Maimonides, in his *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhōt Tefillah* (12:10), gives the origin of the Aramaic translation of the Torah. The process began orally with Ezra in the fifth century BCE, and culminated years later with written translations of the Torah into Aramaic. He informs us that Ezra introduced the public reading of the Torah with a *meturgeman*, a person who translated Torah passages into Aramaic. Ezra also democratized Jewish education by establishing a new class of interpreters of Torah called *soferim* who began to replace the priests as teachers of the people. Ezra was thus responsible for instituting measures that set the stage for a widespread understanding of Torah through translation and interpretation. He was also responsible for setting the stage for the birth of "Rabbinic Judaism" that came into fruition after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, and a new understanding of biblical texts that often departed from their literal meaning.\(^1\)

While neither Ezra nor his translators produced a written targum accessible to the masses, the process of translating the Bible into Aramaic resulted, before long, in the availability of multiple written targumim, each with its own style and subjectivity. Actually, the oldest Aramaic targum discovered, but only in fragments, was found in Qumran, which means that it must be dated prior to the destruction of the Qumran community in 68 CE.\(^2\) We can safely say that there was a written targum in use by the first or second century BCE.

Other targumic fragments were found in the Cairo Genizah. There are also complete targumim on the Pentateuch. One is incorrectly called the *Targum Yonatan*, which scholars call *Pseudo Jonathan*, for Yonatan ben-Uzziel did not actually write a targum on the Pentateuch. The second is the *Targum Stanley M. Wagner possesses six degrees from Yeshiva University, including rabbinic ordination and a doctorate in Jewish history. He is Rabbi Emeritus of the BMH-BJ Congregation in Denver; Professor Emeritus at the University of Denver; Founding Director and Director Emeritus of its Center for Judaic Studies; Founding Director and Director Emeritus of the Mizel Museum of Judaica in Denver and is the author, co-author or editor of thirteen books. Since 2000 he has been co-author with Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin of a five-volume work, Onkelos on the Torah, of which Genesis-Numbers has been published by Gefen Publishing House, and Deuteronomy is scheduled for publication in early 2010. He resides in Jerusalem with his wife, Dr. Renee G. Rabinowitz.*
Neophyti. The dating of those targumim is subject to scholarly debate. These two targumim differ greatly from the Targum Onkelos in that they include many aggadic insertions in their translations. Out of all the Aramaic translations, Targum Onkelos became the authorized, authoritative, and accepted Aramaic translation of the Torah, called "Targum didan [our Targum]" (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 3a). It is important for us to understand why this was so and when this took place.

In order to assess properly the importance of Targum Onkelos as a translation, it is important to note that the interpretations of Torah, first by the soferim, then by the Pharisees and, finally, by the tannaitic and amoraic sages, proliferated enormously between the fifth century BCE and the fifth century CE. This was the period in which highly important literary works were written, the Mishnah, the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, and collections of halakhic and aggadic midrashim. These works expanded Jewry's understanding of the Bible. Biblical exegesis, shaped by oral traditions transmitted from generation to generation, along with the application of hermeneutical rules of interpretation, provided new biblical textual insights. Indeed, that which most divided the Pharisees from the Sadducees in the Second Commonwealth period and the Karaites from the Rabbanites in the early Middle Ages revolved precisely around the question of exactly what the Bible is telling us.

