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Nachmanides Introduced the Notion that Targum Onkelos Contains Derash

Israel Drazin

People read *Targum Onkelos* today, and search it for *derash*, *halakhah*, and homiletical teachings. The following will show that the rabbis in the Talmuds and the Midrashim, as well as the Bible commentators who used the *Targum* before the thirteenth century, recognized the Aramaic translation as one that almost only contains the Torah's *peshat* - its plain meaning - and no exegetical material. It will survey how the pre-thirteenth-century rabbis and scholars used *Onkelos*, and how Nachmanides changed the way the *Targum* was understood. It was only after this Nachmanides change, that other interpreters of *Onkelos* read more than the plain meaning into this *Targum*. The article also introduces the reader to *Onkelos* and explains why the Talmudic rabbis required that it be read weekly.

The Law

The Babylonian Talmud and later Jewish codes mandate that Jews read the Torah portion weekly - twice in the original Hebrew and once in *Targum Onkelos*.¹ Rabbi Moses Maimonides and Rabbi Joseph Karo, whose law codes are regarded in many circles as binding, felt that it is

1 Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 8a, b, Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Prayer 13:25, and *Shulchan Arukh*, *Orach Chayim*, The Laws of Shabbat 285, 1. The requirement does not appear in the Jerusalem Talmud because *Targum Onkelos* did not yet exist when this Talmud was composed. See I. Drazin, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, volume 50, 1999, pages 246-258, where I date *Onkelos* to the late fourth century, based on the targumist's consistent use of late fourth century Midrashim.

vital to understand the Bible text through the eyes of its rabbinically accepted translation - *Targum Onkelos* - and many authorities agree that no other translation will do.² This raises some questions.

What is *Targum Onkelos*?

The word *Targum* means “translation,” thus *Targum Onkelos* means a translation by *Onkelos*. *Targum Onkelos* is a translation of the five books of Moses, from the Hebrew into Aramaic. The rabbis placed their imprimatur upon *Targum Onkelos*³ and considered it the official translation. Although there are other Aramaic translations⁴ as well as ancient Greek ones,⁵ and latter translations into other languages, *Targum Onkelos* is the most literal. Yet despite being extremely literal, it contains over 10,000 differences from the original Hebrew text.⁶

The Significance of Onkelos

Onkelos was extolled by all the Bible commentaries. Rashi makes the statement that the *Onkelos* translation was revealed at Mt. Sinai.⁷

- 2 Although some authorities, such as the *Shulchan Arukh*, discussed below, say that a person can fulfill the rabbinic obligation by reading Rashi.
- 3 Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 3a.
- 4 The two other complete Jewish Aramaic translations are *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Targum Neophyti*.
- 5 The Septuagint, composed about 250 BCE, and the translation by Aquila, composed about 130 CE.
- 6 There are many reasons for the targumic changes, such as to clarify passages, to protect God’s honor, to show respect for Israelite ancestors, etc. These alterations were not made to teach *derash*, as will be shown below. The differences between *peshat* and *derash* is a complex subject. Simply stated, *peshat* is the plain, or simple, or obvious meaning of a text. *Derash* is the reading of a passage with either a conscious or unconscious intent to derive something from it, usually a teaching or ruling applicable to the needs or sensibilities of the later day, something the original writer may have never meant.
- 7 S.v. *m’charef*, b*Kiddushin* 49a.

*Tosaphot*⁸ made a similar statement, and further contends that there are parts of the Torah that we simply could not understand without the *Onkelos* translation.

Some people consider these comments as hyperbolic or metaphoric - that the authors meant that *Onkelos* is so significant that it is as though it were a divine gift, handed to Moses at Sinai. Whether literal or metaphoric, it is clear that these sages are expressing a reverence for *Onkelos* not accorded to any other book in Jewish history; a reverence approaching the respect they gave to the Torah itself. This veneration is further reflected in the fact that for many centuries, every printed edition of the Pentateuch contained the correlating *Onkelos* text, generally given the preferential placement adjacent to the Torah text.

Why did the rabbis require Jews to read *Targum Onkelos*?

It is significant that the talmudic dictum was written when there were many important exegetical rabbinical collections - both Talmuds, *Genesis Rabbah*, *Mekhilta*, *Sifra*, and *Sifrei*, among others. Remarkably, the rabbis did not require Jews to read these books, filled with interesting *derash*, explanations written by the rabbis themselves. They only mandated the reading of *Onkelos* when reviewing the weekly Torah portion.

Furthermore, by the time the *Shulchan Arukh* was composed in the sixteenth century, and the Talmudic law was stated in it, most of the classical Medieval biblical commentaries, which included *derash*, were already in circulation. While Rabbi Joseph Karo, its author, suggests that one could study *Rashi* on a weekly basis in place of the *Targum*, he quickly adds that those who have “reverence for God” will study both *Rashi* and *Onkelos*. The explanation offered by *Turei Zahav* (a commentary by Rabbi David Ha-Levi Segal on the *Shulchan Arukh*, and commonly abbreviated *Taz*), is that while *Rashi* enables the student to read the Bible and gain access to Talmudic and Oral Law insights, *Onkelos* is still indispensable for understanding the text itself.

