

Great Biblical Commentators
Biographies, Methodologies, and Contributions





Avigail Rock

**GREAT BIBLICAL
COMMENTATORS**

BIOGRAPHIES, METHODOLOGIES,
AND CONTRIBUTIONS

TRANSLATED BY

Yoseif Bloch

Maggid Books

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Biographies, Methodologies, and Contributions*

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*In loving memory of Irving and Beatrice Stone,
who dedicated their lives to the
advancement of Jewish education.*

We are proud and honored to continue in their legacy.

*Their Children, Grandchildren, and Great-Grandchildren
Jerusalem, Israel
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Harabanit Dr. Avigail Rock z"l

"פיה פתחה בחכמה ותורת חסד על לשונה"

For over a decade it was an honor and a privilege to have Dr. Avigail Rock z"l teach our Tuesday morning women's Torah class in English in Modiin. Each week we were rewarded by Avigail's depth of knowledge, her contagious laugh and her immense love of Torah and learning. There was nothing in the vast world of Tanakh scholarship that Avigail could not teach us, and nothing we did not want to learn from her. My husband and I hope that with this translation of Parshanei Hamikra, Avigail's wisdom and spirit and joy in Torah will reach a greater audience.

We hope that it inspires them as much as the precious years learning with Avigail did for those of us in her Tuesday morning class.

With tremendous hakarat hatov,

Tzivia and Aryeh Bak



Avigail was an amazing person and teacher, an inspiration to everyone who listened to her words of Torah. She made everything come alive through her words. She had such a tremendous knowledge of Torah and could easily recite information by heart. She made you love Torah as much as she did.

Diana and Ron Ostroff



In memory of my teacher הרבנית ד"ר אביגיל ראק

An inspiration and role model who was gifted to bring תנ"ך to life for many.

May this ספר continue to inspire people with her teachings.

Shoshana and Steven Arnold



In Memoriam

The words of the righteous are their memorial.

(Y. Shekalim 2:5; Rambam, *Hilkhot Avel* 4:4)

May this volume stand in memoriam for my wife, Rabbanit Dr. Avigail Rock, who was taken from us early in life and is unable to witness the publication of her work.

Avigail ז"ל was a Torah scholar whose devotion preceded her erudition. She was a sought-after Tanakh instructor and a beloved teacher who, in her too-short time on earth, inspired thousands of students, young women and men, in a lasting, profound way. Her female students in particular, whatever their age, saw her as their spiritual role model. It was not only the content of her lessons, unique in their breadth and depth, that set her apart; in addition, perhaps primarily, she breathed life into every topic she discussed, touching the hearts of everyone who had the privilege of learning from her.

However, the greatest impression Avigail ז"ל left was upon us, her family. The values by which we live our lives were shaped mainly by her inspiration. Our children, to whom Avigail dedicated this volume, continue to grow independently, thank God, as they build their personal worlds of values which they have drawn from her. During our twenty-three years together, Avigail was also my inspiration and guiding light.

Great Biblical Commentators

All we who study and preserve her lessons – her family, her students, and the readers of this book – create a living memorial to her and her Torah.

Yehuda Rock

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Preface

To the best of my knowledge, there is no existing work which is comparable to this volume by Avigail z"l in its scope, depth, and method of presentation.

Of course, much has been written analyzing biblical exegesis (*parshanut*) and exegetes (*parshanim*). However, most studies dealing with *parshanim* focus on a single commentator or on a particular school of commentators. In-depth, comprehensive studies of specific commentators are easily found, especially when it comes to key *parshanim* such as Rashi and Ramban. In this context, it is worth noting E. Z. Melamed's book, *Bible Commentators: Their Ways and Methods* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1975), which includes comprehensive and particularly detailed reviews of five key commentators.

The entry on *parshanut* in *Encyclopedia Mikra'it*, which was made into a brief volume entitled *Jewish Bible Exegesis: An Introduction* (Jerusalem, 1983), contains overviews of a more comprehensive list of *parshanim*. This collection is significant in terms of the scope of exegetes it deals with, as well as its expansion on tangential issues, such as interaction with Christian interpretation. Thus, it provides a good picture of the world of biblical commentators in their historical contexts. However, as required by the original encyclopedic context, it touches on individual commentators relatively briefly, in a condensed manner,

summarizing facts and conclusions from research without elaborating through discussion or citation of sources or examples.

On the other hand, the book you hold in your hands contains thorough and comprehensive studies of over twenty *parshanim*. In addition to biographical and historical details, the studies include extensive work on the commentator's exegetical methods, his interactions with his historical period and environment, and his contribution to the world of exegesis.