Furthermore, it is quite probable that the overwhelming majority of Jews during this period were not sufficiently familiar with Hebrew to enable them to understand either the Bible or the Hebrew collections of midrashic materials. That is why the targumim became so important, the most important of which was the Targum Onkelos. That is also why it was ordained by the sages that Targum Onkelos, rather than the Talmud or midrashic collections, be reviewed along with the Torah portion each and every week (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 8a-b). So important did Targum Onkelos become that Rashi in his commentary on the Babylonian Talmud (Kiddushin 49a) could say that Targum Onkelos came from Mount Sinai along with God's Revelation. That may sound anachronistic, but what Rashi probably meant was that this translation was to be regarded as sacred, as though it had come from Mount Sinai, an astounding statement from the premier commentator on the Torah and Babylonian Talmud. That is precisely why Rashi, Ramban, and many
other biblical commentators turned to Onkelos when they sought an authentic understanding of the text. Who was this Onkelos and when did he live? It is important that we first correct the most common misconceptions about Onkelos. He is not a *ger*, a convert. He is not the nephew of Titus, Hadrian, or any other Roman emperor. He did not live in the second century CE. He was not a student of Rabbi Yehoshua or Rabbi Eleazar, disciples of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai. In fact, we simply cannot identify the author of what is commonly known as Targum Onkelos, but we do know that the above "facts" are erroneous. These misconceptions about Onkelos emanate in part from one solitary source which directly links the name "Onkelos *ha-ger* [the proselyte]" with our targum and dates it to the early second century. That source is found in the Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 3a), where it is recorded that Onkelos *ha-ger* translated the Torah into Aramaic under the guidance of Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Yehoshua. They were disciples of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, placing them and Onkelos in the early second century.

This statement sounds authoritative. However, the author of this statement, Rabbi Yirmeyahu, lived in the middle of the fourth century; some 200 years after Onkelos allegedly lived. This fourth-century source is also cited in the Palestinian Talmud (Megillah 1:8), with a major difference. In the Palestinian Talmud it states that it was "Aquías *ha-ger*" who translated the Torah into "Greek" under the guidance of Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Yehoshua. It would be rather strange if Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eleazar had two pupils, with names that sounded much alike, who each wrote different translations, one in Greek and the other in Aramaic. However unusual this may sound, it is in fact the contention of many. This perplexity led the author of the article entitled "Onkelos and Aquila" in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1972) to consider them as one person who wrote both translations. That is also highly unlikely.

Rather, the historical truth is that there was an Aquilas *ha-ger* who translated the Torah into Greek in the early second century, who was a disciple of Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Yehoshua, and who was the nephew of a Roman emperor. But, inadvertently and mistakenly, Aquilas, a Greek name, became corrupted into the name Onkelos with just the addition of a *nun*, a very common Aramaic addition. This is how Aquilas became Onkelos, the supposed author of the Aramaic Targum. Indeed, that switch caused much confusion in

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5 This is how Aquilas became Onkelos, the supposed author of the Aramaic Targum. Indeed, that switch caused much confusion in
the Talmud. For example, In the Babylonian Talmud (Avodah Zarah 11a), Onkelos is called Onkelos bar Klonimus; while in the Babylonian Talmud (Gittin 56b) we find an Onkelos bar Klonikus who was the nephew of Titus and wanted to convert; and according to the Haggahot ha-Gra [the emendations of the Vilna Gaon], the reading should be that Onkelos was the nephew of Andrianus [Hadrian].

This indicates an uncertainty among the sages as to the real identity of Onkelos. It is very likely, therefore, that the one single fourth-century talmudic source which connects the Aramaic Targum with a person called Onkelos who lived in the early second century may be historically inaccurate. The fact is that we do not really know who the author of the Targum Onkelos is, but we now know when it was written, and it was not, and could not have been, written in the second century, in the Land of Israel.

Israel Drazin was the first scholar to make the remarkable discovery that the targum called Targum Onkelos was composed in the late fourth century. By studying the thousands of differences between this targum and the biblical text, and comparing the targumic changes with all of the tannaitic midrashim that were finally edited around the end of the fourth century, he found that Targum Onkelos uses, over and over again, all of the tannaitic midrashim, even using the same words contained in the final redacted versions of Bereshit Rabbah, Mekhila, Sifra, Sifrei, and Sifrei Zuta.

