

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS
By Dr. Avigail Rock

This week's shiurim are dedicated in memory of
Moshe Eliezer Maeir Stillman z"l
by Isaac Ely Stillman

Lecture #1:
Targum Onkelos

A. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the world of biblical exegesis (*parshanut*), one must become familiar with the major exegetes (*parshanim*; singular, *parshan*). This is my overarching goal in this series of weekly lectures. We will examine the unique style of each *parshan* individually, from his particular methodology to the influence of his life experiences on the nature of his commentary. At the same time, we will deal at length with the contribution of each exegete to *parshanut* in general. Naturally, in this framework, we cannot deal with all of the biblical exegetes, or even with most of them; rather, we will focus on those *parshanim* who, in my opinion, have had the most significant impact on the world of biblical commentary. I will try, in each lecture, to bring examples from the Torah portion of that week. In this lecture, we will cite numerous verses from both *Parashat Bereishit* and *Parashat Noach*.

Before we begin our analysis, we must address the following pressing question: when and why did biblical exegesis emerge in Jewish history? It is logical to assume that the generation that received the Torah understood its instructions. Similarly, it is logical to assume that in subsequent generations, parents bequeathed to their children an understanding very close to that of the generation that stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai. However, as the chronological distance from Sinai grew, the meaning of the text became progressively more obscure for those who studied it.

Take, for example, the description of the manna in *Shemot* 16:31: "And it was like a white coriander seed; and the taste of it was like a wafer in honey." This verse is a bit perplexing for the modern mind. What is the taste of "a wafer in honey"? What exactly does a "white coriander seed" look like? Ostensibly, the generation that received the Torah understood these references, just as Shakespeare's plays were understood by his Elizabethan audience.

Nevertheless, a modern reader may find it difficult to understand the metaphors and associations that the Bard employs.

Not only do obscure words and abstruse expressions require an explanation; the syntax may be challenging as well. The difficult structure of a given verse or passage may have been much clearer at the time of its writing; alternatively, the words of the Masoretic authorities may hold the key to its explication. However, in the absence of these elements, there is a pressing need to present an understanding that is reasonable and fitting for comprehending the biblical text.

I have chosen to open this series with Onkelos and his Targum (translation) of the Torah, and we will begin with a few brief words about the general nature of biblical translation.

B. TRANSLATION AS AN EXEGETICAL TOOL

Translation is inherently commentary. When a given word has a number of possible meanings and the translator chooses a specific term from among many options, this translator is explaining the word in a definitive way and excluding all other options. For example, let us take *Bereishit* 4:7, a most difficult verse. God is speaking to Kayin, who is upset that his offering has been rejected while his brother Hevel's has been accepted. God reassures him that there is no reason to despair:

If you improve, *se'et*;
And if you do not improve, sin crouches at the door.

It is not clear what the term *se'et* means. Onkelos (and Rashi, who follows in his footsteps) translates the term as "it will be let alone for you" — that is, it will be forgiven.¹ Accordingly, he determines that one should understand and punctuate the verse in this way: "If you improve your actions, you will be forgiven. But if you do not improve, sin crouches at the door." The Malbim, however, explains the term *se'et* as related to the term "*maset*," a gift or tribute;² God is thus saying to Kayin that it will not help him whether he improves (i.e., increases) his offering or not; the result will be the same, because "sin crouches at the door" — i.e., acts are more significant than offerings.³ Thus, the translation of the word

¹ Cf. *Bereishit* 50:17, where "*sa*" refers to bearing or pardoning a sin.

² Cf. *Bereishit* 43:34. Medieval exegetes offered many and sundry explanations of the term *se'et* (see ibn Ezra, Ramban, Seforno); I have chosen the Malbim's explanation, as this influences the syntactic structure of the verse.

³ In Malbim's words: "Thus, God revealed to him that He does not desire offerings; rather, 'Behold, listening is better than any fine offering' (I *Shmuel* 15:22). The essence is improving one's actions, not improving the *maset* or the offering, as improving the *maset* will not be desirable in His eyes. [God is saying to Kayin:] whether you improve the *maset* or not, it is not desirable in My eyes, as there is no qualitative difference in it."

se'et is determinative not only in terms of the definition of this one word, but in terms of the syntactic structure of the verse as a whole.

No translation is perfect. No translator can ever render the text in a precise manner. Very often, the process of translation causes the text to lose the beauty of the original text; when we speak of the Torah's language in particular, we may even say that it loses some holiness as well; at the end of the day, any translation takes away from the Torah's inherent value as "the words of the living God" (*Yirmiyahu* 23:36).

