



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

CHAYEI SARAH (CHAPTER 23:1–25:18)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

Sarah dies and is buried in a sepulcher in Hebron that Abraham purchases; Abraham's servant is sent on a mission to find a suitable wife for Isaac; Rebecca passes a test by showing unusual loving-kindness to the servant, proving that she is worthy of being Isaac's wife; Rebecca turns out to be Abraham's grandniece and invites the servant to her home; the family approves of the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca, after Rebecca consents; Abraham dies.

ONKELOS ON NAMES, COINS, AND PROPER NOUNS

Names:

The Torah often uses place names that our targumist either updates, by calling the biblical site by its contemporary name so that his readers could identify the location of the place, or he provides the meaning of the name. We have two examples in our *parashah*.

In 24:10 (pages 148 and 149),¹ we read, "He (the servant) arose and went to Aram Naharaim, to the city of Nahor (Abram's brother)." The literal meaning of Aram Naharaim is "Aram of the Rivers." *Onkelos* reads instead, "Aram that is by the

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

Euphrates.” The targumist explains Naharaim by substituting a modern name known to his readers, although the Torah used the more ancient name.

In 24:62 (pages 156 and 157), the Bible informs us that “Isaac had just come from Be’eir Lachai Ro’i, that is, “the well of Lachai Ro’i.” The name means “The Living One Who Sees Me,” and possibly suggests Hagar’s belief that God had seen her misery. The targumist is again more specific and has, “the well where the living angel appeared,” referring to the angel (and not God) who appeared to Hagar with an important message (16:14). Our commentary on “THE WELL WHERE THE LIVING ANGEL APPEARED” (page 156) adds:

Sforno states that it was at this well that Hagar’s prayers were answered. Rashi (based on Genesis Rabbah) maintains that Isaac went there to bring Hagar back to his father so that Abraham would marry her.

We also know that Isaac lived there (25:11), and that, according to *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, the Torah academy of Shem and Eber was there.

Note that the *Onkelos* translator felt it necessary to clarify the meaning of the name used in the Torah and explain why this location was so important. His clarification corresponds to the plain meaning of the passage since the Torah informs us that an “angel of the Lord” did appear unto Hagar (21:17).

Coins:

Our translator also updates the names of coins mentioned in the Torah by substituting the names of coins used in his day. Thus, we find in 23:15 and 16 (pages 142 and 143), that he replaces “silver *selas*” twice for the Torah’s “silver *shekel*.” In 20:16 he renders the biblical “a thousand silver” (the Torah does not name the coin) as “a thousand *selas* of silver,” adding *selas*. He does so again in our *parashah*, in 24:22 (pages 150 and 151), “ten *selas* of gold” for the biblical “ten gold.”

Proper Nouns:

Finally, if we turn to verse 25:3 (pages 160 and 161), a similar translational/clarifying phenomenon occurs. In identifying the sons of Dedan (grandchildren of Abraham), the Torah calls them *ashurim*, *letushim*, and *leummim*. The meaning of these terms is unclear. Are they adjectives, as the targumist maintains, meaning “camp and tent dwellers and (inhabitants) of distant lands,” or “caravan drivers, traders and colonists,” as Aryeh Kaplan translates it (*The Living Torah*, page 113)? Or, are they proper nouns, the names of nations, as Rashi, ibn Ezra, and Radak maintain. Nachmanides states that the words may be read either way. Translators make choices about alternative ways to understand words and passages.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

Compared with the panorama of inspiring laws and values in the Torah, the treatment in *Targum Onkelos* of “names, coins, and proper nouns” seems relatively unimportant. However, lovers of Torah cherish every one of its words and passages. Our goal is to familiarize you with the style, the focus, and the orientation of the most important translator of the Pentateuch in the history of the Jewish people. Sometimes we derive insights thereby that enlarge our understanding of Torah; sometimes we derive insights thereby that simply enlarge our understanding of the *Targum*. Both insights are important, even if they are not of equal importance. Discuss the pros and cons of studying aspects of Torah that do not relate to the conduct of our lives.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We mentioned how *Onkelos* treats the names of coins. This alerts us to the use of money in our *parashah*: Abraham pays what the rabbis consider a large sum for the sepulcher in Hebron, despite the seeming reluctance of Ephron to accept any money for the site (Chapter 23); Abraham’s servant showers Rebecca with gifts (24:22, pages 150 and 151); he stresses Abraham’s great wealth (24:35, pages 152 and 153); and gives gifts to Rebecca’s brother and her mother (24:53, pages 154 and 155).

The role played by money in human relations does not seem to have changed much since ancient times. Should Abraham and his servant have acted otherwise? Why did Abraham feel that it was necessary to pay an excessive amount for the sepulcher? Does this purchase have meaning for Jews today? Couldn’t the servant have noted the wonderful traits and attributes of Isaac to emphasize that he was a suitable mate for Rebecca, rather than flash his master’s wealth before her and her family? Is the Torah simply relating an ancient betrothal practice or is there more than this to the story?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 23:1 and commentary, “ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS” (page 144). The targumist avoids a popular *Midrash*.
2. See 24:12 and commentary, “APPOINT” (page 149, continuing on page 148). Requesting God’s guidance or relying on omens; the *Targum* makes a choice.
3. See 24:67 (pages 158 and 159) and commentary. A scribal insertion into *Targum Onkelos*.