

Targum D-Rabbanan: On the Commentators' Onqelos

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Abstract: For the past two hundred years, Onqelos scholars have maintained that *Targum Onqelos* occasionally deviates from the accepted halakhic meaning of a *pasuq* established by Chazal because of Onqelos's preference for the “*pesbat*,” or literal meaning. In this paper, I introduce the view of several important medieval and early modern commentators, which is that *Targum Onqelos* is always consistent with halakhah. I demonstrate that the commentators' view of Onqelos is legitimate by reconsidering most of the cases that have been brought by modern scholars to prove that Onqelos occasionally deviates from the halakhah: in each instance, I show that the Targum can be recontextualized to be brought into harmony with the halakhah.

The Aramaic translation of the Pentateuch known as *Targum Onqelos* has been beloved and revered throughout the generations since its appearance sometime in late antiquity. Rambam and Rashi identify it as the translation referred to by the *amoraim* of the Talmud as “*targum didan*”—our translation.¹ Rashi asserts in his commentary on the Talmud that *Targum Onqelos* was given at Mount Sinai.² Maharal suggests that the two times reciting the Torah portion and the one time reciting its Targum prescribed by the rabbis of the Talmud (*Berakhot* 8a) correspond to the three world-levels—lower world, middle world, and Heaven—of Renaissance cosmology. The recitation of the Targum, according to Maharal, and not the recitations of the Torah in the holy tongue, is the recitation which corresponds to Heaven.³ An authority who preceded all of these, R. Natronai Gaon,

¹ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Ishut*, 8:4; Rashi, BT *Qiddushin* 49a, s.v. *harei zeh mibaref*.

² Rashi, BT, *Qiddushin*, 49a s.v. *harei zeh mibaref*.

³ Maharal, *Netivot Olam* [Hebrew] (London: L. Honig and Sons LTD, 1960), 1:118.

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called *Targum Onqelos* “*Targum D-Rabbanan*”—the translation of the rabbis.⁴ There are at least two possible interpretations of this term: one possibility is that R. Natronai simply meant that the translation attributed to Onqelos is that which was preferred by the rabbis; another possibility is that R. Natronai was alluding to the fact that *Targum Onqelos* incorporates rabbinic teachings within it, and that it is therefore in a certain sense authored by the rabbis. Although *Targum Onqelos*’s heavy indebtedness to rabbinic lore is generally undisputed, academic scholars from the nineteenth century onwards have found a number of places in which *Targum Onqelos* appears to diverge from accepted rabbinic legal teaching, and they have offered different solutions to the problem of the apparent inconsistencies in Onqelos’s approach to the Oral Law and the literal meaning of the Scripture, or “*peshat*,” when translating halakhic *pesuqim*. Scholars of succeeding generations have found problems with each of the earlier solutions advanced to explain *shittat Onqelos* with regard to halakhic *pesuqim*. Some of these later scholars have concluded that there simply is no consistent rationale behind Onqelos’s decisions regarding what to do with halakhic *pesuqim*. In this essay, I will question whether the collection of *pesuqim* traditionally mustered as evidence of Onqelos’s occasional deviation from the halakhah does in fact constitute evidence of such a trend. I will suggest instead that the medieval reading of *Targum Onqelos*, which assumes that it is entirely halakhic, provides a viable and intellectually satisfying alternative to the approaches offered by modern scholars.

I

In this section, I will review the existing literature on *Targum Onqelos*’s relation to Chazal’s halakhic interpretations of the Pentateuch. Although, unlike other rabbinic *targumim*, Onqelos usually presents a spare, more or less literal rendition of the biblical verses, there are several important categories of exceptions to this rule—Onqelos’s most lengthy and obvious non-literal translations occur in his renditions of biblical poetry; he is also known for departing from the literal meanings of halakhic verses when Chazal’s reading of these verses is not literal. For example,⁵ in *Shemot* 12:46, where the Chumash says “*b-vayit ehad yei’akeheil*”—literally, “it (the

⁴ Daniel Goldschmidt, ed., *The Seder of Rav Amram Gaon* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1971), 76.

⁵ For these examples, as well as for an introduction to the scholarship on this topic, I am indebted to R. Yonatan Kolatch’s *Masters of the Word* (Jersey City: Ktav, 2006), 1:182-294.

Pesach sacrifice) should be eaten in one house”⁶—Onqelos translates “*bi-habura hada yitakheil*”—“it should be eaten in the presence of one group of people.” This is in accordance with the non-literal halakhic meaning of the text as understood by Chazal.⁷ Another example of a non-literal translation by Onqelos can be found in *Shemot*, 21:19: the Chumash says “*vi-rapo yirapei*”—literally, “he (the person who caused an injury) shall surely heal him (the injured party).” Onqelos, instead of just Aramaicizing this Hebrew phrase, renders it as “*vi-agar asya yishalem*”—“he shall pay a physician’s fee.” This is, again, in accordance with the non-literal legal interpretation of Chazal.⁸ In *Vayiqra* 23:15, the Chumash says that the *omer* should be counted “*mi-maharat ha-shabbat*”—from the day after the Sabbath. Onqelos, however, translates this as “*mi-batar yoma tava*”—from the day after the holiday, in accordance with the non-literal interpretation of Chazal.⁹ There are several halakhic *pesuqim*, however, regarding which academic scholars have contended that Onqelos’s literal translations lead him to abandon the non-literal interpretations of Chazal. A famous example of this is his treatment of “*ayin taht ayin*”—“an eye for an eye,” which Onqelos translates literally, instead of recording the interpretation of Chazal, who conclude that this *pasuq* mandates monetary payment, and not actual *lex talionis*.

In *The Bible in the Light of the Aramaic Translations*,¹⁰ twentieth-century scholar Yehuda Komlosh analyzes and ultimately rejects two solutions offered by nineteenth-century scholars to the problem of Onqelos’s apparently inconsistent attitude towards literal, or “*peshat*” translations of *pesuqim* for which Chazal provided non-literal, or “*derash*” interpretations. According to the first solution, that of R. S.Y. Rapaport,¹¹ Onqelos, who prefers to translate literally, does so when dealing with halakhot that are carried out by rabbinical courts, such as “an eye for an eye.” Since the common people, unlike the rabbis who sit on the courts, cannot be trusted to know the tradition of the Oral Law on their own, Onqelos finds it necessary to translate the halakhot which apply to them according to the rabbinic *derashot*. Rapaport’s opinion was accepted by R. Z. H. Chajes.¹²

⁶ Translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

⁷ See Rashi, *Shemot* 12:46, s.v. *b-nayit ehad yei’akheil*.

⁸ See Rashi, *Shemot* 21:19, s.v. *vi-rapo yirapei*.

⁹ See Rashi, *Vayiqra* 23:15, s.v. *mimaharat ha-shabbat*.

¹⁰ Yehuda Komlosh, *The Bible in the Light of the Aramaic Translations* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan University/Dvir, 1973), 157-59.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹² *Ibid.*, 158.

