. Unfortunately, this imperative, codified into law in the *Shulchan Arukh* (*Orach Chayim, Hilkhoh Shabbat* 285:1) in the sixteenth century and other codes of Jewish law, is being ignored by many Jews today.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF *TARGUM ONKELOS***

The rabbis considered *Targum Onkelos* so important that Rashi in his commentary on the Babylonian Talmud (*Kiddushin* 49a) said that *Targum Onkelos* came from Mount Sinai along with God's revelation of the Torah. Other Bible commentators said the same thing. What Rashi and the others probably meant was that *Onkelos* must be regarded as sacred, as though it had come from Mount Sinai. This is an astounding and significant statement. That is why Rashi, Ramban, and all the classical Bible commentators and many modern Bible commentators turned to *Onkelos* when they sought an authentic understanding of the text.

## **WHO TRANSLATED *ONKELOS*?**

Who was the translator of *Onkelos* and when did he live? We must first correct the most common misconceptions about *Onkelos*. He is not a *geir*, a convert. He is not the nephew of Titus, Hadrian, or any other Roman emperor. He did not live in the second century. He was not a student of Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eliezer, disciples of Rabban

Yochanan ben Zakkai. In fact, we simply cannot identify the author of what is called *Targum Onkelos*, but we do know that the above "facts" are erroneous.

These misconceptions about *Onkelos* emanate from one solitary source that links the name *Onkelos ha'geir*, "Onkelos the proselyte," with our *Targum* and dates it to the early second century. That source is the Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 3a, which speculates that *Onkelos ha'geir* may have been the translator of the Torah into Aramaic under the guidance of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua.

This statement sounds authoritative. However, the author of this statement, Rabbi Yirmeyahu, who lived in the middle of the fourth century, is also cited in the Palestinian Talmud, *Megillah* 1:8, with two major differences. In the Palestinian Talmud it states that it was "Aquila *ha'geir*" who translated the Torah into "Greek" under the guidance of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua. The Palestinian Talmud tells the miraculous tales about Aquilas that are later ascribed to *Onkelos* in the Babylonian Talmud. It would be rather strange if Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer had two pupils, with names that sounded much alike, who each wrote different translations, one in Greek and the other in Aramaic, who experienced the same miraculous events. However unusual this may sound, it is in fact the contention of many.

This perplexity led the author of the article entitled "Onkelos and Aquila" in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1972) and others to consider them as one person who wrote both translations. That is also highly unlikely.

It is more likely that when the Talmud asked who composed our *Targum*, it recalled the tradition of Rabbi Yirmeyahu that Aquilas translated the Torah into Greek in the early second century and supposed, incorrectly, that Aquilas composed the Aramaic translation. The names Aquilas and *Onkelos* are the same. When Aquilas, a Greek name is written in Aramaic the letter "nun," a very common Aramaic addition, was added and the name in Aramaic became *Onkelos*.<sup>5</sup>

## **WHEN WAS TARGUM ONKELOS WRITTEN AND WHO WROTE IT?**

Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin, one of the authors of the books on *Targum Onkelos* and this guide, was the first scholar to discover that *Targum Onkelos* was composed in the late fourth century.

He studied the thousands of differences between the *Targum* and the biblical text and compared the targumic changes with all of the tannaitic *Midrashim* that were finally edited around the end of the fourth century. He found that *Targum Onkelos* consistently uses all of the tannaitic *Midrashim*, and even copied the same words contained in the

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<sup>5</sup> See examples in Israel Drazin, "Dating *Targum Onkelos* by means of the Tannaitic Midrashim," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, volume 50, number 2, 1999. Israel Drazin's article on Nachmanides will appear in his book on the life and thinking of this sage.

final redacted versions of *Bereishit Rabbah*, *Mekhilta*, *Sifra*, *Sifrei*, and *Sifrei Zuta* that reflect the plain meaning of the biblical text.

Parts of these midrashic collections may have been written earlier than 400 CE, but since the *Onkelos* translator took material from the final redacted versions of these *Midrashim* and since they were not redacted until about the year 400 CE, our *Targum* must have been written after these collections were redacted at the end of the fourth century CE.

Placing the dating of *Targum Onkelos* at the end of the fourth century explains why this *Targum* is not mentioned in any source written before this date, including the early *Midrashim* and the Jerusalem Talmud.

In short, we now know the date of the composition of the translation that is still called *Targum Onkelos*, but we do not know who composed this important translation.

Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin was also the first scholar who discovered that all the Bible commentators before the thirteenth century, recognized that *Targum Onkelos* is a translation that does not include midrashic material, theology, and *halakhah*, and that the first person who introduced the idea that the targumist does so was Nachmanides.

## **THE DATING ISSUE ASIDE**

While it may matter to scholars whether what we call *Targum Onkelos* was written in the early second century or late fourth century, or whether *Onkelos* was really the name of the author of this *Targum* or not, what matters to most people is that that we call *Targum Onkelos* the “authorized” translation of the Torah that the rabbis told us to read weekly. This has been the practice for centuries in many circles for the past 1600 years. The Jewish sages felt that whoever wanted to really understand the literal meaning of the Bible has to turn to *Onkelos*, despite its thousands of deviations from the Hebrew text of the Torah.

How we reconcile the contention that *Onkelos* is literal with the startling number of changes made in translating the biblical text and what contribution *Onkelos* makes to Torah study we will discover as we fulfill that mandate of reviewing the weekly Torah reading with *Onkelos* aided by our “Let’s Study *Onkelos*.”