The problematic nature of translation comes to the fore in a number of ways. One of them is wordplay. Consider, for example, *Bereishit* 2:23: "This shall be called woman (*isha*), because this was taken from man (*ish*)." Onkelos renders: "This shall be called *itteta*, for this was taken from her husband (*balah*)." The verse in the Torah teaches that the etymological root of "*isha*" is "*ish*," but this concept is utterly lost in the Aramaic translation.⁴

An additional sphere in which translation creates difficulties is that of words that express more than one meaning. At the moment when the translator picks a given definition, the reader loses every other potential meaning of the word. An example of this can be found in *Bereishit* 2:25: "And they were both *arummim*, the person and his wife..." Immediately afterward, the next verse (3:1) states: "And the serpent was *arum*." Naturally, *arum* is rendered "naked" in the first verse, while in the latter it is rendered "clever" or "subtle," but the Torah clearly desires to link the two. As these two terms are unrelated in Aramaic, the translation forfeits the eloquence of the Torah.

The inevitable conclusion is that no translation can possibly maintain the full multiplicity of meanings in the original; the translator is compelled to pick one meaning only — generally, one of the simpler ones — and to abandon the rest. Thus, one must necessarily turn the Torah into a shallow, superficial book, without the unique depth and variegated layers hidden within the original text. This approach is expressed by the Sages in the Talmud:

R. Yehuda says: Whoever translates a verse as it is written is a fabricator, and whoever adds to it is a blasphemer and an execrator. (*Kiddushin* 49a)

A precisely literal translation of the text cannot encompass the conceptual truth of the verse, and a translation such as this is liable to lose the message of the verse. Conversely, a rendering of the message without the literal translation may succeed in transmitting the idea hidden in the verses, but it ignores the fact that

⁴ It may be that Onkelos is formulating an alternative etymology, using the wordplay of *itteta* and the term *nesiva*, "taken," which is synonymous with the word *aitei*, "brought" (used in the previous verse). Indeed, a bride is "brought" or "taken" from her father's house to her husband's house.

we are talking about a sacred text in which every word carries meaning. This, apparently, is the explanation of a statement in *Megillat Ta'anit* (Addendum):

And these are the days on which we fast...

On the 8th of Tevet, the Torah was written in Greek in the days of King Ptolemy, and the darkness came to the world for three days.⁵

C. WHEN WAS THE TORAH FIRST TRANSLATED?

Despite the Sages' negative view of the translation of the Torah, as seen in the above source, at some point in history, they realized the contemporary exigency of crafting a faithful rendering of the Torah. When did the need for biblical translation arise?

Aside from the problem of comprehension that we discussed earlier – the chasm of time that may make it difficult to understand *Tanakh* – at the beginning of the period of the Second Temple, an additional impediment to understanding the Torah came into being — a basic lack of familiarity with the language of *Tanakh*, biblical Hebrew. From the time of the Babylonian exile and onwards, the Aramaic language progressively spread among the Jews, as well as among the other peoples of the Ancient Near East. Slowly, the use of Hebrew decreased, until Aramaic became the dominant tongue in the region. This process necessitated a rendering of the Torah in a spoken tongue, because without such a translation, there was no way of approaching *Tanakh*, except for the scholars who still knew Hebrew.

According to the view of the Sages, the first translations of the Torah arose during the Return to Zion in the beginning of the Second Temple era (5th century BCE). *Nechemia* 8:8 describes Ezra's public Torah reading in the following way:

They read from the scroll, from the Torah of God, clearly, and they gave the meaning, so that the people understood the reading.

This is how the Sages understand the verse:

Rav said: What does it mean: "They read from the scroll, from the Torah of God, clearly, and they gave the meaning, so that the people understood the reading"? "They read from the book, from the Torah of God" — this is Scripture; "clearly" — this is translation. (*Megilla* 3a)

The Rambam writes:

⁵ This formulation of the Sages may present the inverse of the three days of preparation before the Torah was given at Sinai (*Shemot* 19:10-16).

From the days of Ezra, the custom was to have a translator translate for the people whatever the reader would read in the Torah, so that they might understand the content of the words. (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 12:2)

Thus, we may point to the period of Ezra as the first step in the development of biblical exegesis.

It may be that the primordial translation described in the Book of Nechemia is not a methodical, systematic rendition of the Torah in its entirety; rather, it appears that the verse describes a translation according to the needs of the audience, picking out difficult expressions and explaining them. Later, apparently in the era of the Mishna, translations of *Tanakh* became an accepted phenomenon throughout Jewish communities. The *mishna* attests to this by enumerating the guidelines of simultaneous translation of the public Torah reading:

One who reads the Torah... he should not read for the translator more than one verse; but in the Prophets, three. (*Megilla* 4:4)

In light of the Sages' skepticism toward biblical translation, they saw fit to choose one rendition and to grant this *targum* primogeniture, thereby preventing an outbreak of do-it-yourself translation. From among the Aramaic translations of Scripture,⁶ the one which most accorded with the Sages' viewpoint – both because of its faithfulness to the text as much as possible and its exclusion of a gross number of independent addenda – was Targum Onkelos. (This choice was as opposed to another famous *targum*, commonly attributed to Yonatan ben Uzziel and known as Pseudo-Jonathan, which weaves in Midrashic elements in almost every verses, as we will see below.) These qualities made Onkelos's *targum* **the Targum**, granting him the distinguished position of the official translator of the Torah.⁷ But who was Onkelos?