Komlosh, echoing Chajes's self-criticism and the criticism of R. N. Adler,¹³ objects to this explanation both because it does not account for all of Onqelos's translations—e.g., payment of the physician's fee in a case of bodily injury would be handled by a *beit din*, yet the Targum's translation of the relevant *pasuq* is according to the *derash*¹⁴—and because “it is difficult for us to imagine that *Targum Onqelos* would choose a criterion that has to do with the type of mitzvah, something which can occasionally be difficult to precisely define.”¹⁵

N. Adler suggests that, in general, *Targum Onqelos* translates halakhic *pesuqim* literally, but that he makes exceptions when working with *pesuqim* around which there were sectarian controversies between Sadducees and Pharisees.¹⁶ Komlosh cites scholars who object to this explanation because it is not supported by historical data—although it is certainly true that Sadducees interpreted “after the Sabbath” differently than Pharisees did, and acted accordingly, it is simply not known whether or not similar active controversies accompanied other *pesuqim* which *Targum Onqelos* translates non-literally.¹⁷ Komlosh concludes his preliminary discussion of this topic by voicing the opinion that Onqelos almost certainly did not have rigid rules about when to integrate or refrain from integrating the Oral Law into his translation, but considered each verse individually, and chose to incorporate the halakhah when the verse did not seem clear enough.¹⁸

A similarly defeatist explanation is offered by another twentieth-century scholar, Pinchas Churgin. Churgin argues that the apparent inconsistency in the Targum's treatment of halakhic *pesuqim* can be explained by the fact that there were multiple authors involved in the production of the Targum.¹⁹ He posits that, originally, there was a proto-Onqelos that was entirely literal and did not incorporate any *midrashim*, and that, over the course of centuries, copyists and scribes, perceiving a need on the part

¹³ See Bernard Grossfeld, “Onqelos, Halakhah and the Halakhic Midrashim,” in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in Their Historical Context*, ed. D.R.G. Beattie and M.J. McNamara (Sheffield, U.K.: JSOT Press, 1994), 231-34.

¹⁴ Komlosh, in *The Bible in the Light of the Aramaic Translations*, provides numerous examples of non-literal halakhic interpretations that are inconsistent with Rapoport's theory on pp. 164-165.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 158.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 158-59.

¹⁹ Pinchas Churgin, “The Halakhah in *Targum Onqelos*,” *Talpiyot* 2 [Hebrew], vol. 3-4 (5705-06/1945-46): 421-23.

of the common people to understand the meaning of the text according to the rabbis, haphazardly incorporated very brief references to *midrashim* into their translations.²⁰

More recently, R. Stanley Wagner has argued that Onqelos does, in fact, have a consistent methodological approach to thorny questions of literal vs. midrashic translation within legal *pesuqim*, which is that Onqelos, “was not interested in incorporating *halakhah* into his translation”²¹ and “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.”²² In other words, Wagner contends that, when Onqelos appears to abandon the literal meaning of the text in order to incorporate the Oral Law into his translation, it is a mere coincidence—Onqelos believes that there are many halakhic prescriptions which constitute the literal translation of the *pesuqim* in which they are found, which he often reads metaphorically.²³

II

At this point, the one approach to *Targum Onqelos's* relationship with halakhah that we have left to consider is the approach taken by some of the most influential medieval and early modern Bible commentators—they believed that the Targum was never inconsistent with halakhah. In this section, I will sketch out the medieval approach by looking at a comment by Rashi on a *mishnah* in *Megillah*. In order to understand the context of this *mishnah*, it is necessary to keep in mind that the practice in the synagogues of antiquity was to alternate the public reading of the Torah and Haftarah with an Aramaic translation. With reference to this practice, the *mishnah* in *Megillah* states that one who reads from the Torah to the translator should not read more than one *pasuq* at a time, while one who reads from the Haftarah can read up to three *pesuqim* at a time (*Megillah* 23b-24a). Rashi explains that the restriction of one *pasuq* at a time for the Torah reading is to ensure “that the translator, who is translating [without a text before him (lit., *al peh*)], should not err.”²⁴ He goes on to explain that the halakhah with regard to the Haftarah is more lenient because “we

²⁰ Ibid., 421.

²¹ Stanley Wagner, “Translation, Midrash, and Commentary Through the Eyes of Onkelos,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2010: 198.

²² Ibid., 195.

²³ Ibid., 198.

²⁴ Rashi, BT *Megillah* 23b, s.v. *vi-lo yiqra la-meturgaman yoter mi-pasuq ehad*.

do not care if he makes a mistake, since halakhic teaching [lit., “*hora’ab*”] does not come to us from [the Haftarah].”²⁵ Although this *mishnah* does not mention any specific translation, it does, according to Rashi, set up an expectation that Aramaic translations coming from within the rabbinic tradition should consistently incorporate *hora’ab*, or halakhah. Rashi’s reading of the *mishnah* fits with comments about *Targum Onqelos* which he makes in his commentary on the Torah²⁶ and with similar comments made by Ramban²⁷ in his commentary on the Torah.

Rashi, Ramban, and later commentators took an approach to *Targum Onqelos* which is diametrically opposed to Wagner’s: they believed that Onqelos was interested in writing a translation which incorporated halakhah to the extent that, in the finished translation, he actually avoided deviating from the halakhah at any point. This rabbinic viewpoint, which spanned the medieval and early modern periods, has not, to the best of my knowledge, been taken seriously or adequately described in modern academic literature.²⁸ My aim here is to fill that gap by presenting the rabbinic viewpoint and examining the question of whether it is viable. I propose to accomplish this by contextualizing Onqelos’s words within the traditions passed down by Chazal in the Mishnah, Gemara, and *midrashim* as those traditions were understood by rabbinic Bible commentators. This contextualization will demonstrate that medieval and early modern commentators viewed *Targum Onqelos* as consistently adhering to the halakhic tradition and that there are no cases in which it can be confidently stated that *Targum Onqelos* is at variance with the rabbinic law.

The apparently non-halakhic translations of *Targum Onkelos* that I will be recontextualizing fall into four categories, the first three of which overlap each other to a significant extent. One category is comprised of phrases in which Chazal found two different levels of meaning, a literal one and a non-literal one—Onqelos’s choice to preserve the literal level of meaning in his translations of these phrases cannot be faulted, as this

²⁵ Rashi, BT *Megillah* 24a, s.v. *u-va-navi shloshah*.

²⁶ See Rashi, *Devarim* 17:5, s.v. *vi-hotzeta et ha-ish ha-bu...el sha’arekha, vi-gomer*. Rashi at no point in his commentary on the Pentateuch explicitly says that *Targum Onqelos* is entirely halakhic, but I believe that it can be definitively inferred from his comments on this *pasuq* that he believes that it is. I will analyze these comments at greater length later in this essay.

²⁷ See Ramban, *Shemot* 21:29, s.v. *vi-gam ba’alav yumat*. Just as in the footnote above with reference to Rashi, there is no explicit statement here, but I believe that Ramban’s comments on this *pasuq* should be interpreted this way, and I will elaborate on them at greater length later in this essay.

²⁸ Cf. Israel Drazin, “Nachmanides Introduced the Notion that Targum Onkelos Contains Derash,” *Oqimta*, Issue 1, 2013: 505-24.

was certainly the best way to remain loyal to the interpretation of Chazal. The second category involves cases in which modern scholars' assumptions that Onqelos's translation is not in accordance with halakhah reflect an excessively narrow approach to what the *halakhah pesuqa* may have been in the eyes of a rabbinic Jew of late antiquity and an insufficient consideration of the full range of halakhic opinions advanced in ancient rabbinic sources. The third category involves translations that have been misunderstood. The fourth category consists of one case in which one medieval authority claims that a textual emendation is in order.

