



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

BECHUKOTAI (CHAPTER 26:3–27:34)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

The Torah summarizes what awaits the Israelites if they observe the law and are faithful to God and if they are disobedient and disloyal to God: the consequences will be blessings and the curses; peace will be God's reward if the nation will keep the commandments; a most horrible fate will befall them, punishments described in the most gruesome locution, should they fail to comply. However, ultimately, due to God's compassion, the people and land will be redeemed. Voluntary gifts made to God, whether of specific objects or of the value of those objects, are discussed.

THE TARGUMIC STYLE OF AVOIDING REDUNDANCIES

In addition to the substantive translations in *Onkelos*, which clarify verses, explain metaphors, remove anthropomorphisms, and offer a revised more lofty depiction of Israelite ancestors, among other contributions, the targumist makes many changes for other reasons altogether, reasons that pertain to an author's writing style. One of these is that the targumist avoids redundancies whenever possible. This means that, although the Torah itself will repeat verbs or nouns within a verse, or in verses in close proximity, usually to enhance the poetry of the passage, the *Onkelos* translator will often replace a word with a synonym rather than be repetitious. He most likely felt that his reading audience would appreciate this stylistic change for it would, in his view, enhance the literary quality of his translation. This required boldness, for if the Torah repeated words, what right does a translator have to introduce such deviations? Yet, such changes are found frequently in the *Targum* throughout the Pentateuch.

We will point out a number of these targumic modifications in chapter 26 so that you can judge the justification for this stylistic alteration.

Verse 7 pages 218 and 219.¹ “You will chase (*u’redaftem*) your enemies.”

Verse 8 pages 218 and 219. “Five of you will chase (*verodfu*) a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand (*yirdofu*).

Here we have the root *r-d-f* (“to chase”) written three times in Scripture in two verses. The targumist uses the Hebrew root in an Aramaic cognate for the first two. But he substitutes a synonym *ye’arkun*, “put to flight,” for the third. This change adds no new meaning; it is only a stylistic change.

Interestingly, the same verb *r-d-f* is repeated twice in verse 36, “The sound of a driven leaf will chase (*verodaf*) them. They will be put to flight, although there is none who chases (*rodeif*).” This time the targumist allowed the redundancy. But, as we have often pointed out, no human being can be held strictly accountable for inconsistencies, and we have many in the *Targum*.

Another example is the biblical word *keri*, first found in verse 26 and repeated many times in this chapter. In our commentary, “HOSTILE” (page 225, continuing on page 222), we offer eight different definitions of *keri*:

The Torah’s “keri” is obscure and has been variously translated. In fact some commentators offer more than a single idea. (1) Saadiah explains it as “your rebelliousness”; (2) Sifra, Pseudo-Jonathan, Rashi, Rashbam, Chazkune, and ibn Ezra understand it as “by chance,” from the root “kara”: the Israelites followed God’s decrees infrequently and inconsistently (compare I Samuel 6:9); (3) “refusal” (Rashi and Rashbam); (4) “overconfidence” (ibn Ezra); (5) “rebellion” (Septuagint, Saadiah, and ibn Janach); (6) “a burden” (Rashi); and (7) “a natural accident” (Arukh [a dictionary composed by Rabbi Nathan ben Yechiel in the twelfth century]; Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed 3:36; and Radak, Sherashim). Our targumist and Neophyti selected (8) “hostility,” a hardening of the heart, resulting in a rejection of God. Lowenstein (Nefesh HaGer) maintains that our targumist is not translating literally; he is paraphrasing to avoid an anthropomorphic portrayal of a human walking with God, by chance or otherwise. However, Luzzatto (Commentary, page 434) and Berkowitz (Lechem Vesimla) argue that he is literal: he derived his interpretation of “keri” from “yakar,” “hard.”

The targumist repeats his translation of *keri* as “hostile” in verses 23, 24, and 27, but he changes it in verse 28 to “strong anger” to avoid a redundancy, and for no other reason.

A third example is in verses 19 and 20 where we find *Onkelos* using two different synonyms for “fruit.” The verses in the *Targum* read, “and the earth under you (will be) as dry as grass so that it yields no fruit (*Onkelos: peirin*) (19), and “The tree of the land will not produce its fruit (*Onkelos: ibeih*) (20).”

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

A fourth example is in our commentary on verse 36. We point out that “the noun ‘enemies’ occurs frequently in this chapter and our targumist varies his renderings to avoid overusing the same term.” In our appendix (pages 318-319) we elaborate:

Targum commentators frequently read more into our targumist’s wording than the words themselves warrant. Adler (Netina LaGer), for example, observes that our translator generally represents the Hebrew “oyeiv,” “enemy,” as “ba’alei d’vaveikhon,” as in verses 32, 34, 37, and 38, but he uses “d’saneihon” here. He defines the former as “haters,” individuals with harmless emotions, and the latter as sinister and hurtful “enemies.” He claims that each is appropriate in context. However, it is more likely that there is no essential difference between the two Aramaic terms and that our translator resorts to synonyms to avoid excessive repetitions of the same word. Additionally, there are Onkelos versions that read “ba’alei d’vaveikhon” here and the Sperber and Berliner versions have “d’saneihon” in verse 39.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

Have we complicated your understanding of the translator’s task by introducing a stylistic change that is neither consistent nor makes any substantive difference in the understanding of the biblical text? It may represent a literary and linguistic enhancement of the translation, but is it confusing? Did we search, as some commentators on *Onkelos* do, for reasons for the change that is not true, or is the evidence that the targumist uses this literary device so frequently that we have satisfactorily proven that he does so simply to assure the refinement of his translation?