Moreover, the studies' goal is not purely informational. In the chapter on Rashi, Avigail z"l writes about Rashi as an educator; an educational, value-oriented objective is also especially characteristic of Avigail's teachings, and it is reflected in the analysis here. Each chapter discusses, demonstrates, and imparts the methods of the commentator, as well as his importance to the student and the teacher, in a friendly, engaging style. I think that anyone wishing to approach the study of *parshanut* as a living experience of Torah study, on the basis of solid research, will find what they are looking for here.

Avigail z"l initially wrote the chapters of this book in the form of short articles (*shiurim*) for the Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash of Yeshivat Har Etzion. With the assistance of our friends Yael and Reuven Ziegler, Avigail began working with Maggid Books on initial steps toward collecting and editing the articles into book form. She wrote the dedication to our children and added the introduction below. Avigail asked Dr. Michal Dell to compose the chapter on *HaKetav VeHakabbala*, which Avigail was already too weak to write herself.

All the chapters of this book are the work of Avigail z"l, except for two: the chapter on Rav Mordechai Breuer, which I wrote as part of the series published by the Virtual Beit Midrash, and the chapter on *HaKetav VeHakabbala* written for this book, as mentioned above, by Michal Dell, at Avigail's request. I thank Michal for this.

The chapters are generally arranged in the chronological order of the commentators in question. However, within the period of the *Rishonim*, the chapter on R. Yosef Bekhor Shor precedes the chapter on R. Avraham ibn Ezra, in order to conclude the commentators from northern France (excluding Hizkuni, whose time and place are uncertain) before moving on to the Spanish commentators (excluding R. Yona ibn Janah, whose

writing is not commentary exactly; the chapter on him appears earlier, in its chronological place). Between these two units, a chapter discusses generally the commentators of France and the commentators of Spain. The chapter on R. Hirsch is also out of strict chronological sequence, for the reason set forth therein.

In the Introduction below, Avigail *z"l* thanked the staff of the Virtual Beit Midrash for producing the original series of *shiurim*. She also left a note to herself to thank Maggid Books and those who would be involved in publishing this book. I would like to join her in expressing gratitude to the publishers, translators, and editors for their contributions and excellent work on the book, in particular translator R. Yoseif Bloch, poetry translator Sara Daniel, and editors Ita Olesker, Caryn Meltz, and Leah Goldstein.

I would also like to offer personal thanks to Yael Ziegler, Jordana and Kalman Schoor, and Marc and Tamar Lesnick, for their support and assistance in producing the original Hebrew book, in commemorating the teachings and memory of Avigail *z"l*, and in supporting our family in general. Thanks also to the Weiss family of Cleveland and Jerusalem, as well as Tzivi and Aryeh Bak, Shoshana and Steven Arnold, and Diana and Ron Ostroff, for their support for this English translation and publication, making it possible for a wider audience to benefit from Avigail's Torah.

Yehuda Rock



Introduction

In this book, we will get to know the various biblical exegetes (commentators, or *parshanim*; singular, *parshan*). We will examine the unique style of each *parshan* individually: his particular methodology and the influence of his life experiences on the nature of his commentary. At the same time, we will discuss at length the contribution of each exegete to biblical exegesis (*parshanut*) in general. Of course, the scope of the present work will not enable discussing all or even most of the biblical exegetes; rather, we will focus on those commentators I view as having had the most significant impact on the world of biblical commentary.

Before we begin our analysis, we must address the question of when and why the need for biblical interpretation developed. It is reasonable to assume that the generation that received the Torah was able to understand its instructions and the nuances of its expressions, and that the tradition handed down to immediately subsequent generations was initially very close to the understanding of that first generation.

However, as the chronological distance from Sinai grew and the receiving of the Torah receded into the past, the understanding of the text diminished. We may demonstrate this with the verse describing the manna: “And the house of Israel called the name thereof manna; and it was like white *gad* seed; and the taste of it was like wafers in honey” (Ex. 16:31). Presumably, the verse was intelligible to the generation that

received the Torah, but it is quite difficult to understand today: What exactly does a white *gad* seed (often translated as coriander) actually look like? And what is the taste of “wafers in honey”?

We may compare this to the way Shakespeare’s plays were understandable to his audience, but our generation struggles to comprehend their language, as well as the playwright’s imagery and associations. Moreover, it is not only the hard words and difficult phrases of the Torah that require interpretation; the syntax of a verse or the structure of a chapter may also prove challenging. The text may have been clearer at the time of its writing, or it may have relied for clarity on the contributions of the Masoretic authorities. In the absence of these elements, however, the need arises to offer a plausible interpretation to explicate the text.

The main role of the *parshan*, then, is to bridge the gap between the ancient text and the contemporary reader. However, many Jewish biblical commentators saw their duty as not limited to the role of bridging the gap. Since the Torah carries the word of God to His people, *parshanut* also seeks to fulfill the spiritual role of answering theological and existential questions that arise from the text, or essential questions that arise from the reality of the commentator’s time, as he seeks answers to his questions and those of his generation in the Torah. These are all motivations of *parshanut*. In this work, we will discuss these goals of the commentators and their responses to contemporary influences.