III

In *Ayelet Ha-Shachar*,²⁹ Malbim's systematic collection of rules about how Chazal derive laws from *pesuqim*, he posits that "in every place in which the meaning of the language will bear two explanations, [Chazal] will give a second explanation as well." A formal limitation of Targumim—which makes for a sharp contrast between them and the discursive midrashic collections and Talmudim as well as the later discursive commentaries—is that they usually can only incorporate one meaning or explanation per phrase.³⁰ Scholars who aim to show that Onqelos sometimes ignores "the" halakhah (or, more broadly, "the" rabbinic teaching) are often simply failing to take note of the fact that when *Targum Onqelos* appears to ignore or contradict a legal ruling of Chazal, he is actually choosing to incorporate the most literal of two or more meanings which Chazal accord to a *pasuq*.³¹ In this section, I will bring examples of instances in

²⁹ *Ayelet Ha-Shachar*, rule 212.

³⁰ Avigdor Shinan has pithily noted this limitation of translation in "The Aggadah of the Palestinian Targums," in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context*, ed. D.R.G. Beattie and M.J. McNamara (Sheffield, U.K.: JSOT Press, 1994): 212: "The *Meturgeman* is unable to do many things that the preacher can do with abandon, such as suggest alternative and even contradictory interpretations." Generally speaking, this observation is especially applicable to *Targum Onqelos*, the leanest of the traditional Targumim. However, it should be noted that, on very rare occasions, Onqelos permits himself to incorporate more than one translation per phrase. See, e.g., his translation of *Bereishit* 49:11 and Rashi's comments on it, s.v. *b'nei atono*: "*v-Onqelos tirgem b-melekh ha-mashiah...v-od tirgem bi-panim aheirim...*"

³¹ There are more instances of Onqelos choosing one of multiple rabbinic meanings and modern scholars thinking that they have caught him deviating from the halakhah than can be included in one paper. In *Devarim* 25:11, "*vi-katzotah et kappab*" is rendered literally because one of the opinions in *Sifre Devarim* (paragraph 161) takes it literally. All quotations from the *Mekhilta d-Rabbi Yishmael*,

which Onqelos has been accused of making non-halakhic translation where he in fact chooses to translate according to one of multiple rabbinic interpretations.

The twenty-first chapter of *Shemot* contains laws pertaining to a Hebrew slave. In *Shemot* 21:6, the Torah teaches the law regarding a Hebrew slave who does not wish to be freed—“*Vi-higisho adonav el ha-elohim, vi-higisho el ha-delet o el ha-mezuzah, vi-ratza adonav et ozno bi-martze'a vi-avado le-olam*”—literally, “And his master shall bring him to the judges, and he shall bring him to the door or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear, and he shall serve him forever [non-idiomatically, for as long as the world endures].” Chazal say that the Hebrew servant serves his master only until the Jubilee year, since every fifty years is called a “world.”³² Because Onqelos³³ translates “*le-olam*” as “*le-alam*,” which is just the Aramaic version of the same word, and does not translate it as “until the Jubilee,” it has been suggested³⁴ that this verse is an instance of Onqelos adhering to the literal meaning of the *pasuq*, despite the fact that there is an inconsonance between the literal meaning and the halakhah as taught by Chazal.

In fact, this *pasuq* is one which exemplifies Malbim’s rule about Chazal’s tendency to make one phrase bear the weight of more than one meaning. In *Mekhilta d-Rabbi Yishmael*,³⁵ Rabbi comments, “from here you can learn that the world (*ha’olam*) is for no more than fifty years.” In other words, he is using a fusion of the *derash* meaning and the literal meaning to derive an esoteric lesson about the age of the world. As Ramban clarifies,

...A person who has studied the esoteric dimension of Torah [*ha-maskil*] will understand that “*le-’olam*” should be understood literally, because one who serves until the Jubilee has served for all of the days of the world. As the *Mekhilta* says, “Rabbi says, come and behold that the world [will endure] only for fifty years, as it says, ‘and he shall serve him forever [for the endurance of the world]’—‘until the Jubilee.’”³⁶

Onqelos chooses the most literal of two rabbinic meanings.

Sifra, and *Sifre* are taken from the following edition: Malbim, *The Torah with the Commentary of the Malbim* [Hebrew] (Bnei Brak: Makhon She’al Yidei Mosdot Alexander, 5760/2000).

³² See Rashi, *Shemot* 21:6, s.v. *vi-avado le-’olam*.

³³ Ad loc.

³⁴ Komlosh, *The Bible in the Light of the Aramaic Translations*, 191.

³⁵ *Mekhilta d-Rabbi Yishmael*, par. 36.

³⁶ Ramban, *Shemot*, 21:6, s.v., *vi-avado le-’olam*.

Another straightforward example of Malbim's principle at work in the teachings of Chazal and formal limitations in the translations of Onqelos can be found in *Devarim* 21:18. The *pasuq* says, "Ki yihiyeh l-ish ben sorer u-moreh einenu shomeya bi-qol aviv u-viqol imo, vi-yisru oto, vi-lo shama aleibem"—"If a man shall have a wayward and rebellious son, who does not listen to his father's voice and to his mother's voice, and they rebuke him and he does not listen to them." Here, Onqelos translates "vi-yisru" literally, as "malfin yatei"—"they teach him," despite the fact that Chazal mandate lashes for him,³⁷ and despite the fact that, in the case of the libeler in *Devarim* 22:18, Onqelos translates "v-yisru oto" as "vi-yalqon yatei"—"they [the court] shall give him lashes," in accordance with the teaching of Chazal. Komlosh, following R. D.Z. Hoffman, counts Onqelos's translation of the *pasuq* regarding the rebellious son as a divergence from Chazal, and hypothesizes that Onqelos chooses to diverge in this way because he wants to teach parents and other authority figures that they should relate to wayward children with temperance.³⁸

Komlosh is right to think that there is an educational consideration here, but wrong to think that the consideration is Onqelos's alone. The *mishnah* in *Sanhedrin* (71a) teaches that the rebellious son is both rebuked and flogged, and this *mishnah* is quoted by Rashi.³⁹ In *Gur Aryeh*, his supercommentary on Rashi, Maharal comments as follows⁴⁰:

This "vi-yisru" is rebuke, as it says [in the next *pasuq*], "and he doesn't listen to them." And if so, it [the word "vi-yisru"] must be rebuke. And the fact that he [Rashi, or the author of the *mishnah*] says "and they should flog him," is from the word *vi-yisru*, which is the language of lashes, as it is written [in *Devarim* 22:18-19], "and they shall flog him and they shall punish him," and that is certainly lashes, as shall be explained later. And if so, we learn two [laws] from it [the word "vi-yisru"].