Can you distinguish the difference between this stylistic change and the other changes he makes in translating Scripture, such as protecting the dignity of Israelite ancestors, explaining metaphors, or providing clarity to verses that are unclear? Again we ask, what kind of “stretch room” may a translator be allowed before he is accused of taking too much liberty with a biblical text? For a population that relies on translation to access Scripture, what safeguards can be established that will ensure that the translation has the necessary integrity and is still “the word of God”? Can we rely only upon comparisons of translations to decide what the translator intended? Can we depend on our understanding of the scholarship and credibility and the perceived goal of the translator? The “scientific tools” he uses and the sources from which he derived his translation? Are we correct in comparing *Onkelos* to the *Tannaitic Midrashim* and arguing that the targumist derived his understanding of the passages’ simple meaning from these earlier sources? Discuss these and other considerations.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In the final *parashah* in Vayikra, we are confronted, in chapter 26, with what has become known as the *tochachah*, “the admonition.” After assuring the Israelites that faithfulness to God and the Torah will result in a happy and fruitful life in the Holy Land, the Torah outlines the dire consequences that will befall the community if it disregards the law and violates it. In our commentary (page 217), we provide a framework for understanding the need for this form of public “admonition”:

Maimonides states (in the introduction to his Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin, Chelek) that a wise person who understands how the world functions does good because the behavior is good and avoids bad because the act is bad; however others behave properly because they expect to receive a reward in this world and/or the world to come, and they avoid what is wrong lest they be punished. Ben Azzai has the same teaching as Maimonides in Pirkei Avot 4:2. Since the vast majority of people fall into the latter group, chapter 26 lists a host of rewards that people receive for obeying the divine commands and the punishments that are inflicted when they fail to do so. Yeshayahu Leibowitz (in Seven Years of Discourses on the Weekly Torah Reading) points out that the Torah addresses both classes of people in different sections of the Torah. He cites the Shema prayer as an example: Deuteronomy 6:4-10 speaks to the small group of wise people (such as Maimonides and ben Azzai), and Deuteronomy 11:13–25, like Leviticus 26, to the much larger population. Abraham ibn Ezra also recognizes (in his commentary to Exodus 20:2) that many biblical portions are directed to the lesser-educated multitude; these sections speak in the language of the multitude and contain concepts that the people can grasp with ease.

The passages reveal a God who interacts with the world, displaying all forms of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic attributes in response to the demonstration of loyalty or disloyalty of the Jewish community to their covenantal commitment. For theological “purists,” such divine behavior is irreconcilable with their perceptions of God. They would agree that individuals and societies that ignore the divine imperatives inhering in the social, ethical, and spiritual value system found in the Torah will most certainly suffer the consequences of their behavior, but only through the natural law that God created. So, too, those who adhere to the laws will benefit naturally from their compliance with it.

Antigonos of Sokho spoke against the majority who do good for the sake of a reward and try to stay away from wrong acts to avoid punishment. In *Pirkei Avot* 1:3, he is reported to have said, “Do not be like servants who serve their master on condition of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve their master not on condition of receiving a reward.”

How do we “navigate” our relationship with God between these two views? Do you feel comfortable with the idea that the Torah is presenting two different views, each for a separate audience? Are you bothered by either view? How can the Torah depict God anthropomorphically becoming so “angry” and “hostile” to either punish disobedience so horribly, or even allow any punishment to be meted out?

The “admonition” is repeated, with some notable changes, in chapter 28 of *Deuteronomy*. There the warnings are written in the singular, while here they are written in the plural. Some commentators explain that the plural is addressed to the people at large and the singular to individuals. They say that it was important to realize that an individual is responsible for his/her own behavior, but unless society promotes a healthy value system, it is exceedingly difficult for an individual to extricate himself or herself from the environment. Hence, to foster proper societal behavior there is a strong focus on the corporate life of the Jew. How does Jewish law further this idea?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 26:12 and commentary, “MY *SHEKHINAH* TO DWELL” (page 218, continuing on page 221). Understanding the targumist’s use of *Shekhinah* to modify anthropomorphisms.
2. See 26:42 and commentary, “I REMEMBER . . . I REMEMBER” (page 229, continuing on page 228). *Onkelos* changes a tense to obviate the notion that God can forget.
3. See 26:46 and commentary, “TORAH” (page 231). *Onkelos* changes the plural *Torot* to the singular Torah and does not reflect the theological interpretation that the Bible’s *Torot* denotes both the Written and Oral Law.