Furthermore, the Aramaic of the Targum Onkelos is clearly Babylonian and not Palestinian, as any perusal of the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds will bear out. The suggestion by some scholars that Targum Onkelos was written in Palestine in the second century but the targum we use was edited in Babylonia at a later time requires a real stretch of the imagination. Parts of these collections may have been written earlier than 400 C.E., but since the nature and extent of Onkelos' borrowing strongly suggests that our targum was written after these collections were redacted at the end of the fourth century, and because the Aramaic of Targum Onkelos is so overwhelmingly Babylonian, it would have had to be written originally in Babylonia and not merely edited there. That sums up a very powerful proof for this new dating of Targum Onkelos, admittedly against many scholars' opinions. Placing the dating of Targum Onkelos at the end of the fourth century explains why this
targum is not mentioned in any source written before this date, including the early midrashim and the Jerusalem Talmud.\(^6\)

While it may matter to scholars whether what we call Targum Onkelos was written in the early second century or late fourth century, or whether Onkelos was really the name of the author of this targum or not, to most lay-people what matters most is that what we call the Targum Onkelos became the standard authorized version of the Aramaic translation of the Torah. For the past 1,600 years, the practice in many circles was, and is, to read Targum Onkelos every week. Our sages felt that whoever wanted really to understand peshat, the literal meaning of the Bible, had to turn to Onkelos, despite the thousands of deviations from the Hebrew text of the Torah found in this targum.

How do we reconcile the contention that Onkelos is so literal with the startling number of changes that are in the targum? To answer this question we must turn to the actual translation to discover some interesting elements in Onkelos' uniqueness. First, it ought to be emphasized that any translator has a very serious and difficult task, in any age and with any work. The Onkelos translator (I shall continue to use the name that has been assigned to this targum for more than 1,600 years) was not only concerned with conveying God's words accurately to a reading audience that did not know Hebrew. He also desired to do so in a way which would not confuse them, and in a way which he felt would protect God's honor and the honor of the Jewish people, even if it meant not being literal at times. Indeed, the Onkelos translator made a conscious, almost heroic effort not to translate words in ways which were not literal. That is what made him special. He did not incorporate in his translation interpretations of the biblical text accepted by the oral tradition upon which Jewish law was based unless he felt that their interpretation was, in fact, the literal understanding of the text. Thus we find many instances of Onkelos' translation being contrary to what became accepted as Jewish law.

The translator also avoided incorporating midrashic materials, however inspiring or educational they were, into his translation. He always wanted to understand the text, and left others to interpret it. Although one may say that any translation is an interpretation in terms of what the words mean, Targum Onkelos is not an interpretation in that it is not exegetical; that is, in the sense that one wishes to use the text for the purpose of deriving a law or a value from a word or phrase. This is an important distinction.
There is an important tannaitic controversy that will clarify this point and enable us to understand Onkelos' style to a greater extent. There was in the early second century a controversy between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael on how to understand the Torah. Rabbi Akiva believed that every single word in the Torah was important because it came from God and, through interpretation, the text could yield God's truths. Rabbi Yishmael, on the other hand, believed *dibberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam*, that God's Torah was expressed "in human language," and God was concerned, so to speak, that His message be understood. Rabbi Yishmael believed that the Torah could most certainly be interpreted, and he even formulated 13 hermeneutical rules governing such interpretation. But he also felt that when the Torah repeats words, or shifts tenses, or gender, or plural and singular, in one verse, most often it is simply the biblical literary style. Unusual grammatical constructs did not always suggest that God wanted to inform us of something special.

In contrast to the view of some scholars, it is clear that the Targum Onkelos translator embraced the opinion of Rabbi Yishmael rather consistently. This accounts for many of the "changes" made by the targumist. Over and over again, but not always, we find him translating verbs in a verse so that they will be uniformly in the present, past, or future tense, and nouns so they will be appropriately feminine or plural or singular, regardless of the biblical Hebrew. In the spirit of Rabbi Yishmael, it did not discomfort him to do so. In addition, almost 80 percent of Targum Onkelos' deviations from the biblical text are simply clarifications made to dispel any confusion in the minds of the readers. These stylistic emendations do not constitute veering from the *peshat*.