Here again, we see a rabbinic scholar explaining that Chazal learn more than one lesson from one phrase in the Torah. Onqelos chooses to translate one of the two lessons which are learned. Interestingly, Maharal seems to say that both interpretations are equally mandated by the *peshat*. In this case, the translation which Onqelos chooses is the one which is *peshat* because of the local context, as opposed to the meaning which is *peshat* because of its usage in other places in the Pentateuch.

³⁷ See Rashi, *Devarim* 21:18, s.v. *vi-yisru oto*.

³⁸ Komlosh, *The Bible in the Light of the Aramaic Translations*, 162-63

³⁹ Rashi, *Devarim* 21:18, s.v. *vi-yisru oto*.

⁴⁰ Ad loc, s.v. *matrin oto biphnei shloshah*.

Another somewhat similar case is Onqelos's translation of the law regarding the girl who is accused of committing adultery after her betrothal and before her marriage. The *pasuq* in *Devarim* 22:17 says, “*v-binei hu sam alilot divarim lamor lo matzati li-vitcha bitulim vi-aleb bitulei biti u-farsu ha-simlab lifnei ziknei ha-ir*”—“And behold, he has said libelous words, saying ‘I have not found your daughter’s hymen’—and this is my daughter’s hymen. And they shall spread out the garment before the elders of the city.” Onqelos translates “*u-farsu ha-simlab*” literally, as “*vi-yifrisun shoshbifa*”—“they spread out her garment.” Rashi⁴¹ comments, “This is a metaphor: the things should be made as visible as a garment.” Onqelos’s literal translation of “*u-farsu et ha-simlab*” is one of the proofs R. S.Y. Rapaport brings⁴² for his theory that Onqelos did not translate according to the halakhah in *pesuqim* that deal with laws which are given over to the rabbinical courts. There are two problems with this. First of all, although it is true that the halakhah as quoted by Rashi is that the girls’ parents do not literally spread her garment before the court, the literal meaning of the words still has some didactic value according to Rashi, as it does in the previous two cases. Second of all, there is not a clear consensus among the rabbinic authorities of either the medieval period or antiquity about whether or not the halakhah is like the literal understanding of this *pasuq*. Ramban thinks that the procedure laid out in the *pesuqim* here actually should be followed according to halakhah, and that Rashi has misunderstood his sources. Ramban⁴³ begins his commentary on these words by quoting Rashi, and continues as follows:

This is the midrash of Rabbi Yishmael in the Sifre and in the Mekhilta. But there is no need, because there is an ancient custom in Israel to bring the bride and the groom to the wedding canopy and to inspect them while the witnesses watch outside, and these [inspectors] are those whom the Sages call *shushbinim*, and when they leave, the witnesses come and take the garment that she [the bride] was made to lie upon, and they see the blood—and this is known in the Talmud and in the books of *aggadah*—and that garment is called a *sudar*. And that is why the *pasuq* says that her father and mother should spread out the *sudar* which they took from the hands of the witnesses, and say, “this is the hymen of my daughter.” And while it is certainly true that it is necessary to clarify many things on which the text does not elaborate, he [Rabbi Yishmael] only said “this is a metaphor” [about the entire scenario laid out in the text, not merely

⁴¹ Rashi, *Devarim* 22:17, s.v. *u-farsu ha-simlab*.

⁴² Komlosh, *The Bible in the Light of the Aramaic Translations*, 158.

⁴³ Ramban, *Devarim* 22:17, s.v. *u-farsu ha-simlab*.

about the spreading of the garment], according to the opinion which makes it possible for the husband to be guilty of libel even if he had not been intimate with her [in *Qetubbot* 46a]. And the *peshat* is that in order to be guilty [of libel] he must have been intimate with her. And so it says in the Talmud, “Rabbi Elazar ben Yaakov says, ‘an actual garment.’” And the halakhah is according to his words.

Thus, according to Ramban (and Rabbi Elazar ben Yaakov), Onqelos’s translation here is perfectly in accordance with the halakhah. As we shall see, Rashi assumes that it is always Onqelos’s intention to translate according to halakhah; Rashi, however, does not object to Onqelos’s translation of this *pasuq*, because even according to Rashi’s interpretation of the *pasuq*, the literal meaning of the phrase “*u-farsu et ha-simlab*” still has a didactic purpose.

The last example which roughly fits into the general category of doubled up meanings is Onqelos’s translation of “*ayin tabat ayin*”—“an eye for an eye,” in *Shemot* 21:24, which is the most famous of Onqelos’s supposed departures from the halakhah: he translates it literally, as “*ayna halaf ayna*,” while Chazal, as is well known, mandate monetary payment for the value of the eye⁴⁴ (of course, the Torah lists many similar damages and reparations, all of which are interpreted non-literally by Chazal and translated literally by Onqelos). Malbim⁴⁵ comments that “the meaning [of an eye for an eye] is that he [the damager] deserves to be blinded in an eye, but because it is impossible to ensure that the damages of the two of them [the damager and the injured party] shall be exactly equal, he [the damager] shall pay the value of the eye.” It would be impossible to understand the prolonged back and forth about this law in *Bava Kamma* (84a-b), which Malbim is summarizing, without knowledge of the literal meaning of this *pasuq*, but that is not all—the literal meaning never was discarded by Chazal or their successors, and was used for a homiletic purpose, as Malbim indicates when he emphasizes that the damager deserves to be blinded. In fact, Rambam thought that this homiletic message was important enough to codify in his *Mishneh Torah*,⁴⁶ a halakhic work:

What is written in the Torah,⁴⁷ “As he inflicts a blemish upon a person, so shall it be inflicted upon him,” is not to teach that [the courts] should injure this one [the damager] just as he injured his fellow, but to teach that he deserves to be deprived of his limb or to be injured

⁴⁴ See Rashi, *Shemot* 21:24, s.v. *ayin tabat ayin*.

⁴⁵ Malbim, *Shemot* 21:24, s.v. *ayin tabat ayin*.

⁴⁶ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Hovel U-mazik* 1:3.

⁴⁷ *Vayiqra* 24:20.

according to what he did, and that therefore he pays the damages which he caused.

This is not necessarily even a classic case of Chazal doubling up meanings, because it seems from the discussion in the Talmud that the original meaning was never really contradicted or abandoned—it was merely put on hold, in a way, because of the constraints of reality.

IV

Another situation in which Onqelos seemingly translates a phrase in a way which is contrary to halakhah can be resolved in a way that is not related to doubled up meanings and Chazal's unique approach to *peshat*, but rather has to do with a simple question of how Onqelos's Aramaic translation is to be understood. Instructions for the sacrifice of the Pesach offering are given more than once in the Torah. In *Shemot* 12:6, the *pasuq* says that the offering must be brought "*bein ha-arybayim*," which Onqelos translates as "*bein shimshaya*." Presumably because of its linguistic similarity to the tannaitic⁴⁸ expression "*bein ha-shmashot*," which means twilight, contemporary scholars assume that twilight is what Onqelos means here.⁴⁹ If so, Onqelos's translation would be anti-halakhic, since Chazal mandate that the Pesach offering should be sacrificed in the afternoon.⁵⁰ However, the medieval interpretation of Onqelos is unlike that of the contemporary scholars. After offering his own explanation of "*bein ha-arybayim*," Ramban⁵¹ discusses the interpretations of Rashi⁵² and Onqelos:

The definition [of *bein ha-arybayim*] which is supplied by Rashi, of blessed memory, may be correct: [if so,] there are two darkenings [*arybayim*]: the darkening of the morning [at noon] and [the darkening of] the evening. This is supported by the Tanakh's references to the waning [lit., *minhab*] of the morning and the waning of the evening, as it is written,⁵³ "and it was in the morning when the waning began," and it is written,⁵⁴ "Until the waning of the evening. And in the waning of the evening I arose from my fast." And "*minhab*" [that has

⁴⁸ See e.g. BT *Beitzab* 19a.

