BOOK REVIEW

Onkelos on the Torah: Understanding the Bible Text, 5 vols., eds. Israel Drazin and Stanley M. Wagner (Jerusalem/New York: Gefen, 2011). Reviewed by Raymond Apple.

Targum Onkelos has long awaited a full translation into English. Israel Drazin and Stanley M. Wagner have now filled the gap by means of five handsomely produced volumes published by Gefen. Other literary classics – the Bible, Mishnah, Babylonian Talmud, Midrash Rabbah and Zohar – were rendered into English decades ago. However, several desiderata remained, including the Targum of Onkelos. There is a theory that the Soncino Press declined to translate the *Shulhan Arukh* for fear that it might make every ignoramus a *posek* (halakhic decisor), but why they did not turn their attention to *Targum Onkelos* is not known, especially in view of the rabbinic dictum that everyone should study the Targum on the weekly Torah portion (TB *Berakhot* 8a-b). As a major classical text, the Targum made the Pentateuch *morashah kehillat Ya'akov – an inheritance of the Congregation of Jacob* (Deut. 33:4) for Aramaic-speaking readers who knew little Hebrew, a problem already recognized in the Book of Nehemiah (13:24; cf. TB *Megillah* 3a and Rashi to *Megillah* 21b).

An English version of Onkelos was planned to accompany the translation of Rashi prepared by A. M. Silbermann and M. Rosenbaum (in association with Blashki and Joseph) in the 1920s and 30s, but the project was not realized. Ktav Publishers issued volumes on Onkelos some years ago, but the present work is in a class of its own. It is probably the most solid and comprehensive edition of the Targum ever published and will rehabilitate Onkelos for the modern age. Apart from the general introduction to the series, each volume has the Torah text in Hebrew, the Targum in Aramaic, an English translation of the Targum, a page-by-page commentary, an appendix with additional notes, a section of Onkelos highlights and discussion points, and the Hebrew text of the *haftarot* with a translation of their Aramaic Targumim. The English is elegant and it is delightful to come across a Torah work

Rabbi Dr. Raymond Apple is emeritus rabbi of the Great Synagogue, Sydney, and a former president of the Australian and New Zealand orthodox rabbinate.

that is not written in "*yeshivish.*" The font, layout and binding are attractive, and the books are a pleasure to handle.

Alhough the Targum is attributed to Onkelos, his identity – if, indeed, he existed – remains a mystery, despite the best efforts of the authors and other Targumists. Tradition (TB *Meg.* 3a, etc.) maintains that he was a proselyte, the son of a wealthy heathen from Asia Minor, and surrounded his name with legends that made the Targum seem romantic, regardless of its contents. Folk tradition identified him with Aquilas, the second-century translator of the Pentateuch into Greek. It asserted that the name Onkelos was an attempt to render Aquila (*Akilas*) into Hebrew (despite the orthographical problem of replacing *ayin* with *aleph*), and believed that Aquila sought to demonstrate his Jewish loyalty by producing an Aramaic *Hummash* in addition to his Greek translation (*Genesis Rabbah* 70:5). In TJ *Megillah* 71c, the rabbis eulogistically applied to Aquila the verse, *You are finer than all (other) people* (Ps. 45:3), although the reference is probably to his translation into Greek ("the fine language"). It is possible that when the Aramaic translation became widely known, it was colloquially spoken of as possessing the Aquila/Onkelos style.

The editors touch on these legends, but stick to scholarship. They separate the Aquila and Onkelos translations and conclude that little can be said with certainty about who produced the Targum that tradition associated with Onkelos. Since it uses tannaitic *midrashim* redacted about 400 CE, they posit that the work could not have come from an earlier date. They see in it the literary-philosophical stance of Rabbi Yishmael as against that of Rabbi Akiva (the contrast between the Yishmael and Akiva principles of interpretation is well spelled out in the introduction to the Exodus volume). Nonetheless, they do not satisfactorily explain why talmudic passages deriving from earlier than 400 CE speak of *targum didan* – "*our* Targum" (TB *Kiddushin* 49a) and have so many Targum references. The phrase, "*our* Targum", recognizes that there were many *targumim* – some dating back to Second Temple times (TB *Shabbat* 115a; cf. *Soferim* 5:15), some partial in scope, some relatively complete – against which Onkelos (if that is what is meant by *targum didan*) appears to have been the "authorized" version. Targum notes must have circulated for centuries, especially amongst the *meturgemanim*, the synagogue

officials who expounded the formal Torah portions in Aramaic (TB *Pesahim* 50b, *Kid.* 49a; Mishnah *Megillah*, ch. 4). There was, however, opposition to committing targumic renderings to writing, for fear that people would think them as sacred as the Torah text itself (TB *Meg*. 32a). All this is evidence that targumic material developed long before the year 400 and that many people must have had a hand in producing it. The editors could have said more about the existence of schools of translators, which indicates that "our" Targum was not composed by any one individual. The real question is who (an individual? a group?) *redacted* Onkelos, not who wrote it. For the sake of convenience, however, the editors constantly speak of "the targumist", a usage followed in this review, even though it may be that Onkelos as such never existed or that there were a number of "Onkeloses." The rabbinic Sages believed – against linguistic and other evidence – that Ezra authored all or most of the Targum, which was forgotten or lost over the centuries until Onkelos, whoever he was, reformulated it in the second century.