However, it was Rabbi Akiba's opinion which prevailed. This resulted in the extraordinary interpretations we find in midrashim, and later among *parshanim*, the commentators on the Bible. They are valuable, edifying and inspiring. Halakhically they are binding. But that should not cause us to blur the distinction between *peshat* and *derash*, the literal and interpretative understandings of the text, or the difference between the Torah *she-bi-khtav* [the Written Law] and the Torah *she-be'al peh* [the Oral Law]. Nor should we understand *derash* as literally as we would a biblical text. Of course, it is perfectly acceptable, even desirable, to interpret Torah in the spirit of *pardes*; that is, *peshat*, *remez*, *derash* and *sod* – literally, allegorically, homiletically,
and mystically. This will yield new understandings of the Torah. But we ought to be careful not to be carried away, sometimes far away, from the Torah's meaning or intention. Sometimes focusing on peshat, or at the very least, recognizing the difference between peshat and derash, is essential.

It is for this reason that Targum Onkelos became such an important work in Jewish life and was included in the publication of most printed Bibles since the invention of the printing press. This targum, even with its many deviations, is the translation which comes closest to the peshat, and the rabbis mandated that we read it weekly to keep us focused on the peshat, the literal meaning of the text. For this reason, biblical commentators also often depended upon Targum Onkelos to understand the peshat. For example, Saadiah Gaon, who translated the Torah into Arabic at the beginning of the 10th century, relied almost exclusively on Onkelos.

There are other reasons that compelled our targumist to provide a translation that was not always literal, or even prompted him to add words to those found in the biblical text, without causing our sages discomfort. First, there are more than 1,600 instances in which the targumist makes a change in texts relating to God. For example, the translator was concerned that because God's name Elohim is written in the plural, Jews would imagine that there were multiple deities. Hence, he substitutes everywhere the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God [Y-H-V-H] for Elohim. That, in and of itself, is bold. Then, the targumist also replaces anthropomorphic and anthropopathic descriptions of God; that is, God described with human form or emotions. In Exodus 3:7, God says: 'I have surely seen the affliction of My people, and I have heard its outcry.' The Onkelos translator replaces the anthropomorphisms with "It has been revealed before Me" instead of "I have seen," and "their cry has been heard before Me" instead of "I have heard." He also substitutes anthropomorphisms with "memra [word, wisdom, command]," or "yekara [glory]," or "shekhinah [a feeling of the Divine presence]." And he uses the Aramaic "kadam [before]" over 650 times to avoid the impression that we can directly encounter God. We rather relate "before" God.

Today, we take for granted God's incorporeality, but in the early centuries of the Common Era the belief in a God who had human features was widespread. While Maimonides (1138-1204) in his Mishneh Torah (Hilkhot Teshuvah 3:7) regards anyone who believes in the corporeality of God as a he-
retic, his interlocutor, the famous Abraham ben David of Posquières (c. 1246-1316), known more popularly as the RAAVAD, criticized Maimonides and wrote that there were many "greater and better people than him who believed [in an anthropomorphic God] because of scriptural and aggadic references."

The Onkelos translator was extremely heroic in his time to emphasize the incorporeality of God, and Rambam gives him credit for that courage in his *Guide of the Perplexed.*

The targumist also deviated from the literal meaning of the text when he wanted to protect the honor of the Jewish people. One example of many would be the biblical description, found in the beginning of Exodus, as to how the Israelite population grew in Egypt. The Bible has *paru va-yishretzu* [they multiplied and swarmed] like *sheratzim* [creeping things]. The targumist, unhappy with the description of the Israelites as "creeping things," replaces *va-yishretzu* with the much more dignified "they gave birth."

Another example is that Sarah's condition in her senior years is described in the Torah (Gen. 18:12) as *veloti* [literally: withered]. That is the way, for example, Artscroll translates the word. But the targumist, wishing to protect the honor of matriarch Sarah, translates it as having "grown old," not "withered." These are certainly conscious deviations from the literal meaning of the text, but for what the Onkelos translator considered a worthy purpose.

