



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

METZORA (CHAPTER 14:1-15:33)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

The purification process of the *metzora* is outlined; the indigent *metzora* is allowed to bring fewer sacrifices; a house afflicted with *tzara'at* has a special purification procedure; the Torah addresses the impurity derived from female and male bodily discharges and under what conditions the impurity is transmitted; distinctions are made between the impurity of a menstruant and the impurity acquired by other body flows; the Israelites are warned to separate themselves from impurity lest they defile the Tabernacle.

THE CASE OF THE EXTRA *HAY*:

ARE THERE SUPERFLUOUS LETTERS IN THE TORAH?

There is a glaring use of the letter *hay* in our *parashah* in chapter 14 that points to a biblical style that needs clarification. Six times, in 14:13 (pages 102 and 103),¹ 22 (pages 104 and 105), 30 (twice, pages 104 and 105) and 31 (twice, pages 106 and 107), there appears a *hay* that seems extraneous and unnecessary and our targumist was faced with the challenge of how to treat the letter in his translation. We mentioned

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

before in our Guides and commentary that *Onkelos* follows the school of Rabbi Ishmael in seeing the Torah “speaking in the language that human beings would clearly understand” and not agreeing with the view of Rabbi Akiva who considered it necessary to regard every biblical linguistic irregularity as a launching pad for exegesis and interpretation. This orientation may seem strange to us today because, by and large, Rabbi Akiva’s opinion prevailed and the extraordinary expansion of the Oral Law is predicated upon it.

These facts make it important and valuable for us to understand what to expect of the *Onkelos* translator when he confronted the challenge of the biblical *hay* that really doesn’t belong in the text. Our examination will help understand the different ways that Torah is interpreted. While we are using chapter 14 as our focus, this phenomenon of apparently superfluous letters is found many times elsewhere in the Torah.

Let us examine the four verses referred to above and the unnecessary *hays* that are found in them. With regard to the process of purification the *metzora* must undergo, the Torah states:

13. “He slaughters the lamb in the place where the guilt offering and burnt offering are slaughtered, ‘*bimkom hakodesh*,’ (literally, in the place of the holy).”

Onkelos, recognizing that the *hay* of *hakodesh* is superfluous, drops it and renders the phrase *be’atar kadish*, in a holy place, as if the Torah had, *bimkom kodesh*.

22. “. . . one as the guilt offering, (‘*ve’ha’echad olah*’), and one as the burnt offering.”

Onkelos drops the *hay*, “the,” and renders as if the Torah read *ve’chad*.

30. “He prepares the one (‘*ha’echad*’) of the turtledoves or the pigeons (‘*b’nei hayonah*’).”

The targumist replaces *ha’echad* with *chad* and *hayonah* with *yonah*, again removing the superfluous *hays*.

31. “(He prepares) what he can afford, the one (‘*ha’echad*’) as the guilt offering and the one (‘*ha’echad*’) as the burnt offering.”

In both cases, the targumist substitutes *chad* for *ha’echad*, “one” for “the one.”

It may seem trivial to stress the liberty taken by the targumist in eliminating a Torah letter in his translation. But, reflect for a moment. What is the *halakhah*? What if a Torah scroll were found with one of its *hays* missing from it? The law is that the Torah is *pasul*, invalid, unfit for use for the public synagogue Torah reading, even if it is the only Torah available. Just one missing letter renders a Torah unfit for use. That is how holy the *halakhah* considers each and every letter. Yet, here we have a translator eliminating a letter, as if it did not exist, six times in one chapter, in a translation that has been venerated by the sages for sixteen hundred years.

