



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

EMOR (CHAPTER 21:1–24:23)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

The priests had special laws that they were required to fulfill in order to serve as exemplars of holiness; they could not contaminate themselves by coming in contact with corpses, except those of close relatives; they could not marry a divorcee or a harlot; a high priest had even more stringent regulations; priests who were to officiate in the Sanctuary were restricted from doing so if they had certain physical defects; if they were impure, they could not officiate or eat holy food; the sanctity of the sacrifices as well as the *terumah* offering to the priests had to be preserved; the animals offered as sacrifices had to be unblemished; many of the laws pertaining to the celebration of the Sabbath and festivals that punctuate the Jewish calendar year are described; some of the laws pertaining to the kindling of the menorah and the showbread offering are described; a blasphemer is punished with the death penalty; the *lex talionis*, “eye for an eye,” law is announced, which the rabbis explained is monetary compensation for damages inflicted to ensure that punishment is commensurate with the harm caused.

TREATING BLEMISHES THAT DISQUALIFY PRIESTS

Chapter 21 addresses the laws of priests that assure that they maintain a high standard of “sanctity.” Verse 6 in *Onkelos* (page 168 and 169)¹ states: “They must be

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

holy before their God and not profane the name of their God, for they offer the offerings of the Lord, an offering of their God they offer, therefore they must be holy.”

Among the commandments that disqualify a priest from serving in the Tabernacle (later, the Holy Temple), the Torah enumerates physical blemishes that render him unfit for service, although he does not lose his status completely as a priest; he may continue to eat “holy” and “most holy” foods, permitted only to priests (verse 22, pages 172 and 173). Some of the blemishes mentioned in the Torah cannot be identified. It will be enlightening to discover how *Onkelos* and commentators treat them.

The *Onkelos* translator often, but not always, retains the biblical Hebrew roots of the Scriptural words in his translation, perhaps because he believed that his readers were familiar with the terms. Hence, while he does so in verse 18, without clarification, others disagree as to their meaning. “Ibn Kaspi, for example, defines *charum* as a person lacking a limb and *sarua* as one with an excess limb” (commentary, verse 18 page 170). In our appendix (page 313) we elaborate:

Neophyti, Pseudo-Jonathan, and the Septuagint render Scripture’s “charum” as a “deformed nose,” Saadiah as a “broken nose,” and ibn Ezra as a “sunken nose.” Neophyti and Pseudo-Jonathan insert two explanations of “gibein” and “dak” (verse 20): “eyebrows that cover the eyes” and “hunchback” for the first, and “no hair on the eyebrows” and “dwarf” for the second. The Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 43b, understands the terms to refer to eyebrows. Ibn Ezra states that the first is “eyebrowless” and the second “dwarf.”

In verse 20 (page 170), we read about a *kohein*, a priest, having a “disease in his eyes.” Scripture’s *tevalul* is of uncertain meaning, as our commentary explains:

DISEASE. Some say that it derives from the root “b-l-h,” “destruction (of the eye),” while others see the root as “b-l-l,” “mixed (substances in the eye),” the letter “tav” being extraneous according to both explanations (ibn Ezra). The Targum’s wording is questionable. The Sperber and Berliner texts have “chilin,” “illness” or “disease,” which is probably the correct reading because it captures the general intent of “tevalul,” even though it does not give the word’s specific meaning. However, other Onkelos texts, Pseudo-Jonathan, and Neophyti have forms of the noun “chilazon,” the name of a creature. The identity of the “chilazon” is uncertain and there are various opinions on what kind of creature it is, including some scholars who feel certain that we will probably never be able to identify the creature and others who are convinced that they can identify it. Some believe it had the characteristics of a worm; thus, the name of the eye disease in Aramaic may have been derived from the fact that the worm leaves a threadlike path. It describes the eye disease that disturbs the white of the eye, creating a white thread that extends from the eye white and breaks through the pupil (Babylonian Talmud, Bekhorot 44a and Berakhot 38a, quoted by Rashi). Alternatively, the connection with the worm may remind one that just as the worm

seems to flow across a surface, so does this eye ailment cause the eye to flow with tears.