In addition, the translator very often interprets metaphors for what they mean. To use one of the most popular verses in the Torah as an example: *lo te-vashel gedi ba-ḥalev immo* ["you shall not cook a kid in its mother's milk"]. In Exodus 23:19, our targumist regarded this phrase as a metaphor, and translates it as "do not eat meat and milk." For him, this is precisely what the metaphor meant. This metaphor is found twice more in the Torah, again in Exodus and once in Deuteronomy, prompting the rabbis to issue the halakhah, based on the seemingly superfluous repetition that one could neither cook meat and milk together, eat them together, nor benefit from the mixture. This interpretation did not prompt our translator to change his translation in each of these cases. He translated all of the repetitions in precisely the same way, because, as we have indicated, he was not interested in incorporating halakhah in his translation.

In addition to these deviations, Onkelos often updates the names of places and payments mentioned in the Torah to names used in talmudic times. For
example, Abraham does not pay Ephron the Hittite 400 shekel for the sepulcher in Hebron, but 400 selaim, since the sola was the coinage used in the targumist's time.

As indicated, the targumist often clarifies biblical phrases by adding a word or two in order to elucidate statements which could otherwise be misconstrued. For example, the phrase poked avot al banim in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:5), is generally translated as meaning that God "visits the iniquity of parents upon the children." The Onkelos translator changes the phrase to read "visiting the guilt of the fathers upon rebellious children . . . when the children continue to sin as their fathers." Now, that is not what the Torah actually says, but that is what Targum Onkelos states in its translation. It takes some measure of courage to incorporate a phrase in an Aramaic translation of the Torah which does not appear in the Hebrew text; after all, Targum Onkelos is not a commentary, it is a translation. The targumist adds words that are not in the Hebrew text in many other places, such as Genesis 2:24, concerning Adam and Eve. The Torah informs us, al ken ya'azov ish et aviv ve-et immo ve-davak be-isko, which is generally translated as "therefore, a man shall abandon his father and mother and cleave to his wife." The targumist translates it as "Therefore, a man should abandon the house [beit mishkevei] of his father and mother . . . ." It is not that parents are abandoned; it is simply that the man moves out of his parents' home when he gets married.

Sometimes the deviations from the Hebrew text are very subtle; adding, changing, or deleting a single word or even a single letter. Finally, our targumist often uses biblical Hebrew in his translation when he feels that the biblical word best conveys the meaning, or he will even translate the text using Greek words when they will better resonate with his readers.

I cannot say that the Onkelos translator is always consistent. He does not always correct the tenses or gender of the Hebrew text when they are clearly inappropriate. He does not always explain metaphors. He does not even always replace anthropomorphisms. If he did, the targum would have entirely lost the flavor of Scripture and the translator probably would have lost his readers.

Targum Onkelos is a remarkable Aramaic translation of the Torah, venerated by the sages and students of the Bible for more than 1,600 years, and which, most assuredly, should be used today. Justice can hardly be done in
one essay to the importance and uniqueness of this remarkable work. I hope that our newly-published *Onkelos on the Torah* (*Bereishit, Shemot, Vayikra, Bemidbar*, with the last volume soon to be published) will fill a void and help revive a Jewish commitment to the ancient formula, mandating that we review the weekly portion, twice from the biblical text and once with Onkelos.