8 S.v. *sh'nayim*, b*Berakhot* 8a, b.

Thus, the rabbis, who composed books containing exegetical interpretations, felt that it was so important for Jews to know the plain meaning of the Torah, that they mandated that Jews read *Targum Onkelos* every week.⁹ When did people stop seeing that *Onkelos* contains the Torah's plain meaning and read *derash* into the wording of the *Targum*?

The Earliest Understanding of *Targum Onkelos*

There was no problem understanding the intent of *Targum Onkelos* until the thirteenth century, close to a millennium after it was composed. Apparently, at that time, Nachmanides was the first commentator to introduce the concept that people should read *Onkelos* to find deeper meaning, meaning that went beyond the plain sense of the text. These included mystical lessons, what Nachmanides referred to as *derekh haemet*, the true way.

The conclusion that *Onkelos* contains only the simple meaning of the Torah is supported by an examination of how the ancients, living before the thirteenth century, consistently used *Onkelos* for its *peshat*. Although many of these Bible commentators were interested in, and devoted to, the lessons - *derash* - that could be derived from biblical verses, and although they were constantly using *Onkelos* for the Torah's plain meaning - its *peshat* - they did not employ the *Targum* to find *derash* or to support a conclusion that the verse they were discussing contained *derash*. This situation changed when, for the first time, Nachmanides mined the *Targum* to uncover *derash*.¹⁰ Nachmanides used *Onkelos* to support his interpretation of the Torah.

9 They may have also been implying that one cannot understand their *derash* unless they first understood the Torah's *peshat*.

10 Our view that *Onkelos* was written without *derash* is also supported by the following interpretation of b*Megillah* 3a: The Talmud recalls a tradition that the world shuddered when *Targum Jonathan* to [The books of] the Prophets was written. Why, the Talmud asks, did this not occur when *Targum Onkelos* was composed? Because, it answers, *Onkelos* reveals nothing (that is, it contains no

This is significant since many of these rabbinical commentators were far more interested in *derash* than in *peshat*. If they felt that *Onkelos* contained *derash*, they would have used this translation, which they extolled, as Nachmanides later did, to support their midrashic interpretations of the Torah. The following are the ancient sources.

Midrashim and Talmuds

The first references to a *Targum* are in the Midrash and the Babylonian Talmud. A *Targum* is mentioned seventeen times in the Midrashim¹¹ and eighteen times in the Babylonian Talmud.¹² Each of the thirty-five citations is an attempt to search the *Targum* for the meaning of a word. Although these sources were inclined to exegetical explanations, and were scrupulous in naming the source for their teachings, they never tried to draw exegetical interpretations from the *Targum*, and never stated that their idea is mentioned in *Onkelos*. Thus, the Midrash and the Babylonian Talmud understood that the *Targum* is a translation and not a source for *derash*.

Die Masorah Zum Targum Onkelos

A volume of targumic traditions collected in *Die Masorah Zum Targum Onkelos* is said to have been composed in the third century, but was most likely written a couple of centuries later,¹³ after the Talmuds. It too, makes no suggestion that *Onkelos* contains *derash*. The book attempts to describe the *Targum* completely, but contains only translational traditions

derash), whereas *Targum Jonathan* reveals secrets (by means of its *derash* content).

- 11 See M. M. Kasher, *Torah Shelema* 24 (Jerusalem, 1974), pages 225-238, and J. Reifman, *Sedeh Aram* (Berlin, 1875), pages 12-14. The mention of a *Targum* in the Midrashim and Talmuds are not necessarily references to *Onkelos*; the wording in these sources and *Onkelos* frequently differ.
- 12 See Kasher, *supra* pages 155-161 and Reifman, *supra*, pages 8-10.
- 13 See edition by A. Berliner (Leipzig, 1877). See I. Drazin, *JJS* 50.2, *supra*, and note 15, for a summary of the scholarly comments on this volume.

about *Onkelos*. If the author(s) believed that *Onkelos* contains *derash*, he/they would have included traditions about it.

Saadiyah Gaon

The works of Saadiyah Gaon, born in 882 C.E., also contain no indication that *Onkelos* contains *derash*. Saadiyah Gaon composed a translation of the Bible into Arabic, and used *Targum Onkelos* extensively to discover the plain meaning of words. He never even hinted that his predecessor's work contains *derash*.¹⁴ This is significant since Saadiyah Gaon emphasized the Torah's plain meaning, and used *Onkelos* frequently in his Arabic translation.¹⁵ He quotes *Onkelos* on every page without attribution. His reliance upon *Onkelos* as a translation is so extensive, that if readers have difficulty understanding *Onkelos*, they can look to the Saadiyah Gaon translation for an illumination of what the targumist is saying.