D. THE IDENTITY OF ONKELOS AND THE TIME OF THE TARGUM'S COMPOSITION

We have no exact information concerning the identity of Onkelos and the time of the composition of his Targum, and there are different views concerning the matter. Onkelos is mentioned in Tractate *Megilla*:

Said R. Yirmiya — alternatively, R. Chiya bar Abba: Onkelos the convert recited the Targum of the Torah from the mouths of R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua. (*Megilla* 3a)

⁶ The limitations of this series do not allow me to analyze the Greek translations of Scripture, but their place of honor remains unquestioned.

⁷ See for example, the following ruling of the Rambam, *Hilkhot Ishut* 8:4: "If one says to a woman, 'You are betrothed to me by this on the condition that I am literate,' he must read the Torah and translate it with Targum Onkelos."

However, this declaration is far from self-evident, and it is difficult to conclude based on this that Onkelos lived in the period of the Mishna (as I will shortly explain). It may be that the intent of this aggadic statement is to identify Onkelos as a student of R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua, much like R. Akiva, thereby declaring that Onkelos received his interpretation through the *mesora* and giving the seal of approval to his Targum.

Dr. Israel Drazin, an Onkelos scholar, proves in his analysis that we should apparently date Targum Onkelos around the year 400 of the Common Era.⁸ He offers two main proofs of this:

1. Onkelos is not mentioned in sources compiled before this time, such as the Talmud Yerushalmi and Tannaitic *midrashim* (such as the Mekhileta of Rabbi Yishmael, the Mekhileta of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the Sifra, and the Sifrei.)
2. Onkelos commonly quotes the abovementioned Tannaitic *midrashim*, which were compiled about the year 400 of the Common Era. Furthermore, he consistently uses the version of the later editions of the Sages' *midrashim*.

On the other hand, we should not date the life of Onkelos much later than this, since he is mentioned in the Talmud Bavli (e.g., *Megilla* 3a, *Avoda Zara* 11a, *Gittin* 56b).⁹

E. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF TARGUM ONKELOS

What characterizes Targum Onkelos, and what is so unique about his style that earned him such a distinguished standing?

We will enumerate a number of important points:

1. The Targum is a terse, literal translation that aims to explain the verses in a simple way, and it does not add details from the Midrash. This is opposed to the Targum Yerushalmi, et al. For example, the words “And the woman saw that the tree was good for food” (*Bereishit* 3:6), Onkelos translates simply: “And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat,” while the Targum Yerushalmi renders it, “And the woman perceived Samael, the Angel of Death.”

8 I. Drazin, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 50, No. 2 (1999), pp. 246-58.

9 Many miraculous tales are attributed to Onkelos, the most famous being the passage in *Avoda Zara*, in which the Roman emperor sends three Roman legions, one after another, in order to convince Onkelos to recant his conversion; Onkelos manages to convince them all of the veracity of the Torah, and it is they who convert — to Judaism. (Titus is identified as Onkelos's uncle in the passage in *Gittin*.)

2. The Targum avoids the anthropomorphization of God. Onkelos, out of respect for the divine, avoids attributing human acts or ascribing human feelings to God. There are a number of examples of this. Consider *Bereishit* 7:16 – after Noach enters the Ark, the verse reports, “And God closed for him.” Onkelos translates this, “And God protected him with His word,” stressing that God protects Noach with His utterance. Onkelos uses this language in order to refute the possible interpretation that God closes the door of the Ark with His hand. In another example from *Parashat Noach* (*Bereishit* 8:21), we find, “And God smelled the pleasant smell, and God thought to Himself...” In this verse, there are two expressions that express physicality: God smells an odor, and God thinks to Himself (literally, “said to His heart”). Onkelos translates the expression “And God smelled” as “And God accepted with goodwill;” “God thought to himself” is translated: “And God said in His utterance.”

3. When the Torah uses a metaphor, Onkelos is exacting in explaining the significance of the metaphor and not translating it literally, as this would be a ludicrous rendering of the Torah. For example, the words “And the Israelites were coming out with a high hand” (*Shemot* 14:8), Onkelos translates, “And the Israelites were coming out with a bare head” — that is, the nation leaves openly, ostentatiously.