NOTES
1. See Nehemiah 8:8 and 13:24 and the Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 3a and Shabbat 115a, Jerusalem Talmud Shabbat 15c and Tosefta Shabbat 13 (14), 2.
4. Azariah dei Rossi, 16th century, noted in his book *Me’or Einayim* that people misunderstood the Hebrew abbreviation TY as Targum Yonatan when Targum Yerushalmi was intended. Many ancient Hebrew books used abbreviations before the printing press was invented to save scribal costs.
6. Indeed, we have been informed that a noted scholar at Bar Ilan University is building on Dr. Drazin's discovery by showing that the language of Onkelos is fourth-century Aramaic. Dr. Drazin introduced his discovery in his *Targum Onkelos to Deuteronomy* (New York: Ktav, 1982).
7. See Drazin's 1982 volume for a dozen examples from Deuteronomy, translating literally rather than inserting rabbinic halakhah: retaining the words "life for life" in 19:21, and "you shall cut off her hand" in 25:12, contrary to the halakhah that the person inflicting the damage should only pay money. Similarly, the targumist renders 21:18's "chasten" as "instruct," the simple meaning of the word according to its context in the verse, but contrary to the halakhah that a "perverse and defiant son" receives capital punishment.
8. The sources and discussion of the contrary approaches of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael are in *Encyclopedia Talmudit* (Israel, volume 7, columns 77-82). A discussion is also in Drazin and Wagner's *Onkelos on the Torah, Exodus* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2006) pp. xxvi-xxvii. See also Heschel, mentioned in the next note, for the most extensive discussion.
10. Drazin and Wagner, *Onkelos on the Torah, Leviticus* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2008) pp. xvii-xxi. Henry Malter, *Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1921). Saadiah, like Onkelos, translated the Torah in a rational manner, eschewed anthropomorphisms, halakhah and interesting homiletical interpretations [derash], which go beyond the plain original meaning of the biblical text. Both also update the biblical grammar to that of modern Hebrew, such as rendering many singular forms appropriate in biblical Hebrew even though they referred to many, to the plural, the true intent, and updated the names of biblical sites to the names known to the targum's readership.
11. The term *memra*, equivalent to the Greek *logos*, is inserted in Deuteronomy, for example, close to fifty times to avoid depicting the Deity anthropomorphically, performing tasks like humans or having a body. There are instances where *memra* is substituted for "mouth," "voice," "God fighting," "moving," "demanding," "charging," helping," "taking," making the world," and "being a consuming fire." The term *yekara*, "glory," is also utilized to avoid anthropomorphism, but it reflects the impact that God makes upon humans. Thus in 33:2, its only targumic appearance in Deuteronomy, it is in "brightness of His glory appeared." The brightness of God's glory appeared, but not God, who could not do so, being incorporeal.

12. *Shekhinah* is used in Onkelos to reflect the feeling that humans have of the Divine presence being immanent, or a feeling of the presence of God on earth, or transcendent, being in heaven. Thus, in Deuteronomy 1:42, the targumist changes the verse that states that God will not be in the midst of the Israelites, which suggests the possibility of a corporeal appearance, to the *shekhinah* not being present, meaning that the Israelites will not feel the presence of God. Similarly, instead of God being in heaven in 3:24, which suggests that God can be set in a single place, like a human body, it is the *shekhinah* that is there, the people feel that God is transcendent.

13. The term "*kadam*," like the Hebrew "*lifnei,*" means "before," and both add a sense of respect. It also removes an anthropomorphic depiction of the Deity. Thus, God does not "hear" in the Targum to Deuteronomy 1:34, which could suggest the existence of Divine ears, but the words are heard "before" the Lord. Similarly, 9:28 is changed to "an inability before the Lord" to avoid saying that God Himself is unable to do anything.

14. Maimonides cites Onkelos over 20 times in the first book of his *Guide of the Perplexed* to show his contemporaries, many of whom believed in a corporeal God, that the authoritative Targum Onkelos deviated hundreds of times in the Aramaic translation to remove many of these depictions, depictions that were only placed in the Bible because the Torah was written in the language of people, using their metaphorical statements.

15. There are close to 90 times in Deuteronomy that Onkelos changes the number or tense of a word, such as a participle to the perfect, an infinitive to imperfect and singular to plural. There are close to forty times that the targumist updates place names. There are also many instances throughout the entire translation where the Aramaic deletes the letters *vav* [and] and *he* [the] that indicate a specific item or person.

16. This occurs, for example, three times in Deuteronomy. See I. Drazin's *Targum Onkelos to Deuteronomy* (New York: Ktav, 1982) p. 31, and A. E. Silverstone, *Aquila and Onkelos* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1931) p. 152.