The introduction to Exodus, the first volume to appear in this series, and the more extensive introduction to Genesis both analyze the literary and ideological methodology of the Targum in an attempt to delineate its relationship to the Bible. It is a solid and helpful analysis, one that should be required reading for anyone interested in the subject. A similar attempt was already made by Nathan Marcus Adler in his Hebrew commentary, *Netinah la-Ger* – "A Gift to the Proselyte" (Vilna, 1875): the name is a play on the author's first name and the tradition that Onkelos was a proselyte. It is said, however, that Hasidic detractors called Adler's book *Nevelah la-Ger* – "Carrion for the Proselyte" (Deut. 14:21). The authors of the present work render obsolete some of Adler's views, e.g., that Aquilas and Onkelos were one and the same, that Onkelos rediscovered and wrote down the Targum, that the work follows the tradition of Rabbi Akiva, and that it was addressed to the scholar more than the common reader.

As indicated above, this translation is careful and stylish, avoiding two extremes – obfuscation on the one hand, and over-simplification on the other – although one can quibble here and there with the editors' choice of words. An instance is Genesis 1:2, where Onkelos renders *tohu va-vohu* as *tzadya vereikanya*, translated here as *unformed and empty* when *desolate* might be

better than *unformed*. Jastrow translates *tzediyah* in his *Dictionary* as "desolation."

One has to say that this work has a major drawback. Sometimes the English does not match the Aramaic text printed on the facing column, a problem that could have been avoided had the editors decided on a particular Aramaic version and insisted that the English match the Aramaic text. They state: "The Aramaic text upon which our translation, commentary and appendices are based relies upon Abraham Berliner, *Targum Onkelos* (Berlin, 1884) and Alexander Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic* (E. J. Brill, 1959). For technical reasons, the *Onkelos* text in this volume is from a different source. Hence, the reader will find discrepancies on a number of occasions." This is just not good enough. The "technical reasons" they mention seem to have been decided on by the publisher, but they detract from the reader's enjoyment. A detailed comment is made below about a leading example (deriving from Gen. 48:22) of this confusion.

It is also annoying to find that the notes which begin on the left-hand page, beneath the translation, move to the right-hand page and then resume on the next left-hand page, leaving the reader unsure of where to go.

When people study Rashi's commentary, they classically ask, "What was bothering Rashi?" Likewise, the editors of the present volume must have asked themselves many times, "What bothered Onkelos that made him change the Torah text?" Fortunately, they usually (though not always) succeed in finding a possible explanation. It is well known that Onkelos's work is not a mere literal translation of the Hebrew text, although this would already have merited a *dayyenu* (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan is much freer), but in many instances it takes the liberty of altering – even rewriting – the Bible for the sake of a philosophical or literary purpose. An example from the *Akedah* (Binding of Isaac) narrative is Genesis 22:14, on which the editors remark, "Onkelos rewrites the entire verse . . . seven changes are made," the main purpose being to remove anthropomorphisms. Sometimes the purpose of rewriting is the achievement of clarity. An example of an interpolation that makes the text clearer is Genesis 1:14, where *u-le-yamim ve-shanim*, literally *for ancient days*, becomes in Onkelos *u-le-mimnei vehon yomin u-shenin – for counting days and years*. Another example is Exodus 20:2, where *beit avadim*, literally *house of slaves*, becomes *beit avduta, house of servitude*.

Rabbinic interpretations are incorporated in the text, e.g., in Exodus 20:5 God *visits the guilt of the fathers upon the rebellious children (benin ma-radin)* who *continue to sin as their fathers*. In Exodus 20:13, where *lo tignov* is normally translated as *You shall not steal*, some Onkelos texts add *nefesh* (*a person*), thus interpreting it to mean *You shall not kidnap*. In Leviticus 19:32, *seivah*, *the hoary head*, becomes *de-savar be-Orayta, those who are aged in Torah* (not necessarily in years). Several times (e.g., Ex. 23:19, 34:26) the Bible ordains: *lo tevashel gedi ba-halev immo – you shall not cook a kid in its mother's milk*; this becomes *la teikhlun besar ba-halav, you shall not eat meat in* (or, with) *milk.* At times a post-biblical flavor is given to a word, e.g., in Leviticus 19:10, where *la-ger, for the stranger*, becomes *le-giyyorei – for proselytes* (similarly in verse 34; cf. Ex. 20:10). Onkelos is a Lover of Zion, as we see from Numbers 24:5 where *mah tovu ohalekha, how good are your tents*, becomes *ma tava ar'akh – how good is your land* (cf. Jer. 30:18).