14 See my study of Saadiyah Gaon and *Onkelos* in the introduction to *Onkelos on the Torah: Leviticus*, pages xvii-xxii.

15 *Perushei Rav Saadiyah Gaon*, in *Torat Chaim*, Mossad Harav Kook, Jerusalem, 1986, and Daf-Chen Press, Jerusalem, 1984. The uses of *Onkelos* are indexed in *Genesis* in the 1984 volume on page 471. See E. I. J. Rosenthal, "The Study of the Bible in Medieval Judaism," *Studia Semitica*, Cambridge, 1971, pages 244 - 271, especially pages 248 - 249 regarding Saadiyah Gaon.

Saadiyah Gaon established Hebrew philology as a prerequisite for the study of the literal sense of the Bible, and he used rabbinic interpretations in his translation only when it complied with reason. He stated at the end of his introduction to the Pentateuch that his work is a "simple, explanatory translation of the text of the Torah, written with the knowledge of reason and tradition." He, along with ibn Ezra and *Onkelos*, as we will see, included another meaning only when the literal sense of the biblical text ran counter to reason or tradition. His failure to mention that *Onkelos* contains *derash* does not prove indisputably that he saw no *derash* in the commentary. However, since he copied *Onkelos*' interpretations so very frequently in his Arabic translation, it is likely that if he saw *derash* in *Onkelos* he would have mentioned it.

Menachem ibn Saruq

Menachem ibn Saruq, a tenth century Spanish lexicographer, was explicit on the subject. He called *Onkelos* a *ptr*, a translation.¹⁶

Samuel ben Hofni Gaon

Samuel ben Hofni Gaon headed the Babylonian Academy at Sura in Babylonia during the years 997-1013 and wrote a biblical commentary. He refers to *Targum Onkelos* on several occasions,¹⁷ uses the *Targum* to understand the meaning of words, and always treats it as a literal translation containing no *derash*.

Rashi

No biblical commentator relied more often on *Onkelos* than Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, better known as Rashi, born in 1040. He extols *Onkelos*, as stated above, mentions the targumist by name hundreds of times,¹⁸ and incorporates the targumic interpretation without attribution in hundreds of other comments. He has a non-rigid blend of *peshat* and *derash* in his commentary,¹⁹ and frequently quotes the Talmud and the

16 In his *Sefer Machberet Menahem* (H. Filipowski, editor), London and Edinburgh, 1854, pages 14a, 16b 17a, 17b, 20a, and others.

17 *Peirush Hatorah L' Rav Shmuel ben Hofni Gaon*, Mossad Harav Kook, Jerusalem, 1978, index on page 111.

18 See the listing in *Perushei Rashi al Hatorah* by Charles B. Chavel, Mossad Harav Kook, Jerusalem, 1982, pages 628 - 629. For Rashi's struggle against *derash*, see, for example, his commentary to *Genesis* 3:8. While Rashi believed he interpreted Scriptures according to their *peshat*, ibn Ezra criticized him: "He expounded the Torah homiletically believing such to be the literal meaning, whereas his books do not contain it except once in a thousand (times)," *Safah Berurah*, editor G. Lippmann, Furth, 1839, page 5a. See also S. Kamin, *Rashi's Exegetical Categorization with Respect to the Distinction Between Peshat and Derash* (Doctoral Theses), Jerusalem, 1978; M. Banitt, *Rashi, Interpreter of the Biblical Letter*, Tel Aviv University, 1985; and Y. Rachman, *Igeret Rashi*, Mizrachi, 1991.

19 Rashi said that he was offering *peshat*. He meant that his commentary frequently contains *derash* that seemed to him to reflect the plain meaning of the Torah.

Midrash as the source his *derash*. As far as I know, he never uses *Onkelos* as a source for his *derash*, nor does he treat the *Targum* as anything other than a translation. It should be obvious that since Rashi relied so extensively on *Onkelos*, which he considered holy, for *peshat*, if he had seen *derash* in the *Targum*, he would have said so.

Rashbam

Rashi's grandson Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (also known as Rashbam, about 1085 – 1174) wrote his Bible commentary, largely, with the goal in mind liberate people from *derash*, and to show his objection to Rashi's frequent use of *derash*.²⁰ He seldom mentions his sources, but draws respectfully from *Onkelos*, usually by name. In his commentary to *Genesis*, for example, where Rashi is only named in 37:2, *Onkelos* is quoted in 21:16, 25:28, 26:26, 28:2, 40:11, and 41:45. In his commentary to *Deuteronomy*, to cite another example, *Onkelos* is mentioned in 4:28, 16:2, 16:9, 17:18, and 23:13. While he criticizes his grandfather with and without attribution for his use of *derash*,²¹ and occasionally disagrees with *Onkelos*, he never rebukes the targumist for using *derash*.²² Like his predecessors, there is no testimony for uses of the *Targum* for *derash* purposes.

