



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

ACHAREI (CHAPTER 16:1-18:30)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

The role of the high priest on the Day of Atonement and the elaborate rituals over which he presided, including the confession, the scapegoat ceremony, and the incense service, so that he, the priests, and the people would obtain atonement and reconciliation with God; sacrifices may be offered only in the Tabernacle (later, the Holy Temple); animals for personal consumption may be slaughtered according to specific regulations, including that its blood cannot be eaten and must be covered; the laws of sexual behavior are commanded and marriage between close relatives is forbidden, as is homosexuality and bestiality; the holy land may not be contaminated by sexual abominations, lest Israel be exiled from it.

ONKELOS AND THE MASORETIC TRADITION

We have had on a number of occasions opportunities to point out the enormous contributions of the Masorites in clarifying biblical textual difficulties and ambiguities. With a reverent attitude toward the sacred text, even when a word appears to be written erroneously, they preserve the word as they found it (*ktiv*), but they also record the way the word should be pronounced (*keri*).

The Masorites were biblical scholars and scribes who studied the wording and spelling of scriptural words and determined the correct Torah text, based upon which they created vowel signs to facilitate its reading and show how it should be read, vocalization signs to

show how each term should be pronounced, and accentuation markings indicating how the text should be parsed and changed. The Masorites are generally thought to have worked in Israel from the seventh and eighth centuries CE until about the twelfth century. The Masorites also wrote thousands of notations concerning the proper spelling of biblical words, how frequently such spellings occur, and other characteristics of the text. In our “*Onkelos Highlight*” (page 130)¹ we provide additional information about the Masorites:

The plan of the Onkelos targumist, as we have seen, was to translate the Pentateuch according to its plain meaning. He was, in a sense, similar to the Masorites, who also focused on the plain meaning of the Torah words and attempted to identify their proper text. Thus it is no surprise that the targumist generally incorporated the (later) Masoretic “keri” into his translation, and that he used the “ketiv” only when he was convinced that it fit better with the context of the passage.

Let us turn to our *parashah* to find an example of the Masoretic tradition and how it was used by the late fourth century *Onkelos* several centuries earlier. In 16:21 (pages 126 and 127), in connection with the rituals performed by the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the Torah states “Aaron shall lay two *hand* on the live goat’s head and make a confession over it regarding all the Israelite iniquities.” The passage states *shtei yado*, “two hand (singular),” must be placed on the goat’s head. The Masorites wrote that the word should be read as if it had a *yud* as its penultimate letter, which converts the noun into the plural. The targumist, as he customarily does, has what the Masorites later inserted as the *keri*, and translates the word as if it read *yadov*.

This Masoretic reading makes sense. However, there is another *keri* and *ketiv* on the word *yadav/yado* in 9:22 where it is not so evident which reading is correct. Scripture informs us that Aaron raised *yado*, “his hand,” while blessing the people, although the Masorites, as they do here, write that the word should be read as *yadav*, “his hands,” in the plural, and *Onkelos* has this reading. Rashi and ibn Ezra maintain that the priest was blessing the people with the priestly benediction found in *Numbers* 6:24-26, and this necessitated both hands. But Nachmanides disagrees and says that Aaron offered a personal prayer, as King Solomon did in *I Kings* 8:22, and could have used one hand. *Neophyti*, on 9:22, suggests that Aaron felt uncomfortable with his role in the golden calf episode and was reluctant to approach the altar, but overcame his reluctance and lifted up his “hand” in prayer. *Pseudo-Jonathan* maintains that he did so with joy. Thus, all the *Targums*, Rashi, and ibn Ezra reflect the view of the Masorites, but Nachmanides does not.

But Masoretic observations go beyond recommending how to read biblical words. Everyone agrees, for example, that the first word in *Leviticus* should be read *vayikra*, “and He called.” However, the Masorites have a small *aleph* at the end of the word, and it is written this way in the Torah scroll. Our commentary on 1:1 explains:

This textual phenomenon prompted different midrashic explanations, which our Aramaic translator, who rendered the literal meaning of this as well as all other

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

biblical passages, ignored. For example, the Bible commentator Maharam reports his teacher's interpretation, a dialogue between Moses and God. Moses humbly requested God to use the word without the "aleph," which has the connotation of "chanced upon," and implies a lower-level divine revelation only through a dream, while "called" with the "aleph" suggests a closer relationship with God and a higher level of prophecy. Since God insisted on the use of the "aleph," which described what actually occurred, Moses wrote it as directed, but, as an indication of his humility, made the "aleph" small. Whenever there is more than one way that Scripture can be read, as here, our targumist incorporated the version into his translation that fits his understanding of the plain meaning of the verse in the context in which it appears.

Our appendix note on page 287 elaborates on the phrase, "He called to Moses":

*The phrase "vayikra el Moshe," "He called to Moses," appears in only one other biblical verse, Exodus 24:16, where the "aleph" of "vayikra" is written in its normal size. The "masorah," the traditional count of different biblical phenomena, identifies twenty-five instances in Hebrew Scriptures where letters are written small (S. Frensdorff, *Das Buch Ochlal W'ochlah*, page 84).*

The midrashic Targums Pseudo-Jonathan and Neophyti and most of the Fragmented Targums have "the word of the Lord" called Moses, while the Paris version of the Fragmented Targum has the "Master of the World" do so. Their term "word" (various forms of "davar" in each of the Targums) implies a "revelation." In Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 28:10, for example, "word": describes a revelation by God to Jacob. The usage softens the somewhat anthropomorphic verb "called," which could suggest that God has and uses vocal cords. Onkelos never utilizes "davar" and is unconcerned over the anthropomorphism "called."