Further in the verse, we find two other defects, *yalefet* and *maroach ashekh*, that are clarified in our commentary (page 170, continuing on page 173):

SCAB. Scripture's "yalefet" is a skin disease that clings to a person tenaciously until he dies (Rashi). Onkelos's "chazazan" is also a skin disease, and is a word the targumist drew from Sifra.

CRUSHED TESTES. Scholars differ regarding the meaning of the Torah's "meroach ashekh." Pseudo-Jonathan, ibn Ezra, Nachmanides, and Saadiah have "swollen testicle," the view of Rabbi Akiva in Sifra and the Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 44b. This interpretation is based on the understanding that "meroach" is derived from the word "ruach," "wind," implying "swollen" (ibn Ezra). The Talmud has an additional alternative translation, "abnormally dark skin." A third view is found in the Septuagint, a Fragmented Targum, and Neophyti: "missing testicle." Onkelos pluralizes "testes" and translates "meroach" as "crushed," the meaning that the word has in Isaiah 38:20. This is another of many instances where our targumist paralleled the opinion of Rabbi Ishmael, who advocated reading Scripture according to its plain meaning, contrary to the view of his colleague Rabbi Akiva who mined the text for halakhah. The term the Targum selected for "testes," "pachtin," is in Job 40:17 (Rashi).

In short, we see that while people turn to Onkelos to discover the meaning of biblical terms, the Targum is not always helpful. Sometimes the targumist only uses a form of the Hebrew term and at other times he offers us a translation that other commentators refuse to accept.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

Since the *Onkelos* translator lived at the end of the fourth century and the laws pertaining to the Temple service were no longer operative, is it possible that he felt no great compulsion to identify the blemishes outlined in the Torah that disqualified the priests for service? That would seem to be consistent with his general approach in *Leviticus*, as we explained in our commentary on 1:2:

Leviticus contains a wealth of technical terms relating to the Tabernacle service. As we discussed in the introduction, Onkelos generally refrains from explaining the meaning of these names, stating their significance, or presenting the details of how the sacrificial functions were implemented. Instead, the translation usually simply

repeats the biblical word, as here for “korban,” “offering,” and later for nouns such as “olah,” discussed in verse 3, which is usually rendered “burnt offering” in English.

Yet, despite what we wrote, doesn't our translators' failure to explain the biblical terms constitute an abrogation of responsibility? Can we find other justifications for our targumist's reticence to be more definitive at times in his translation?

It would be a worthwhile exercise if you tried to translate a text, any text, from one language to another, even with a dictionary. It would make you much more sensitive to the demanding, formidable, exacting, difficult task that faces a translator, and appreciative and, perhaps, less critical of his efforts. Our sages, commentators, and philosophers viewed *Onkelos* with reverence and awe and reserved a place of distinction for the *Targum* among the most notable literary works ever produced by the greatest of Jewish thinkers. We hope that you agree with this decision.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We raise some issues worthy of reflection and discussion in our “Beyond the Text” (page 183) pertaining to the Torah's standards for qualifying or disqualifying a *kohen* for the Temple sacrificial service:

There are certain women he is not permitted to marry; he may not come in contact with a dead person (with some exceptions); and he may not have any of the physical blemishes outlined in the Torah. One can understand the need for spiritual “standards” for religious leaders. However, shouldn't commitment to the Torah's laws be a qualification? [Should there not have been some emphasis on the demeanor of a priest in terms of his social life? It is wholly absent.] Is it fair to disqualify a priest who is lame, or has a broken leg or arm, or one with a sore or scab? How do you understand these Torah laws?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 22:16 and commentary, “IN IMPURITY” (page 179). The targumist adds two words to the biblical text. Was it necessary?
2. See 23:2 and commentaries, “FIXED TIMES...FIXED TIMES” and “A SACRED EVENT” (page 185). Two important terms for “holy days” are clarified.
3. See 24:10-16 and all commentaries (page 199, continuing on page 198). Dealing with “blasphemy.” Targumic, midrashic, and the views of commentators.