⁴⁹ See Komlosh, *The Bible in the Light of the Aramaic Translations*, 191.

⁵⁰ See Rashi, *Shemot* 12:6, s.v. *bein ha-arybayim*.

⁵¹ Ramban, *Shemot* 12:6, s.v. *bein ha-arybayim*. My translation starts with the word "*vayitakhen*" from the middle of Ramban's long commentary on this phrase.

⁵² See Rashi ad loc.

⁵³ II Kings 3:20.

⁵⁴ Ezra 9:4-5.

been translated as waning] is related to the word “*menuḥab*”—resting—of the sun and quietening of its great light, as the Targum translates⁵⁵ [*li-ruach hayom as*] “*li-manah yoma*” [—at the waning of the day], and these are “*minḥab gedolah*” [—lit., ‘great waning’] and “*minḥab ket-anah*” [—lit., “small waning”] which are mentioned by the Sages⁵⁶ [in the context of their discussions of the times for afternoon prayer]. And behold, this entire time is the one given for the lighting of the candles and the [bringing of] the *qetoret* [in the Temple] [note: the Torah commands⁵⁷ that these services should be performed “*bein ha-arybayim*, and Onqelos translates “*bein ha-arybayim*” as “*bein shimsḥaya*” in those contexts as well] ... And Onqelos’s opinion leans in this direction [i.e. Rashi’s interpretation of “*bein ha-arybayim*”], who wrote “*bein shimsḥaya*,” [by which he intended] “between the eastern sun and the western sun.”

Maharal,⁵⁸ too, understands Onqelos’s translation here as being in accordance with the halakhah. Unlike Ramban, he also addresses the problem of the apparent similarity between “*bein shimsḥaya*” and “*bein ha-shmashot*.” First Maharal quotes Rashi and the portion of Ramban’s commentary in which Ramban elucidates Rashi’s commentary and offers support for it from Onqelos, and then he offers his own opinion:

And I say that this [interpretation of Onqelos] is very unlikely, for how can the time between when the sun is in the east and when the sun is setting be called “*bein ha-shmashot*” [lit.,—between the suns] when it is known that our Rabbis of blessed memory⁵⁹ used the language “*bein ha-shmashot*” to describe a time that may be day or may be night [i.e. twilight]? And according to this [Ramban’s insertion of Onqelos into Rashi] it [twilight] should not be called *bein ha-shmashot*, and we have not found these two suns [suggested by Ramban in his role as supercommentary on Rashi and Onqelos] anywhere else, nor have we found these two darkenings [suggested by Rashi].

And I say that the time between days is that which is called “*bein ha-arybayim*”—that is to say, between the day that has passed and the day that is coming, for when the day that has passed is completely gone, then the day begins to darken—then that time is called “*bein ha-arybayim*,” and in the language of the Targum, which is the language

⁵⁵ *Bereishit* 3:8.

⁵⁶ BT *Berachot* 26a.

⁵⁷ *Shemot* 30:8.

⁵⁸ Maharal, *Gur Aryeh*, *Shemot* 12:6, s.v. *vi-lashon bein ha-arybayim vi-kehulu*.

⁵⁹ BT *Shabbat* 34b.

of people, it is called, “*bein ha-shmasbot*” which is just as if he had written “between the days,” and then its meaning would be that time in which the passing day has begun to darken and the coming day has not yet come, because in the words of the Torah the day is called after its beginning, as it is written,⁶⁰ “and it was evening and it was morning.” And in the language of people, the day is called after the shining of the sun, and therefore it is as if what is written is “between days”... and our Rabbis of blessed memory used the term “*bein ha-shmasbot*” to indicate the time that truly is between days, so much so that it is a question whether it belongs to the day before or to the day after—that time they called *bein ha-shmasbot*. From this we will know the true meaning of “*bein shimsbaya*,” and this is Onqelos’s intention when he translated “*bein shimsbaya*.” And it is all called “between the days,” whether it is truly between the days—as in the usage of our Rabbis of blessed memory, in which *bein ha-shmasbot* means truly between days—or the time that begins to be between days—that is to say—from midday onwards...

A proof for this interpretation can be found in the words of Chazal in the fifth chapter of *Pesahim*.⁶¹

The Pesah that is slaughtered on the fourteenth [of Nisan] in the morning—ben Beteira says it is unfit if it were brought not for the sake of the mitzvah. Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Hoshaya, ben Beteira declared that a Pesah offering that was brought for the sake of the mitzvah is fit, since its time is the entire day, since it is written “*bein ha-arbayim*,” and Rabbi Shilo says “between two *aravim*.”

If our Sages of blessed memory do not interpret “*bein ha-arbayim*” as we have said, how could they interpret thus?... I say that they interpret *bein ha-arbayim* as I explained above, that is, between two days, the preceding evening and the coming evening. And even though ben Beteira agrees that the main time for the mitzvah of Pesah is from midday onwards, that is because “*bein ha-arbayim*” is the time that is truly between two *aravim*, that is, when the first day has passed and the next day is coming, and that is the time after midday as we have said above...which is the time between the previous evening and the coming evening. And even though Rabbi Yochanan disagrees⁶², and believes that even ben Beteira would not allow a Pesah

⁶⁰ *Bereishit* 1:5.

⁶¹ BT *Pesahim* 11b.

⁶² BT *Zevahim* 12a.

that was slaughtered in the morning, there is no reason at all to believe that he would disagree with this interpretation of *bein ha-arbayim*, rather Rabbi Yoḥanan believes that it is a [narrower] time between the days, as we have said.

Maharal's proof from the Talmud should be adequate to convince any doubters that, at the very least, Chazal themselves saw their interpretation of *bein ha-arbayim* as being consonant with the literal text. Maharal's direct treatment of the problem of Chazal's use of "*bein ha-shmashot*" and reinterpretation of Onqelos also seem plausible.

Onqelos himself, in fact, sheds some light on the intention of his translation of "*bein shimsbaya*" in another *pasuq*. In *Bereishit* 49: 27, Jacob blesses Benjamin as follows: "*Binyamin zē'ev yitrof; baboqer yokhal ad, vi-l'erev yihalek sbala!*"—lit., "Binyamin is a wolf who will take; in the morning he will eat spoils, and in the evening he shall divide plunder." As mentioned earlier, Onqelos's most dramatic departures from the literal meaning of the Chumash occur in his translations of poetic passages, such as the blessings of Jacob; his translation of this *pasuq* is as follows: "*Binyamin b-arei tishrei shikbintei; bi-ahsantei yitbanei mikdisha; bi-tzafra u-vi-fanya yibon mikarvin kabanaya qurbana, u-l-idan ramsba yibon mifalgin motar hulkehon mi-sbar qudsbaya*"—"In the land of Binyamin the Divine presence shall rest; the Temple shall be built in his home; in the morning and in the afternoon the priests shall bring sacrifices, and in the evening they will divide the remainder of their portions from the remaining sacrifices." It is relevant to our discussion that Onqelos notes here that the correct times for the offering of the sacrifices are "morning and afternoon," while "evening" is reserved for eating the leftover meat.