20 M. I. Lockshin, *Rabbi Samuel ben Meir's Commentary on Genesis*, Jewish Studies, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989. See especially Rashbam to *Genesis* 37:2 and 49:16 where he criticizes his grandfather using strong language.

21 Lockshin, *supra*, pages 391-399, notes that Rashi's Torah Commentary is the primary focus of Rashbam's own commentary. Of some 650 remarks in the latter's commentary to *Genesis*, only about 33 percent concern issues not relevant to Rashi. Of the remaining two-thirds, in only about 18 percent does Rashbam feel Rashi is correct, and in just over 48 percent he is in disagreement with him, consistently criticizing him for substituting *derash* for *peshat* - the very thing Rashi declared he would not do. In view of his sensitivity and opposition to *derash*, it is very telling that he did not sprinkle even one drop of venom on the targumist.

22 See *Genesis* 25:28, for example, where Rashbam issues the accolade: "the plain meaning of scripture is the one offered by the Targum." It is significant to note that although Rashbam railed against the insertion of *derash* into a biblical

Abraham ibn Ezra

Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1164), like Rashbam, was determined to distance himself from *derash* and establish the literal meaning of the biblical text in his Bible commentaries, as he states in his two introductions. He uses *Onkelos* frequently as a translation, to prove the meaning of words.

Ibn Ezra was the first to note a few isolated instances of *derash* in the *Targum*. This first observation of *derash* in *Onkelos*, I believe, is because *derash* did not exist in the original *Targum* text.²³ Various overzealous well-meaning scribes embedded it at a later period, probably around the time that Ibn Ezra discovered it. Ibn Ezra recognizes that the purpose of *Onkelos* is to offer *peshat* because he states that the targumist is following his (ibn Ezra's) own method, the "straight (or right) way" of *peshat* to interpret the Hebrew according to grammatical rules.²⁴

commentary, his own commentary was frequently adulterated, as was *Targum Onkelos*, by the improper insertions of *derash* by later hands. See, for example, *Deuteronomy* 2:20, 3:23, 7:11, and 11:10 in A. I. Bromberg, *Perush HaTorah leRashbam*, Tel Aviv, 5725, page 201, note 25; page 202, note 111; page 206, 7, note 9; and page 210, note 3.

- 23 Charles Heller and Rabbi Dov Revel were also convinced that the original text of *Onkelos* did not contain *derash*. However, neither of them recognized Nachmanides as the first commentator to argue the opposite. The first is in *A Critical Essay on the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch*, NY, 1921, pages 32-57. The second is in *Targum Yonatan al Hatorah*, New York, 5685, page 5. See also Bernard Grossfeld in "Targum Onkelos, Halakhah and the Halakhic Midrashim," in D.R.G. Beattie and M. McNamara (editors), *The Aramaic Bible*, 1994, pages 228-46.
- 24 In an epigram prefacing one of the editions of his commentary on the Pentateuch, ibn Ezra writes that he intends to mention by name only those authors "whose opinion I consider correct." He names *Onkelos* frequently. In his commentary to *Numbers*, for example, the *Targum* is cited in 11:5 where he gives another interpretation, but respectfully adds, "he too is correct," and in 11:22 he comments, "it means exactly what the Aramaic targumist states." See also 12:1; 21:14; 22:24; 23:3; 23:10; 24:23 and 25:4. Asher Weiser, *Ibn Ezra, Perushei Hatorah*, Mossad Harav Kook, 1977.

Maimonides

Shortly thereafter, Maimonides, born in 1138, supported part of his rationalistic philosophy by using *Onkelos*. Maimonides recognized that the targumist deviated frequently from a literal rendering of the biblical text to remove anthropomorphism and anthropopathisms - to avoid portraying God in a human fashion - for this is “a fundamental element in our faith, the comprehension of which is not easy for the common people.”²⁵ Maimonides apparently never uses *Onkelos* for *derash*.

While he treats *Onkelos* respectfully, ibn Ezra uses the strongly derogatory terms “deceivers” or “liars,” for the *derash*-filled *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* to *Deuteronomy* 24:6. See D. Revel, *Targum Yonatan al Hatorah*, New York, 5685, pages 1 and 2.

- 25 The “fundamental element” that *Onkelos* addresses is the avoidance of a literal translation of most anthropomorphic and anthropopathic phrases. See the listing in Rabbi Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translation and introduction by Shlomo Pines, The University of Chicago Press, 1963, volume 2, pages 656 and 658, and 1:28 for the quote.