As we note in our “*Onkelos* Highlight” (page 110):

Anyone who has completed a year of Modern Hebrew language study would agree that a “hay” should not be placed where the Torah placed it. This raises two questions (1) Was the Torah wrong by using the “hay” in the passage? (2) How could the targumist be so brazen as to remove a letter that the Torah felt was necessary? There are essentially two approaches to resolving these questions. The first approach accepts the idea that the Torah added “hays” for a purpose, but nevertheless recognizes that the targumist is after all a translator and not a halakhist and he is allowed to remove the “hays” to clarify the verse for his readership. The second approach would argue that the Torah “speaks in human language” and God did not insert every letter to teach halakhic lessons; therefore while the “hays” were appropriate in ancient Hebrew, a translator who wants to make the text clear to modern readers is perfectly free to remove them.

In our Preface to *Leviticus* (pages xv and xvi) we clarify the targumist’s approach, lest it be considered irreverent, which it most certainly is not:

The targumist’s acceptance of Rabbi Ishmael’s view does not mean that he rejected the entire body of law, theology, and values that emanated from the exegetical genius of the sages who extracted mountains of halakhah and aggadot not evident in Scripture itself. Onkelos, we believe, would certainly have acknowledged these rabbinical interpretations that comprise this Oral Law and tradition.

Our contention is that the targumist did not want to incorporate these laws into his translation, not because he rejected them, but because he did not view the teaching of the Oral Torah to be his task. He was a translator. He wanted to provide a literal understanding of the text on its own terms. Yet, notwithstanding the fact that the targumist ignored the oral traditions, which did not directly reflect the literal understanding of the text, the sages who wrote the Talmud and Midrashim that contained their teachings gave Onkelos their “seal of approval” without feeling at all uncomfortable that their exegesis was not incorporated into it.

They obviously felt that it is vitally important for every lover of the Bible to focus with as much fervor on the plain meaning of the text as on the multitudinous interpretations of the text. “Peshat”—that is, the literal meaning of Scripture—is, after all, the first of the four accepted categories of biblical understanding known as “pardes,” which refers to “peshat,” “remez,” “derash,” and “sod,” the literal, allegorical, homiletical, and mystical discernment of Torah.

The rabbinic mandate of “shnayim mikra v’echad Targum,” the imperative of reading the Torah portion twice in the Hebrew and once with Onkelos, is especially relevant today so that our immersion in commentaries and exegesis, in the spirit of “hafoch bah v’hafoch bah, d’kulay bah,” “search well in the Torah for everything is in it,” will not deflect us from attempting to first grasp the plain meaning of Scripture.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

We focused on the seemingly superfluous *hay* in this Guide. We showed, in essence, that biblical Hebrew is different than contemporary Hebrew. Biblical Hebrew inserts the definite article *hay*, “the,” in places that modern Hebrew would not place it. Languages change. Some rabbis and scholars ignore this idea and read significant, legal and homiletical lessons into the superfluous *hay*. But our targumist, as a translator, while respecting the legal and homiletical lessons, does not place them into his translation.

This situation with the *hay* is not unique. Another, more prevalent situation is the letter *vav*, which means “and,” “but,” “however,” “then,” and the like. Biblical Hebrew introduces many sentences with the letter, even when contemporary Hebrew would not use it. Again, as with the *hay*, many rabbis and scholars read lessons into the usage (readers may want to see an example in our commentary on *Exodus* 21:1, and look again at the example in the *Tzav* Guide on page three about the *vav*). *Onkelos* generally retains these *vavs*, but does not insert or even hint at the lessons others read into the letter. Do you think that the targumist was justified in disregarding the biblical style in regard to the *hay*? Why?

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Many people consider the Torah message relevant for all times. Does the fact that the Torah was written in biblical Hebrew, which is different than contemporary Hebrew, threaten this idea in any way? Or, should we say that the Torah had to be written in a language that the people who received it could understand?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 14:12 and commentary, “PENALTY OFFERING” (page 103). Why does the *metzora* bring an *asham* (penalty offering)?
2. See 14:16 and commentary, “HAND” (page 102). A characteristic change made by the targumist when Scripture uses a figure of speech, a part that represents a whole.
3. See 15:11 and commentary, “WITHOUT RINSING HIS HANDS” (page 112, continuing on page 115). *Onkelos* misses a chance to clarify a perplexing phrase.