Skeptics of Onqelos's loyalty to Chazal might note that in our *pasuq* he nevertheless chooses to translate "*bein ha-arbayim*" as "*bein shimsbaya*," despite the fact that the word "*fanya*," which means afternoon, remains available to him; it seems equally noteworthy, however, that, instead of opting to equate *bein ha-arbayim* with "*ramsba*"—evening, which is how he translates "*erev*" in *Bereishit*—he chooses instead the relatively cryptic "*bein shimsbaya*," which both Ramban and Maharal interpret as a reference to the afternoon.

The next example of a misunderstood translation is also *sui generis*. As mentioned previously, Chazal teach that the Torah's thrice-repeated prohibition of cooking a kid in its mother's milk teaches that there are three actions that must not be undertaken with a mixture of meat and milk: one must not cook such a mixture; one must not eat it; and one must

not derive benefit from it.⁶³ Although Onqelos does alter “*lo tivashel g’di bihaleiv imo*”—lit., “do not cook a kid in the milk of its mother,” to make it resemble Chazal’s understanding more than the original Hebrew does, he does not vary his translation to reflect the fact that there are three prohibited actions; in each instance of the prohibition of cooking a kid in its mother’s milk, he translates “*lo taikhlun basar ba-halav*”—do not eat a mixture of meat and milk. Komlosh takes Onqelos’s apparent mixed acceptance and rejection of Chazal as evidence for his theory that, although Onqelos does often integrate the Oral Law into his translation, this integration is rather sporadic and relaxed in nature, and that it is not uncommon for Onqelos to deviate from it for various reasons—in this case, because eating is the most common instance in which the prohibition of eating meat and milk would come up.⁶⁴

Komlosh’s assumption that complete loyalty to the Oral Law would demand a variation in the translation is not necessarily warranted: Chazal learn from the repetition of the prohibition that there are multiple prohibited actions associated with meat and milk; they do not, however, assign each of the three instances of the prohibitions to one of the prohibited actions. Rashi, who is rarely accused of harboring a disloyal attitude towards Chazal, repeats Chazal’s teaching about the threefold nature of the prohibition in his commentary to each of the *pesuqim* in which it is reiterated;⁶⁵ he does not go off on his own and make declarations about which *pasuq* teaches about which dimension of the *issur* in each of the places, and refrain from mentioning the other dimensions there. Furthermore, varying translations of identical phrases in such a way as Komlosh suggests Onqelos should have done would fundamentally warp the literary form of the text. Of course, the simple claim that Onqelos allows his loyalty to the literary form of the text to override his loyalty to the Oral Law would merely be a variation on Komlosh’s general theme. There are, however, halakhists and commentators who see the form of the text as an important shaper of the Oral Law itself, and of the interpretations thereof.

In his commentary to Rashi on *Shemot* 34:26,⁶⁶ Maharal, who is ever attentive to the integration of the formalistic characteristics of the Written Law and the Oral Law, asks why the Torah chooses to convey three distinct prohibitions regarding a mixture of meat and milk by repeating itself,

⁶³ See Rashi, *Shemot* 23:19, s.v. *lo tivashel g’di*.

⁶⁴ Komlosh, *The Bible in the Light of the Aramaic Translations*, 162.

⁶⁵ Rashi, *Shemot* 23:19, s.v. *lo tivashel g’di*; *Shemot* 34:26, s.v. *lo tivashel g’di*; *Devarim* 14:21, s.v. *lo tivashel g’di*.

⁶⁶ Maharal, *Gur Aryeh*, *Shemot* 34:26, s.v. *Azharab li-basar vi-halav vi-shalosh pa’amim ne’emar bi-Torah vi-khulu*.

instead of simply issuing three distinct commandments. He cites solutions offered by Rambam and others, which he rejects. Then he offers his own solution:

And to me it seems right to say that since there is a prohibition of cooking, [and] the prohibition of eating is not its own entity; rather, all [prohibitions surrounding meat and milk] are subsumed under the prohibition of cooking ... And I am not certain that a person who cooked and ate a mixture of meat and milk with one warning would get two sets of lashes. Since the Torah presented it all under the language of “do not cook,” there is only a prohibition of cooking here, and he is only liable for one [set of lashes], just as, if he ate and enjoyed the food that he ate, he is only liable for one set of lashes.

And there is proof for this [opinion that the prohibition of eating is subsumed under the prohibition of cooking] in the chapter “*Kol Ha-basar*,”⁶⁷ where there is an opinion that says that a person who cooks forbidden fat and milk together and is lashed for the cooking is lashed for the eating as well, despite the fact that he is not lashed for eating meat and milk. The eating is already forbidden because of the prohibition of forbidden fat, and [there is a principle that] “one prohibition does not pile on top of another prohibition [when punishments are being determined].” However, since the *pasuq* presented the prohibition of eating with the language of cooking, he is lashed for cooking, since this reason [the principle of “one prohibition does not pile on top of another prohibition”] does not apply, so he receives a second set of lashes for the eating [of the forbidden fat cooked in milk]. And the reason for this is that he [the author of this opinion in the Talmud] believes that the prohibition of eating depends upon the prohibition of cooking, which is the root of the [threefold] prohibition, and that this is the reason why [the Torah] presents all of these prohibitions with the language of “cooking.” And according to the first opinion⁶⁸ [in the Talmud] there ... [it is said that] since he is not lashed for eating [meat and milk, because of the rule that prohibitions do not pile upon each other], he is not lashed for cooking either. Even though [the author of this opinion] makes cooking subsidiary to eating, he [also] believes...that the prohibition of eating and the prohibition of cooking are thought of as one prohibition. And that is why he says that once he [the man who cooked forbidden fat in milk and ate it] does not get lashes for eating [a mixture of meat and milk; he does get lashes for eating forbidden fat], he does not get lashes for cooking [a mixture of meat and milk]

⁶⁷ BT *Hullin* 114a.

⁶⁸ BT *Hullin* 113b.

either, since the two prohibitions are one. And [according to this opinion, which says that eating is primary] the Torah uses the language of cooking [for each case] because it is the first prohibition [i.e., it is the action which is performed first in a normal sequence]. And that is why the Torah says “do not cook” three times, and it never writes “do not eat,” because if so, it would sound like three separate prohibitions [and if there were three separate prohibitions, the laws of lashes would be applied differently] ... And one who reads carefully will see that this is the correct view.

If Onqelos had changed the wording for this commandment in each place where it is reiterated, he would have been disloyal to the passage in *Hullin* which brings two opinions, both of which agree that the three prohibitions related to meat and milk are subsumed under one heading. Perhaps Onqelos agrees with the first opinion in the Talmud, which extrapolates from eating to cooking, and therefore translates “*lo tevashel*” in every instance as a prohibition against eating.