Maimonides based his interpretation of negative commandments 128 and 163 in part upon our *Targum Maimonides, The Commandments*, translated by Charles B. Chavel, The Soncino Press, 1967, pages 116, 117 and 155, 156. This was not because *Onkelos* deviated from the plain meaning to teach *halakhah*. Commandment 128 forbids an apostate Israelite to eat the Passover offering. *Onkelos* translates the biblical “no alien may eat thereof” as “no apostate Israelite” (*Exodus* 12:43). The targumist may have thought this was the necessary meaning because *Exodus* 12:45 and 48 state that a sojourner and an uncircumcised Israelite could not eat this sacrifice; thus the earlier verse must be referring to someone else. Commandment 163 prohibits a priest from entering the Sanctuary with disheveled, untrimmed hair. Maimonides notes that *Onkelos* translates *Leviticus* 10:6’s “Let not the hair of your heads go loose” as “grow long.” Again, the targumist may have thought that this was the verse’s simple sense because it is the language used by the Torah itself in *Numbers* 6:5, and because when one loosens one’s hair, it becomes longer. Indeed, Rashi states explicitly that the *peshat* of “loose” in this instance is “long.”

Rabbi Joseph Bechor Shor

Rabbi Joseph Bechor Shor (born around 1140) adopted the literal methodology of Rashbam.²⁶ However, he is not as consistent as Rashbam; he inserts homiletical comments along with those that are literal. Bechor Shor mentions Rashbam only twice by name, but quotes *Onkelos* dozens of times to support his own definition of a word when his interpretation is literal. Although he used *Onkelos* and *derash*, he never states or even suggests that *Onkelos* contains *derash*,²⁷ and does not use *Onkelos* to support his homiletical remarks.

Radak

Rabbi David Kimchi (known as Radak, about 1160 – 1235) wrote biblical commentaries using the text's plain sense in contrast to the homiletical elaborations that were prevalent during his lifetime. He followed the methodology of ibn Ezra and stressed philological analysis. He refers to *Onkelos* frequently and always treats the *Targum* as a translation. He, like ibn Ezra, occasionally inserted homiletical interpretations into his commentary from exegetical legends to add zest and to delight readers, but he does not use *Onkelos* for this purpose.

Conclusions from Reading the Ancient Commentators

The consistent history of *all* the commentators using *Onkelos* only for the plain meaning of the Torah, and not mentioning seeing *derash* in the *Targum*, is quite persuasive that no *derash* was contained in the original *Onkelos* text. If any of the commentators who lived before the mid-thirteenth century believed that *Targum Onkelos* contained *derash* - especially those who delighted in, or who were concerned with *derash* -

26 He is believed to have been a student of Rashbam's brother Rabbeinu Tam. See the source in the next note.

27 J. Nebo, *Perushei Rabbi Josef Bechor Shor al Hatorah*, Mossad Harav Kook, 1994, page 11, Bechor Shor went beyond *Targum Onkelos* in his concern about biblical anthropomorphisms and his attempts to exonerate the patriarchs.

they would have said so. None but ibn Ezra did, and he called attention to only a very small number of, probably, recent unauthorized insertions.

Where, then, did the *derash* that many people today think that they see in *Targum Onkelos* come from? First of all, I stipulate that most of the instances in *Onkelos* that readers recognize as *derash* were really intended by the targumist as *peshat* - the text's simple meaning; people differ in what they see. Second, C. Heller has shown us many examples where most, if not all, of the presently found *derash* did not exist in the original *Targum* text.²⁸ His findings are supported by the previously mentioned history showing that ibn Ezra was the first to observe any *derash* at all in our *Targum*.

Nachmanides was the first Bible commentator to read *derash* into *Onkelos*

Nachmanides was influenced by Kabala, Jewish mysticism. He equated Kabala with truth²⁹ and felt³⁰ that, since Torah is truth, it must contain Kabala. He held that no one can attain knowledge of the Torah, or truth, by his own reasoning. A person must listen to a kabalist who received the truth from another kabalist, generation after generation, back to Moses, who heard the Kabalistic teaching directly from God.³¹ He decided to disseminate this truth, or at least hint of its existence, and was the first to introduce mystic teachings of the Torah into a biblical commentary.³²

28 See note 23.

29 *Genesis* 6:13, 18; 31:42; 33:20; 35:13; and others.

30 This could be seen as a kind of syllogism. Torah is truth. Kabala is truth. Thus, Torah "must" contain Kabala.

31 *Ramban, Writings and Discourses*, translated and annotated by Charles B. Chavel, Shilo, 1978, page 174.

32 *Ramban, Commentary on the Torah*, translated and annotated by Charles B. Chavel, Shilo Publishing House, Inc., 1971, volume 1, XII. Chavel points out that the extensive kabalistic influences on future generations can be traced to Nachmanides.