4. In translating verses of biblical poetry, Onkelos breaks away from his customary approach; he does not explain the verses according to their simple meaning, but rather according to their prophetic content. For example, Yaakov’s blessing of Yehuda, “And to the choice vine, his she-donkey’s child” (*Bereishit* 49:11), Onkelos renders, “The nation will build his sanctuary.” The “choice vine” is seen as the Jewish people, since they are often compared in *Tanakh* to a grapevine;¹⁰ he reinterprets the word “*ben*” as related not to *ben*, son, but *beneh*, build; and the word “*atono*” is translated as “his sanctuary,” based on the Temple’s *shaar ha-iton*, “the entrance gate.”¹¹

5. The Targum attempts to prevent errors that may lead to the desecration of God’s name. Sometimes, the Torah uses an identical word for something sacred and profane. Thus, for example, the term *mizbeiach* is used equally for an altar dedicated to God and one designated for pagan worship. Nevertheless, Onkelos translates these words differently. He translates a reference to an altar for God as *madbecha*, cognate to *mizbeiach* – for example, *Bereishit* 8:20 reports, “And Noach built an altar for God,” which he translates, “And Noach built a *madbecha* before God.” On the other hand, the term he uses for pagan altars is *agora* – for example, *Shemot* 34:13 commands, “For you must demolish their altars,” and Onkelos applies this to the pagan *agora*. Even the word *elohim* is ambiguous; in *Tanakh*, this is

¹⁰ For example, *Yirmiyahu* 2:21.

¹¹ See *Yechezkel* 40:15.

sometimes a sacred name and sometimes a term for pagan deities. In the latter case, Onkelos uses the term *dachala*, fear — that is, inherently powerless objects that are invested with powers by those who worship them. This is how he renders, for example, *Shemot* 20:19: “Do not make for yourselves silver gods or golden gods” — “*dachalan* of silver or *dachalan* of gold.”

6. The Targum strives to maintain the dignity of the leaders of the Jewish nation, often concealing character defects in the Patriarchs. When the Torah describes an act by using a term with an extremely negative connotation, Onkelos transmutes the negative word to a neutral word. For example, in the story of the theft of the blessings by Yaakov, Yitzchak says to Esav, “Your brother came with guile, and he took your blessing” (*Bereishit* 27:35). Onkelos renders this, “Your brother came with cleverness, and he received your blessing.” Thus, Onkelos changes two things: Yaakov is described as “clever” rather than “guileful,” and instead of “taking” the blessing, he merely “receives” it. Consequently, a reader of the Targum perceives that Yaakov is not a thief, but a clever man; furthermore, Yaakov is the receptacle for Yitzchak’s blessings, not the one who takes them. Similarly, the Torah unequivocally states that “Rachel stole her father’s *terafim*” (*Bereishit* 31:19), but Onkelos softens this and translates it as “And Rachel took the images.”

7. The rendition of the Targum follows the Halakha. Sometimes, Onkelos translates the verse according to the tradition of the Oral Torah, and not according to the simple meaning of the verse. For example, *Bereishit* 9:6 states, “One who spills the blood of a person, by a person shall his blood be spilled,” establishing the death penalty for homicide. Onkelos translates this verse in the following way: “One who spills the blood of a person, with witnesses, by the utterance of judges, his blood shall be spilled.” In other words, the death penalty requires eyewitness testimony and a judicial verdict. Another example is the rendering of the famous phrase, “Do not cook a kid in its mother’s milk” (*Shemot* 23:19, et al.), which Onkelos transforms into “Do not eat meat in milk.”

F. THE IMPORTANCE OF TARGUM ONKELOS

There is no doubt that Targum Onkelos succeeded, for over a millennium, in maintaining its honored place in the Jewish community as the authoritative and sanctified translation of the Torah. In every publication of the Torah with commentaries, Targum Onkelos maintains its place of honor, and throughout the Jewish world, the weekly study of the Targum is a halakhic obligation. The formula of “twice Scripture, once Targum” is in fact codified (*Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim* 285).

In this lecture, we have seen that the words of the Targum were chosen by Onkelos with exactness and precision, based on pedagogical and theological motives; therefore, one who reads Targum Onkelos must delve into it in order to understand it thoroughly. For this purpose, the works of a large number of commentators and researchers, old and new, are available to use in the study process.

May we all merit the blessing of the Talmud:

R. Huna bar Yehuda says in the name of R. Ammi: A person should always complete his portions together with the congregation, twice Scripture and once Targum... for if one completes his portions together with the congregation, his days and years are prolonged. (*Berakhot* 8a-b)

(Translated by Rav Yoseif Bloch)