Interestingly, as Rabbi Yehoshua Hartman points out in the footnotes to his edition of *Gur Aryeh*, Rav Saadiah Gaon counts all three prohibitions related to milk and meat as one commandment in his *minyan ha-mitzvot*, apparently in accord with the first two opinions⁶⁹ in the small *sugya* in *Hullin* cited by Maharal and with the translation of Onqelos. Unlike Onqelos, however, Rav Saadiah Gaon does vary his Arabic translation of the prohibition of meat and milk, translating the first and third instances as “do not cook” and the second as “do not eat.” This may simply be owing to the fact that, essential agreement with Onqelos notwithstanding, he weighs the conflicting considerations differently and his legal-artistic discretion leads him to a different choice in translation. An argument seeking to harmonize Onqelos’s translation with halakhah, then, need not contend that, given the adoption of a certain halakhic stance, Onqelos must have translated in the way that he did, but that his adoption of that stance may very well have affected his decision to choose a certain translation over another.

In all of the cases of presumed anti-halakhic translations by Onqelos which we have already seen, broader readings in the ancient rabbinic sources and later codifiers and commentators reveal in each instance that Onqelos’s translation may be quite compatible with the halakhah, and that

⁶⁹ The third opinion brought in that Gemara is that eating forbidden fat cooked in milk is not punished with lashes (for the meat and milk part of it) and that cooking forbidden fat in milk is punished with lashes. It is adopted by Rambam, who, unsurprisingly, counts the prohibitions of cooking and eating as two separate commandments in his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*.

the rabbinic commentators certainly tend to assume that it is. There is, however, at least one place in the Chumash in which Rashi says that he thinks that *Targum Onqelos* is anti-halakhic. In *Devarim* 17:5, regarding the punishment of an idol worshipper, the Torah says, “*vi-hotzeta et ha-ish habu o et ha-ishah habi asher asu et ha-davar ha-ra ha-zeh el sha'arekha*,”—lit., “you shall take that man or that woman that did this bad thing to your gate.” Onqelos translates, “you shall take that man or that woman that did this bad thing to the gate of your rabbinical court.” Unusually, Onqelos’s deviation from the most literal meaning—as opposed to his adherence to the most literal meaning—here distances his translation from the accepted halakhah. Rashi⁷⁰ comments on this:

One who translates “to your gate” as “to the gate of your rabbinical court” is mistaken, for we have learned,⁷¹ “to your gate”—this is the gate in which he committed the sin. Or perhaps it is the gate in which he was judged? It says ‘your gate’ below, and it says ‘your gate’ above; just as ‘your gate’ which it says above is the gate in which he sinned, so too ‘your gate’ that it says below is the gate in which he sinned.” And its Aramaic translation is “*li-kirvayikh*.”

First, it is important to note that from this comment we can infer that Rashi believed that it was always Onqelos’s intention to translate according to the halakhah. If Rashi thought it possible that Onqelos might be purposefully presenting anti-halakhic *peshat* commentaries in the manner of Rashi’s grandson, Rashbam, Rashi would not have used the word “mistaken” here. However, it is very strange that Rashi, who believed that the Targum comes from Sinai, should claim that the author of the Targum has made a mistake about the halakhah. Rashi’s uncharacteristic apparent disrespect for *Targum Onqelos* becomes less surprising, however, if we accept R. A. Berliner’s contention⁷² that every time Rashi uses the word “*vi-targum*”—which I have translated here as “and its Aramaic translation is”—he is introducing an emendation based on an alternative manuscript which he considers to be correct. The uncharacteristic nature of the apparent dismissal at the beginning of the commentary of Rashi which we are looking at makes a good case in Berliner’s favor, as do the existences

⁷⁰ Rashi, *Devarim* 17:5, s.v. *vi-hotzeta et ha-ish ha-bu, el shiarekha, vi-gomer*.

⁷¹ BT *Qetubbot* 45b.

⁷² Avraham Berliner, *Rashi on the Torah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 5730/1969), 433.

of several manuscripts which contain the alternate Aramaic translation which Rashi suggests is the correct one.⁷³

Interestingly, Ramban, who does not mention the Targum directly in his commentary on this *pasuq*, appears to have the Targum on his mind when he points out that the law in *ḥutz la-aretz* does, in fact, differ from the *pesbat* of this *pasuq*, just as our version of *Targum Onqelos* does: “for outside of the Land [of Israel] he is stoned near the gate of the court in which he is judged.”⁷⁴ While Rashi assumes that the Targum must reflect the law of Eretz Yisrael, Ramban’s quotation of the law of *ḥutz la-aretz* brought down in the Gemara raises the possibility that the author of *Targum Onqelos* intentionally incorporated it, and not the law of Eretz Yisrael, in his translation. There is, after all, a certain fittingness in the translation into Aramaic, the language of exile, incorporating the law of exile.

Actually, the gemara which Ramban quotes does not use the term “*ḥutz la-aretz*” at all, but speaks of “*ir she-rubab ovdei kokhavim*”—“a city the population of which is primarily made up of idolaters” (*Ketubbot* 45b). Ramban, whose theological centering of Eretz Yisrael is well known, appears to have read “*ir she-rubab ovdei kokhavim*” as a shorthand for “a city in *ḥutz la-aretz*.” However, a literal reading of the phrase “*ir she-rubab ovdei kokhavim*” is also possible. Such cities existed, by imperial decree, within Eretz Yisrael after the Roman destruction of the Temple, reflecting an “exile” that was temporal rather than purely spatial in nature. The law taught by our version of the Targum then, again, very appropriately, reflects the law which would most often have applied in a certain time even within Eretz Yisrael—in the very centuries of late antiquity in which it is thought that the earliest layers of *Targum Onqelos* were first composed.⁷⁵

In *Shemot* 21:29, the *pasuq* states that in a situation in which the owner of an ox who was warned (“*hu’ad*,” from which comes the term “*shor mu’ad*”—an ox who has been the subject of warnings) three times that his ox

⁷³ See the critical apparatus in Alexander Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic* [Hebrew] (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 1:320.

⁷⁴ Ramban, *Devarim* 17:2-5, s.v. *bi-ehad she’arekha* (the second one).

⁷⁵ For an overview of the philological debates regarding the provenance of *Targum Onqelos*, see Edward M. Cook, “A New Perspective on the Language of Onqelos and Jonathan,” in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context*, ed., D.R.G. Beattie and M.J. McNamara (Sheffield, U.K.: JSOT Press, 1994): 142-56. There does not appear to be a clear scholarly consensus on whether Onqelos originated in Palestine, Babylonia, or somewhere in between. For an overview of the similarly unresolved debates about when *Targum Onqelos* was first authored and when it became solidified in its present form, see Komlosh, *The Bible in the Light of the Aramaic Translations*, 27-29.

has gored and does not keep his ox from goring again, and in which the ox kills a person the fourth time it gores, the ox is stoned and the owner “shall be put to death”—lit., “*yumat*.” Ramban observes that the rabbinic law in this case—which is that the owner is put to death at the hands of Heaven instead of being killed by an earthly court—fits in with a larger pattern in the wording of the Scripture and its rabbinic interpretation:

Our rabbis of blessed memory received that it is death at the hands of Heaven, and like it are “and the stranger who approaches shall be put to death [*yumat*],”⁷⁶ “and they shall die [*umatu*] through it because they will have desecrated it.”⁷⁷ And I have observed that when the Pentateuch speaks of those who deserve the death penalty [at the hands of a court], the word “*yumat*” [—“shall be put to death”] does not come alone, but “*mot yumat*” [—“shall surely be put to death”] is said in every instance...