Nachmanides extended his exegetical methodology into his interpretations of our *Targum*.³³ He felt this was appropriate. *Onkelos*, he believed, “lived in the age of the philosophers immediately after Aristotle,” and like the philosopher was so interested in esoteric teachings that, though born a prominent Roman non-Jew, he converted to Judaism to learn Torah, and to later teach its secret lessons through his biblical translation.³⁴

Examples of Nachmanides’ problematical interpretations of *Onkelos*

In a detailed separate study, which is still in draft, I studied all the instances where Nachmanides interprets *Onkelos*. I found that Nachmanides mentions *Targum Onkelos* in his *Commentary to the Pentateuch* while analyzing 230 verses. Most of his attempts to see the targumist as teaching homiletic lessons and mysticism seem forced. He reads more into the Aramaic than the words themselves state.

There are 129 puzzling interpretations of *Onkelos* in these 230 verses. This represents about 56 percent of the total 230. However, 55 of the 230 Nachmanidean comments are merely references to the *Targum* without any analysis. When these 55 comments are subtracted from the total 230, we are left with 175 instances in which Nachmanides analyzes the *Targum*. The 129 problematical interpretations represent about 75 percent of the 175 times that the sage discusses *Onkelos* and uses it to

33 This is my original idea. It is based on several facts. First, we know that he was the first to read Kabala in the Torah words and phrases. Second, we know that he had enormous respect for *Onkelos*; he referred to *Onkelos* about 230 times in his Bible commentary and, although he criticized others, he treated *Onkelos* with great respect, even reverence. He considered *Onkelos* to be generally expressing the truth. Thus it is reasonable to assume that he applied the same syllogism to *Onkelos* that he applied to the Torah. Finally, we know of no one before him who read mysticism into the targumist’s words.

34 *Ramban, Writings and Discourses, supra*, pages 75-76. Nachmanides’ error in dating *Targum Onkelos* “immediately after Aristotle” was not his only historical mistake. He believed that the Talmud’s implied dating of Jesus at about 100 years before the Common Era was correct. See *Judaism on Trial*, editor H. Maccoby, Associated University Presses, Inc., 1982, pages 28 and 29.

support his interpretation of the biblical verse. Following are seven examples.

1. *Genesis* 1:31 states: “And God saw everything that He made, and, behold, it was very good (Torah: *tov meod* - *Onkelos: takin lachada*).”

This verse describes the results of the sixth day of creation as “very good.” The translator Onkelos, who prefers to clarify ambiguous biblical phrases with more specificity (good in which way), renders it “well established,” implying that the world was established firmly. He may have been calling to mind *Psalms* 93:1, “the world also is established that it can not be moved” and *Psalms* 96:10, “the world also shall be established that it shall not be moved.”

Nachmanides reads into the *Onkelos* words “well established” that the targumist is teaching that creation contains evil, “the order (of the world) was very properly arranged that evil is needed to preserve what is good.”³⁵ This interpretation is a good homily, but is not the plain meaning of the *Onkelos* words. It is problematical because “well established” neither suggests “containing evil” nor implies that evil is necessary to preserve what is good.

2. After creating man, God, according to *Genesis* 2:7, “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.” The bible uses *nefesh* for “breath” and “being.” In later Hebrew, *nefesh* came to mean “soul,” a meaning it did not convey in the Pentateuch. Since the Hebrew “breath of life” does not indicate how humans supersede other creations, *Onkelos* alters the text and clarifies that “man acquired the power of speech,” *ruach memalela* (literally, “speaking breath”). Thus, humans transcend animals by their intelligence in general, and their ability to speak, communicate, and reason, in particular. This is the Aristotelian

35 The Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* 9:5, which is the source of this teaching, mentions “death” and 9:9 “the evil inclination in man” as examples of seemingly bad things, which are good from a non-personal world-wide perspective. R. Bachya ben Asher, the student of Nachmanides’ student Rashba, who was also a mystic, mentions 9:9, but not the *Targum*. He did not see this idea in *Onkelos*.

concept, accepted by Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), whereby the essence of a human is intelligence, and people are duty bound to develop that intelligence.³⁶

Nachmanides, the mystic, disagreed with Maimonides, the rationalist, and anachronistically interpreted the biblical *nefesh* as “soul.” The Hebrew verse, he declares, alludes to the superiority of the soul that is composed of three forces: growth, movement, and rationality.³⁷ *Onkelos*, he maintains, is reflecting this concept of the tri-partite soul, and that the rational soul that God breathed into man’s nostrils became a speaking soul. How the two Aramaic words, literally meaning “speaking breath,” suggest this elaborate tri-partite theology, is problematical. Again, Nachmanides seemingly desired to have *Onkelos*, which he admired, reflect and support his own idea even though what he reads into the *Targum* is not its plain meaning.

3. *Genesis* 4:1 states that when Eve gave birth to Cain, she exclaimed, “I have acquired a man with the Lord.” Since this statement has an anthropomorphic sound, suggesting physical help from God, our *Targum* adds *qadam*, “before (the Lord),” thereby supplanting, or at least ameliorating, this implication of physical aid, in that it distances God from the birth.