Sometimes the editors fail to attach enough significance to a textual change that appears in some (though not all) versions of the Targum. In Jacob's final blessings, Genesis 48:22 reads in Hebrew *asher lakahti mi-yad ha-Emori beharbi u-ve-kashti – which I took from the Amorites with my sword and my bow.* The translation they give is precisely that, *with my sword and my bow*, but the Aramaic version they use is *bi-tzeloti u-ve-va'uti,* which means *with my prayer and my plea.* The resulting confusion is hard for the reader to work out, even though the two versions are mentioned in the editors' footnotes. What we are not given is a reference to TB *Bava Batra* 123a, which shows that the Sages preferred the spiritual to the militaristic interpretation; nor is it explained why "sword" is one of the terms for prayer (Adler quotes a view that prayer, like a sword, protects a person) or why there is a connection between *be-kashti, with my bow*, and a plea (the Hebrew consonants can be read as *bakkashati, my plea*). What is going on here is an ideological tug-of-war between military and spiritual weapons that may have taken place in the context of the Jewish revolt against Rome. One would have liked this issue to be addressed.

An immensely important feature of the Targum is the changing of the Divine Name from *Elohim* to *YHVH*. According to the editors, this change was made to avoid confusing the public with a name bearing the plural ending *im,*

an exception being Genesis 1:27, where the editors regard the phrase *betzelem Elohim*, *in the image of God*, as too well known for it to be altered (they also note in the Appendix to Genesis, "The targumist does not change *Elohim* to the Tetragrammaton where a pronoun is attached to *Elohim*, such as '*our* God'"). The plural ending of *Elohim* still arouses controversy, but it should be noted that in reference to *Ha-Shem* the name takes a singular verb and cannot refer to a plurality of gods. *Elohim* is generally explained as the plural of majesty; the intensity of power that the singular *Elo'ah/Eloha* is not strong enough to convey; or a status like *ne'urim* (youth) or *zekunim* (old age). Rabbinic exegesis has many theories about these two names: for instance, *Elohim* represents God as judge while *YHVH* suggests His mercy (see TJ *Ta'anit* 2:1; *Genesis Rabbah* 12:15 and 33:4; Rashi to Gen. 1:1). Onkelos is not likely to have wanted God to appear in the Torah in the aspect of mercy alone (or mostly so) without the attribute of justice, since Divine judgment of the world is so axiomatic to biblical philosophy. It may well be that the problem caused by the name *Elohim* lies in the sheer ambiguity of the word; it seems to be a generic term for a powerful being, not limited to *Ha-Shem* but sometimes denoting a pagan god (Ex. 20:3), an angel (Ps. 8:6), a human prince (Ex. 21:6), or a human judge (Ps. 82:1). It is also found as a form of superlative – e.g. *wrestling of God* (Gen. 30:8) or *a great city unto God* (Jonah 3:3) – which denotes "great" even in cosmic terms. The name *YHVH* certainly has nuances that have long been the subject of study and discussion, but there is no problem about who (or Who) He is. It could also be that *YHVH* has more passionate spiritual overtones, while *Elohim* suggests a more abstract, distant deity. Did Onkelos then prefer *YHVH* for reasons of clarity, emotion, or ideology? The authors should have worked more on this subject, seeing how important it is from page one of the Bible.

A further, presumably ideological, phenomenon in Onkelos is that anthropomorphisms are generally avoided, replacing, for example, "*God* did" with "the word (*meimra*) or glory (*yekara*) of God did." Instead of an active verb, "God *did*", Onkelos generally has a passive one, "It *was done before God*." Any sign of physicality is removed from the Creator. *Etzba Elohim – the finger of God* (Ex. 8:15) becomes *maḥa min kodam YHVH – a plague from before the Lord*. Onkelos must have been impressed by verses such as *Be very careful . . . for you saw no shape when the Lord your God spoke to you at*

Horeb out of the fire (Deut. 4:15). Hence he renders the anthropomorphic verses of Exodus 33:18-23 metaphorically, suggesting that God will protect Moses with His *meimra*. However, there is a problem with Genesis 1:26, *Let us make man in our image*: it is not only that in Onkelos the verse retains the plural sense (*na'avid . . . be-tzalmena*), he also retains the anthropomorphism, *Let us make*. The editors explain, "It is possible that this verse was so well known by the people that the targumist felt it would not be misunderstood." They may be right, but the idea that Onkelos did not touch well-known passages warrants further investigation.

The editors' extensive notes display specialized knowledge of targumic material and a broad acquaintance with rabbinic exegesis, although fascinating words and phrases are sometimes left unannotated. Every reader has a favourite piece of exegetical ingenuity and is keen to discover what a new publication has to say on a particular verse.

The whole content of this work, even the incidental notes and suggestions for discussion, is a goldmine for the reader. Despite the criticisms voiced above, these volumes deserve to be treasured and consulted. By including the Torah blessings, the editors clearly hope that readers will use these books to follow the Torah readings in synagogue, and I for one plan to do so. I am quite excited about it, not only because the work is so fascinating in itself but because it will help me to follow the advice of one of my teachers – to look at each year's Torah portions through the eyes of a different exegete.

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