And I do not know the rationale behind the translation of Onqelos, who said “shall be killed [*yitqatil*].” And perhaps he wished to say that it would be appropriate for him to be killed [by a court], but that there is a monetary payment which effects atonement [the atonement that would normally be effected by the death penalty]. Or he desired to interpret that which the Scripture stated—“and its owner shall *also* be put to death”—as “he shall [also] be killed, just as the person who was gored was killed,” for his day will come, or he will fall and be destroyed in battle, and Hashem will not absolve him. He wished to teach that he is punishable by the hands of Heaven to die by the hands of a killer, not his own death, like the idea that is conveyed by “and I shall kill you with a sword.”⁷⁸

And Onqelos also translates “and the stranger who approaches shall be put to death”⁷⁹ as “*yitqatil*”—“he shall be killed,” because he reasoned according to the words of Rabbi Aqiva, who said, “a stranger who served in the *miqdash*...Rabbi Aqiva says [that he is punished] with strangling.”⁸⁰

First of all, it is important to note that it can be inferred from this passage that Ramban believes that it is always the intention of *Targum Onqelos* to adhere to the halakhah—he offers two explanations for Onqelos’s apparent deviation from the halakhah here, in *Shemot* 21, and an additional explanation for a twin instance of the same in *Bemidbar* 18, all of

⁷⁶ *Bemidbar* 18:7

⁷⁷ *Vayiqra* 22:9.

⁷⁸ *Shemot* 22:23.

⁷⁹ *Bemidbar* 18:7.


⁸⁰ BT *Sanhedrin* 84a; Ramban, *Shemot* 21:29, s.v. *vi-gam ba'alav yumat*.

which harmonize the Targum and the halakhah. The explanation for the translation in *Bemidbar* is straightforward: Onqelos follows the opinion of Rabbi Aqiva. Less straightforward are Ramban's explanations for Onqelos's translation here in *Shemot*, which are both homiletical in nature: both explanations contend that Onqelos learned something extra-halakhic (but not anti-halakhic) from the phrase "*vi-gam ba'alav yumat*," and that he chose to incorporate this extra-halakhic, homiletical meaning into his translation in place of the simple halakhah. If so, Onqelos's translation here, according to the Ramban's reading, is similar to Onqelos's literal translation of "*le-olam*" in *Shemot* 21:6, in which he also prefers the homiletical meaning of the *pasuq* to the halakhic meaning of the *pasuq*. Ramban is on relatively weak ground here insofar as he does not bring sources from the Talmudim or *midrashim* which parallel the close readings and homiletic lessons which he attributes to Onqelos.

There is another important respect, however, in which Ramban's harmonization of Onqelos and the halakhah here stands on very strong ground indeed. Modern scholars, such as R. Natan Adler,⁸¹ read Onqelos's translation of this *pasuq*, *Shemot* 21:29 as an instance of his cleaving to the literal meaning of the Scripture rather than incorporating the halakhah. Ramban's trouble with Onqelos is caused by a very different reading: the Targum here, as Ramban sees it, advances a translation which appears to be both non-halakhic and non-literal: Onqelos could have translated *yumat* with passive form of the cognate Aramaic root (m.m.t) that has the same meaning. Instead, he chose to use the root q.t.l. (meaning kill or murder, parallel to the Hebrew h.r.g or r.tz.h.) vs. m.m.t. (meaning die, close to the Hebrew m.v.t.) throughout the Pentateuch are a fascinating subject deserving of their own study. The short version of the story is that, when a Hebrew word featuring m.v.t is in simple, non-transitive and non-passive form (*binyan qal*), Onqelos usually uses the cognate Aramaic word—so "*bi-yom akhulta mimenu mot tamut* [on the day on which you eat from it you will surely die]" becomes "*bi-yoma di-teikhol mi-nei meimat timut*." However, when m.v.t. is in transitive (*hiphil*) or passive (*huphal*) form and there is a non-divine actor, whether the actor is a person or people contemplating

⁸¹ Quoted in Bernard Grossfeld, "Onqelos, Halakhah and the Halakhic Midrashim," 237.

foul play,⁸² an angel,⁸³ the emissaries of a gentile king,⁸⁴ or a Jewish court,⁸⁵ Onqelos will typically choose q.t.l instead of m.m.t. This is usually not the case, though, when Hashem is the actor—when the *pasuq* uses m.v.t in transitive form to describe what He did to Er and Onan, Onqelos simply uses m.m.t in transitive form.⁸⁶ This makes sense, since “q.t.l.” appears to be somewhat negative and even disrespectful, and is not used in Onqelos’s translation of Reuben’s suggestion to Jacob that he, Jacob, a human actor, should kill two of Reuben’s sons if Reuben fails to follow through on a commitment.⁸⁷ All of these translations lie behind Ramban’s assumption that Onqelos’s translation of *yumat* in our *pasuq* as *yitqatil* must mean some type of killing beyond simple death at the hands of Heaven, like that suffered by Er and Onan. It is not clear to me why R. Adler and those who have accepted his reading of Onqelos here believe that Onqelos’s choice of q.t.l. means that he is making a literal translation. It seems that Ramban’s assumption that a verb with the m.m.t. root would be the literal choice is correct.

What we have just seen is that some of the most influential rabbinic scholars who wrote commentaries on the Bible in the medieval and early modern periods assume that *Targum Onqelos* is wholly consistent with the halakhah. Within the past several hundred years, academic scholars have called Onqelos’s interpretive loyalty to the rabbis and the Oral Law into question—some have even suggested that Onqelos was not interested in incorporating the halakhah into his translation at all. What I have attempted to demonstrate here is not that the modern approaches to Onqelos are all wrong (it is impossible to disprove null hypotheses), but that the medieval approach to Onqelos is viable and attractive. There is no instance in which Onqelos adopts a literal translation that appears to diverge from the halakhic meaning that cannot be harmonized with a rabbinic reading of the text. 

⁸² *Targum Onqelos, Bereishit* 37:18.

⁸³ *Targum Onqelos, Shemot* 4:24.

⁸⁴ *Targum Onqelos, Bereishit* 26:11.

⁸⁵ *Targum Onqelos, Vayiqra* 24:17.

⁸⁶ *Targum Onqelos, Bereishit* 38:7 and 38:10. See also his translation of *Bereishit* 18:25, which avoids applying q.t.l. to Hashem in a different way.

⁸⁷ *Targum Onqelos, Bereishit* 42:37. Onqelos does apply q.t.l. to Hashem in his translations of Moshe’s (audacious) prediction of what the gentile nations will disrespectfully say about Him in *Bemidbar* 14:15 and *Devarim* 9:28 as well as in his translations of other, more violent Hebrew verbs. For the passage in the Pentateuch which best showcases Onqelos’s switching back and forth between q.t.l. (negative) and m.m.t. (neutral) based on context, see *Bemidbar* 35:16-31.