36 *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:1. The Greek term *psyche* had a similar etiological history as the Hebrew *nefesh*. T. Cahill, *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea*, Doubleday, 2003, writes on page 231.

Psyche was, to begin with, a Greek word for “life,” in the sense of individual human life, and occurs in Homer in such phrases as “to risk one’s life” and “to save one’s life.” Homer also uses it of the ghosts of the underworld – the weak, almost-not-there shades of those who once were men. In the works of the early scientist-philosophers, *psyche* can refer to the ultimate substance, the source of life and consciousness, the spirit of the universe. By the fifth century B.C., *psyche* had come to mean the “conscious self,” the “personality,” even the “emotional self,” and thence it quickly takes on, especially in Plato, the meaning of “immortal self” – the soul, in contrast to the body.

37 R. Bachya ben Asher also mentions the parts of the soul, but not the *Targum*, again not seeing Nachmanides’ idea in *Onkelos*.

The word *qadam* was inserted in *Onkelos* in verse 4, as well as in seventy other instances in *Genesis*, for the same reason - to ameliorate an anthropomorphic depiction, this in addition to 585 instances in *Targum Onkelos* to the other volumes of the Pentateuch.³⁸ Nachmanides ignores the targumist's frequent use of *qadam* to avoid anthropomorphism³⁹ and its plain meaning. He states that the correct interpretation of the biblical Hebrew is that Eve said: "This son will be an acquisition from God for me, for when we die he will exist in our place to worship his creator." Nachmanides assures us that this was Onkelos' opinion, as proven by the addition of the word *qadam*. Thus, Nachmanides drew a conclusion from the *Targum's* use of a single word, a word that is used over five hundred times for an entirely different purpose, and which cannot, by itself, connote and support his interpretation. Furthermore, *qadam* does not have this meaning in the hundreds of other instances where it appears.

4. In *Genesis* 17:17, *Onkelos* changes a significant detail in the Aramaic translation. Abraham does not "laugh" (Hebrew, *vayitzchak*) when he hears he will have a child in his old age, but "rejoices" (Aramaic, *vachadi*). This alteration is not made in 18:12, where Sarah "laughed" when she heard the same news. Rashi explains that the couple reacted differently. Abraham trusted God and rejoiced at the good news, while Sarah lacked faith and sneered, and therefore God chastised her in 18:13.

Nachmanides asserts that the *Onkelos* rendering in 17:17 is correct because the word *tzachak* also means rejoice, and Abraham and Sarah's reactions, he contends, were the same - proper "rejoicing."

Actually, as defined by the Even Shoshan dictionary and others, *tzachak* is an outward expression, a "laugh," and not an inner feeling of contentment. R. Bachya ben Asher mentions the Aramaic rendering, but he does not mention Nachmanides. He recognizes, contrary to

38 See the five books by I. Drazin on *Targum Onkelos* published by Ktav Publishing House. Each contains a listing of the deviations by the targumist from the Hebrew original.

39 In my discussion of *Genesis* 46:4, I show that Nachmanides was convinced that *Onkelos* never deviates to avoid anthropomorphisms.

Nachmanides, that *tzachak* does not mean rejoice, but rather laugh. He states that the targumist made the change to “rejoices” because in the context in which the word appears here it should be understood as an expression of joy. This example, while not expressing a theology, as in the first three instances, also shows Nachmanides insisting by use of a forced interpretation that the targumist understands the Torah in the same way he does.

5. Onkelos replaces the Torah’s “Is anything too wondrous for the Lord,” in *Genesis* 18:14, with “Is anything hidden from before the Lord.” The Hebrew “wondrous” is somewhat vague, and is seemingly not exactly on point within the tale of Sarah’s laughter. The Aramaic explains the text and relates that Sarah’s laughter, mentioned in the prior verse, although it was not done openly, was not “hidden” from God. This is also the interpretation of Saadiah Gaon, Rashi, Chazkunee, Ibn Ezra, Radak, etc. Thus, in short, all that the targumist is doing is clarifying the text, a task he performs over a thousand times in his translation.

However, Nachmanides states that Onkelos uses “hidden” in the translation to teach a mystical lesson. Nachmanides, as is his habit, does not explain the lesson, but the explanation is in R. Bachya ben Asher and Recanati. R. Bachya writes that God added the letter *heh* to Abram’s name, transforming it into Abraham, and “the letter *heh* alludes to God’s transcendental powers”; thus, God gave Abraham the power to have a son. Abraham, he continues, exemplified the divine attribute of mercy, and Isaac the divine attribute of justice, and now both attributes would exist on earth. It is difficult if not impossible to read this Nachmanidean mystical interpretation of *Onkelos* into the word “hidden.”⁴⁰

6. *Genesis* 21:7 quotes Sarah’s excited exclamation of joy,⁴¹ “Who [meaning what person] would have said to Abraham [that I would give birth at the advanced age of ninety]”. The *Targum* renders her statement as a thankful praise of God, “Faithful is He who said to Abraham,” and

40 R. Bachya mentions neither Nachmanides nor *Onkelos*, again not seeing the Nachmanidean interpretation in the *Targum*.

