



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

TOLDOT (CHAPTER 25:19–28:9)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

Rebecca conceives after a long period of barrenness; The twins in her womb struggle and Rebecca receives a prophecy about them; Esau emerges as the firstborn and becomes a hunter while Jacob is a dweller in tents; Esau sells his birthright to Jacob; Isaac relocates to Philistia to escape a famine and the king kidnaps Rebecca; Isaac wants to bless his firstborn, Esau, but Jacob, with Rebecca's complicity, takes the blessing; Esau vows to kill his brother; Jacob's parents tell him to leave the land and go to the home of Rebecca's family, hopefully also to find a wife.

EXTOLLING ISRAELITE ANCESTORS

Rebecca and Jacob's scheme in chapter 17 to secure Isaac's blessing for Jacob before Isaac dies, provoked many interpretations to explain the apparent uncharacteristic behavior of the matriarch and patriarch. Jacob is at first reluctant to deceive his father. He says he does not want to appear in Isaac's "eyes as a trickster." Rebecca assures him that "your curse will be on me," which *Onkelos* renders, "it was said to me in a prophecy that no curses will come to you" (27:13, pages 176–179).¹ Our commentary explains:

Our targumist might have been uncomfortable with the possibility that Rebecca could be cursed and, therefore, understands "on me" as the revelation of a prophecy. However, this uncharacteristic, elaborate, imaginative paraphrase is probably a late

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

insertion by an over-diligent scribe. It is not even hinted at in any of the other Targums; nor in Saadiah, or Rashi who frequently repeat what they found in Onkelos; nor is it picked up by ibn Ezra who often states the targumist's view, even when he disagrees; nor is it in Radak, Sforno, or Nachmanides. Only Rashbam and Chazkune approach what appears to be the targumist's understanding and mention Rebecca's prophecy; Rebecca was certain that Isaac would not curse his son since God promised (in 25:23) that the older son would serve the younger. Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Sforno have another view; if Isaac will curse you, that curse will not rest upon you, but upon me, since I caused you to do what you did. Saadiah suggests; I will be responsible to remove any curse from you.

We add in our appendix that *Pseudo-Jonathan* reads: "If he blesses you with blessings, let them descend upon you and your children; but if he curses you with curses, let them be upon me and my soul" (page 435).

We are inclined, based upon our understanding of the targumist's style to resist the urge to include imaginative elaborations in his translation, to see this targumic passage as a late scribal insertion. Our view is supported by the absence of the elaboration in commentaries that copied *Onkelos'* ideas. This scribe wanted to portray Israelite ancestors favorably. We will discover many other altered *Targum Onkelos* texts.

However, it should be noted that our translator also changed the biblical text over one hundred times in *Genesis* to present a more favorable picture of the Israelite ancestors than is in the Torah, although not as radically. In 27:35 (pages 180 and 181), for example, Isaac responds to Esau's plea for a blessing by stating "Your brother came with deceit and he took your blessing." *Onkelos* replaces "deceit" with "wisdom" and "took" with "accepted." He must have felt that the notion that Jacob was "deceptive" and "grabbed" or "took" Esau's blessing was repugnant, so he softened the condemning language.

Similarly, with regard to the odious behavior of Jacob's sons in avenging Shechem's rape of Dinah, their sister, the Bible describes their discussion with Shechem "deceit," while the targumist substitutes "wisdom" (34:13 and commentary).

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

A literal reading of the episodes of Jacob taking Isaac's blessing and his sons' response to Dinah's dishonor, appear to be morally reprehensible behavior. It requires either exegetical elaborations or, as in the case of the *Targum*, non literal translations, to reconcile our favorable views of the matriarchs and patriarchs and their children with the reality conveyed by the actual texts. We will have the opportunity of discussing other examples of this occurrence in the future.

How do you feel about interpretations and translations that defend the honor of Israelite ancestors when the Torah itself is not so inclined? Isn't written: "For there is no just man on earth who does (only) good, and does no wrong" (*Ecclesiastes* 7:20)? Isn't it rather instructive that even the patriarchs and matriarchs didn't always act correctly; yet they are considered important people?

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In responding to Rebecca's suggestion that he pose as Esau, Jacob resists the idea on the grounds that "If my father touches me, I will appear in his eyes as a trickster to him" (27:12, pages 176 and 177). Is Jacob's response appropriate? Doesn't it seem that he doesn't want to deceive his father only because he might be discovered? Or, is it possible that Jacob only suggested that the ruse might not work? Why did he do what he did? Wasn't it immoral?

Is the fact that Rebecca apparently never saw Jacob again after he fled from Esau's wrath, the Torah's way of indicating that she was punished for her complicity in Isaac's deception? Was Jacob's punishment the stormy exile from his home for two decades and the fact that he was the victim of two deceptions: the substitution of Leah for Rachel as a wife, and the "cover up" of the disappearance of his beloved son Joseph?

Esau is depicted in *Targum Onkelos* as a "cunning hunter" and Jacob, as a "mild man, who ministered in the house of study" (25:27, pages 164–167, see commentary). Is the Torah emphasizing that parents should be at least as concerned about the forces that are shaping their children's lives "in the street" as they are about the values they want to cultivate in them at home?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 26:5 (pages 168 and 169) and commentary. The targumist uses *memra* twice in different ways.
2. See 27:33 (pages 180 and 181) and commentary. Does Rashi misinterpret the *Targum's* translation of Torah's *charad* and *charadah*?
3. See 27:40 and commentary, ". . . TRANSGRESS THE WORDS OF THE TORAH" (page 183). The targumist interprets, rather than translates, an obscure word.