In summary, *Onkelos* parallels the later Masoretic recommendations when they fit with the plain meaning of Scripture as the targumist reads the passage, but does not do so when the Masoretic wording reflects a midrashic notion, as it does with the small *aleph* of *Vayikra*.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

It is relatively easy to read Hebrew today because, thanks to the Masorites, we have vowels to guide us. But, even today, the synagogue Torah scroll is not written with vowels and the Torah reader must prepare himself not only by memorizing the Masoretic cantillations (musical notes that serve as punctuation), but also the approved reading of words that often can be read in different ways. The *Onkelos* translation guides us in understanding how words should be read, based on the meaning he assigned them. The fact that the *Targum* existed centuries before the Masorites authenticated and fixed the

reading of questionable biblical words, suggests that his impact upon how the Bible is to be read and understood was enormous.

At times, the correct reading is the determining factor in Jewish law. For example, in 21:11, the Torah declares *al kol nafshat (ketiv) meit lo yavo*. “He (the priest) may not come in contact with any dead person.” Our commentary on this verse explains:

This verse prohibits the high priest from coming into a tent or home where there is a corpse or a certain amount of a corpse (Rashi and ibn Ezra, based on the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 4a). The word “persons” is written in the Bible in the singular “nafshat,” but the traditional pronunciation is the plural “nafshot.” The Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 4a, b, contains a dispute whether we give precedence to the spelling of a word (the “ketiv”), or the tradition of how it is read (the “keri”). In this case the difference between the singular and plural shows itself where there is the prohibited amount of a corpse in the tent, but it comes from two bodies. If the word is singular, the law of “a certain amount” only applies if it came from a single corpse. However, the plural could be understood to mean that the amount can come from more than a single body. Onkelos ignores the Talmudic dispute, as usual, and renders “person” in the singular.

Note that in this instance, our targumist accepts the *ketiv*, *nafshat*, rather than the *keri*, which he accepts most of the time. Have you an explanation for his deviation in this verse? Could it be because, here, the *ketiv* really is closer to the *peshat*, the literal meaning of the verse?

A final example of Masoretic readings for this Study Guide is found in 25:30. The verse has *lo*, which is written with an *aleph*, and means “no (wall).” But the Masorites declared that the word should be read as if it were written with a *vav*, meaning “which has a wall.” Here we have two opposite meanings based on one letter. All of the *Targums* accept the *keri*, as do *Sifra* and the Septuagint.

The point is that translators have decisions to make. They had a *masorah*, tradition as to how to read it, but it was not “codified” as it was later, after the Masorites completed their work. Undoubtedly, our *Targum* contributed much to the decisions rendered by the Masorites. Nevertheless, to complicate the issue, biblical scholars have challenged some of the Masoretic conclusions. Indeed, sometimes even the Masoretic text has variant readings. How do we cope with this challenge?

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Chapter 16 focuses on the Day of Atonement ritual performed by the high priest. The ritual raises some interesting contemporary questions, outlined in our “Beyond the Text” on pages 136 and 137:

Chapter 16 deals with the elaborate ritual of atonement performed by the high priest on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. The rabbis deemed this tenth day of the

Hebrew month of Tishrei especially propitious for this rite since they understood that it was the day on which God forgave the Israelites for the grievous sin of the golden calf. Can atonement and forgiveness be achieved through the spiritual power inherent in the nature of a day, or by virtue of rituals performed by someone else on a person's behalf? Mustn't inner transformation precede reconciliation with God?

Review the pageantry associated with the Yom Kippur ritual. In what way does it induce the desire for that inner transformation? Why have our sages deemed it worthy to include this Torah reading on Yom Kippur, as well as devote a section of the prayer service to a description of how the day was celebrated in the Temple? Why is it important to try to recapture this spiritual event in the life of the Jewish people when it last took place almost two thousand years ago? Wherein lies its relevance to contemporary Jewish life?

The sequence of the high priest's service required him to atone first for himself, then his household and, finally, for the entire congregation of Israelites (16:17). Is there a lesson we may derive from this order? In our relationships with people, is it not necessary first to make certain that we, personally (and those within our family), have learned to live in peace and harmony before we strive to encourage others to improve their behavior?

We are told in 16:30, "you shall be purified before the Lord." Is this one of Judaism's highest and most significant desiderata? Shouldn't it take more than one ritual and more than one day to achieve this spiritual goal, if we can achieve it at all? How do we strive, each and every day, to be "purified before the Lord"? Can we ever really be "pure"? If the goal is unattainable, what does the Torah want us to do? How do we know when we are "pure"?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. See 16:1 and commentary, "BROUGHT THE STRANGE FIRE" (page 121). The *Targum* clarifies a phrase that points to the wrong deed committed by Nadav and Avihu, sons of Aaron. See also the appendix to chapter 10.
2. See 17:8, 10, 12, 13, and 15, and the commentaries. The targumist uses the anachronistic term, "proselyte," for the biblical *geir*.
3. See 18:9, 19, 23, and 25, and the commentaries and our "Onkelos Highlight" (page 144). The targumist avoids what he regards as indelicate biblical language.