41 The “joy” is mentioned in the *Targum* to verse 6.

avoids the risk of the general population reading the translation and misunderstanding Sarah's reaction as one of surprise; for she should not have been surprised. God had assured Abraham a year earlier that he would have a son.⁴² Thus, by making the change, the *Targum* shows that she not only is not surprised, but also is thankful that God fulfilled His earlier promise.

Nachmanides interprets the Torah's "Who would have said to Abraham" to mean that everyone will join Abraham and Sarah in rejoicing over the birth of Isaac because it is such a "surprise"; the possibility of such a birth would never have occurred to anyone. He writes that the *Onkelos* rendition is "close" to his interpretation of a community celebration. Actually, as we stated, *Onkelos*' "Faithful is He who said to Abraham" is quite the opposite. Rather than focusing on the people and their reaction to the unexpected event, the targumist deviated from the Hebrew text to avoid depicting Sarah as having been surprised. His Aramaic version concentrates on God, not the community, and on how the divine promise was fulfilled.

7. *Genesis* 22:2 recounts God commanding Abraham to take his son Isaac to "the land of Moriah," and to offer him there as a sacrifice. Mount Moriah was traditionally understood to be the later place of the Jerusalem Temple,⁴³ and the targumist therefore renders "Mount Moriah" as "the land of worship," to help his readers in identifying the location. This is a typical targumic methodology: The *Targum* changes the names of places mentioned in the Bible, and gives their later known names.⁴⁴

42 *Genesis* 17:19.

43 See *II Chronicles* 3:1.

44 Rashi offers an additional explanation why "Mount Moriah" is rendered "the land of worship." He connected "Moriah" to "myrrh," which was an ingredient of the sacrificial incense, and an important part of the Temple worship. Rashi states that this is the targumic interpretation. Rashi may be explaining why the site was called Moriah, which would not be *derash*, but rather the plain sense of the word. Nachmanides' interpretation goes far beyond a simple definition. See *Genesis Rabbah* 55:7, *Exodus* 30:23ff, and Babylonian Talmud, *Keritut* 6a.

Nachmanides contends that *Onkelos* is referring to an exegetical teaching that was recorded, years after the targumist's death, in *Pirkei d'R. Eliezer*.⁴⁵ God pointed to the site and told Abraham that this is the place where Adam, Cain, Abel, and Noah had sacrificed, and the site was named Moriah because Moriah is derived from the word *mora*, fear, for the people feared God there and worshipped Him.

There are several problems with Nachmanides' analysis. First, as we already pointed out, our targumist would frequently update the name of a site to help his readers identify its location,⁴⁶ and this is a reasonable and consistent explanation of the targumic rendering. Second, the targumic words "land of worship" do not suggest the elaborate exegetical story that was not recorded until long after the death of the targumist. Third, the story is a legend; there is nothing in any text to indicate that God had such a conversation with Abraham, or that the ancestors sacrificed in this area. Furthermore, it is contrary to the targumist's style to incorporate legends into his translation.

Summary

Thus, none of the Bible commentators before Nachmanides apparently saw *derash* in *Onkelos*. If they saw *derash*, we would have expected them to say so. None did until Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, and he was probably either referring to recent scribal additions to the original *Targum*, or was expressing his opinion that his view of *peshat* in certain verses differed from those of the targumist. It appears that Nachmanides was the first to read homilies, theology, and mysticism into the *Targum*, just as he was the first to read mysticism into the Torah itself. We offered several examples that show how his interpretations seem forced, and do not reflect the plain meaning of the targumic words.

45 Chapter 31.

46 This occurs twenty-three times in *Genesis* alone.

Nachmanides' introduction of the notion that *Onkelos* contains mysticism may be the reason why rabbis,⁴⁷ who respected Nachmanides' teachings, began for the first time to search the *Targum* for *derash*.

47 There are many books that explain the *derash* that they see in *Onkelos*. The most widely known is *Netina La-Ger* by Nathan Adler (Wilna, 1886). Others include *Biure Onkelos* by S. B. Schefftel (Munich, 1888), and *Chalifot Semalot* and *Lechem Vesimla*, both by B. Z. J. Berkowitz (Wilna, 1874 and 1843). Modern writers using this method include Y. Maori, who generally focuses on the *Peshitta Targum*, and Rabbi Rafael Posen who writes a weekly column for a magazine distributed in Israeli synagogues. One may find listings in B. Grossfeld's three volumes *A Bibliography of Targum Literature*, HUC Press, 1972.