



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

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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

LEKH LEKHA (CHAPTERS 12:1-17:27)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

Abram receives a call from God to journey from his home to the land of Canaan and is promised that he will become a great nation; Abram arrives, but later leaves Canaan for Egypt because of a famine and Sarai, his wife, is taken to Pharaoh's palace; Abram returns to Canaan with Sarai and separates from his nephew, Lot; Lot is taken captive in a war, but Abram frees him; God enters into the "Covenant between the Parts" with Abram; Sarai banishes Hagar, her maidservant, but an angel informs Hagar that she will bear Abram's child who will be called Ishmael and instructs her to return to Sarai; God changes Abram's name to Abraham and commands that he and his male descendants should be circumcised as a sign of the covenant with God; Sarai's name is changed to Sarah; Abraham circumcises himself and the male members of his household.

THE *TARGUM'S* USE OF "PROPHECY"

In 15:1 (pages 80 and 81),¹ the Lord appears to Abram *bamachazeh*. The Hebrew word literally means "vision," but what does "vision" mean? *Onkelos* translates it as "prophecy," but Maimonides states that Abram was having a dream.

¹ All page numbers refer to the *Onkelos on the Torah* volume.

Our commentary on 15:1 explains:

PROPHECY. Maimonides describes Abram's vision as a dream, a lower level of prophecy. In his Guide of the Perplexed 1:4, 2:41, and 2:45, he states that a "vision," as the name implies, is a visual experience. Abram was very fearful while he was awake; he fell asleep and had the dream that is retold in this chapter. Ibn Ezra, Neophyti, and the Fragmented Targums use "prophecy" here, like Onkelos, but Pseudo-Jonathan retains "vision."

Our "Onkelos Highlights" (page 84) elaborates:

Was Abram's "vision" in chapter 15 a "prophecy" or a "dream"? Non-rationalists, such as Judah Halevi (in part four of his Kuzari), have maintained that prophecy was a miraculous event granted only to Jews, through which God granted the prophet the ability to see the future. Rationalists, such as Maimonides (in his Guide of the Perplexed 2:32–48), reject his view. Maimonides interprets prophecy as a human experience, a higher level of understanding that can be achieved by any moral person with sufficient intellect. Maimonides, ibn Kaspi, Bechor Schor, Chazkune, and others have proposed that Abram's experience in this chapter was a dream, presumably the consequence of daytime concerns and thought. Our targumist, a translator and not a philosopher or commentator, paraphrases the term "vision" in 15:1 as "prophecy," without attempting to explain what that term means.

The *Onkelos* rendering raises many questions. For example, what did the translator mean by "prophecy"? Is he upgrading Abram's experience from a "vision" to a "prophecy"? Is he taking a position different than that of Maimonides? Does he agree with Halevi?

The issue becomes more complicated when we look at the two other times that the word *machazeh*, "vision," appears in the Pentateuch, in *Numbers* 24:4 and 16. The Torah is discussing the non-Israelite Balaam there and calls him a "visionary." While the *Onkelos* translator renders the word "prophet" in regard to Abram, he uses *chazu*, "vision" for Balaam. It seems clear that he wanted to distinguish and diminish Balaam the non-Israelite as inferior to Abram.

One could argue that this helps us understand the targumist's view of "prophecy" better. But does it?

Scripture discusses the role of prophet and warns against hearkening to a false prophet in *Deuteronomy* 18:15-22, and describes him as one who speaks or purports to speak in the name of God. That is the closest Torah definition we find of prophecy. Our translator offers no definition. He takes certain things for granted when he writes his translation. He often uses terms that he is confident the people of his time will understand, albeit somewhat obscurely, without reference to philosophy or theology, because he is a translator and not a philosopher or theologian.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON *ONKELOS*

We point out that *Onkelos* translates the very same word used in the Torah for the experiences of Abram and Balaam, *machazeh*, in different ways for a subjective reason. He apparently wanted to “downgrade” Balaam and “upgrade” Abram. But if the Torah used identical terms, what right does a translator have to change entirely the meaning to suit his perception of the two personalities? Additionally, isn’t it “politically incorrect” to insult a non-Israelite in this fashion?

The Torah could have easily stated that the Lord appeared unto Abram *binevuah*, “in a prophecy,” precisely the way *Onkelos* translated it. But that formulation is not found in the text. That prerogative was assumed by *Onkelos* and the authors of two other *Targums*, and approved by ibn Ezra. The same question can be asked of those who regard the “vision” as a “dream.” Scripture is familiar with the word “dream,” which is found in many places. If the Torah wanted to convey that Abram’s experience was a “dream,” it could have clearly said so. Have both translators and interpreters exceeded their bounds?

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Why are there no prophecies today in which God communicates to human beings? Is no one worthy today for such communication? Would we believe anyone who professes that they had such a communication? How do you feel about Judah Halevi’s distinction between Jews and non Jews with regard to prophecy? How would you define “prophecy”? Some scholars say that God is communicating with people today through nature. What could they mean? Does this make sense to you? What ancient prophetic truths are there to which we should be committed? How are prophets to be ranked? Are the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, known as the “major prophets” any more significant than those of the so called “minor prophets,” such as Hosea, Joel, and Amos? Or, were they designated that way because of the size of the prophetic books they left us?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 15:6 (pages 80 and 81) and commentary. What does “Amen” really mean?
2. See 15:15 (pages 82 and 83) and commentary. The biblical euphemism for death.
3. See 15:9 and commentary, “OFFER” (page 83). The nature of the “covenant.”