Hazal teach us that “we begin by honoring the hosts.” I was fortunate that the original host of the chapters of this book was the Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash of Yeshivat Har Etzion. The writing was done in full collaboration with the staff of the Virtual Beit Midrash, who are engaged in the sacred work of making the Torah accessible to many. May your work be blessed by Heaven. In this context, it is my pleasure to personally thank the dedicated Virtual Beit Midrash editor, Eyal Kesner, who, in addition to thoroughly and professionally editing the *shiurim*, also contributed to their content with his insightful comments and extensive knowledge. May God reward you for your exceptional work.¹

1. Avigail z”l wrote a note to express here her gratitude to Maggid Books and the editors who would work on the book. I do so above, in the preface [YR].

Among my earliest childhood memories is attending Friday night services at Machon Gold in Jerusalem, where my mother taught, when I was about eight years old. The regular sermon was given by Nechama Leibowitz z"l, who would later become my teacher; חבל על דאברין ולא משתכחין. There, between *Kabbalat Shabbat* and *Arvit*, the seeds of interest in studying Tanakh in general and *parshanut* in particular were planted in me.

This interest was cultivated by my mother and teacher, Chana Poupko, through the personal example of a Torah scholar who toiled in its study literally day and night, and through her constant encouragement ever since, together with that of my father, Rav Moshe Poupko.

I would like to express my gratitude to my brother Avraham Poupko, who was a faithful interlocutor as I composed these lessons. My conversations with him helped me polish and refine my work.

I cannot express in words my deep gratitude to my dear husband Yehuda, who always stands by my side, for his endless support and devotion. The final product of this book has been significantly influenced by many discussions I had with him on exegetical issues, and by his valuable and helpful comments. He also wrote one of the chapters of the book, about his teacher, Rav Mordechai Breuer. What is mine and yours is his.

And above all, I wish to offer praise and gratitude to the Creator of the World, Who bestows His goodness with compassion upon me and upon my family.

Let Your mercies come to me, that I may live;
For Your law is my delight. (Ps. 119:77)



Chapter 1

Biblical Translations and Targum Onkelos

I have chosen to open this study with Onkelos and his *targum* (translation) of the Torah. We will begin with a few brief words about the general nature of biblical translation.

TRANSLATION AS AN EXEGETICAL TOOL

Translation is inherently commentary. When a given word has a number of possible meanings, and the translator chooses a specific term from among many options, he is definitively explaining the word and excluding all other options. Let us take, for example, Genesis 4:7, which is a difficult verse. God is speaking to Cain, who is upset that his offering has been rejected while his brother Abel's has been accepted. God says to him: "If you improve *se'et* and if you do not improve sin crouches at the door."

It is not clear what the term *se'et* means. Onkelos (and following him, Rashi) translates the term as "you will be let alone" – that is, you

will be forgiven.¹ Accordingly, he determines that one should understand and punctuate the verse in this way: “If you improve your actions, you will be forgiven. But if you do not improve, sin crouches at the door.” Malbim, however, explains the term *se’et* as related to the term *maset* – a “gift” or “tribute”;² God is thus saying to Cain that whether he improves (i.e., increases) his offering or does not improve it, it will not matter; the result will be the same – that “sin crouches at the door.” The implication, according to this interpretation, is that acts are what are significant, rather than offerings.³ The translation of the word *se’et*, then, determines not just the meaning of this one word, but also the syntactic structure of the verse as a whole.

No translation is perfect. No translator can ever render the text in an exact manner. Very often, the process of translation causes the text to lose the beauty of the original text; when we speak of the Torah’s language in particular, we may even say that it loses some holiness as well. At the end of the day, any translation takes away from the Torah’s inherent value as “the words of the living God” (Jer. 23:36).

The problematic nature of translation comes to the fore in a number of ways. One of them is wordplay. Consider, for example, Genesis 2:23: “This shall be called woman (*isha*), because this was taken from man (*ish*).” Onkelos renders: “This shall be called *itteta*, for this was taken from her husband (*baalah*).” The verse in the Torah teaches that the etymological root of “*isha*” is “*ish*,” but this concept is utterly lost in the Aramaic translation.⁴

1. Cf. Genesis 50:17, where *sa* refers to bearing or pardoning a sin.
2. Cf. Genesis 43:34. Medieval exegetes offered many and sundry explanations of the term *se’et* (see Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Sforno); I have chosen to present Malbim’s explanation, as it influences the syntactic structure of the verse.
3. In Malbim’s words: “God revealed to him that He does not desire offerings; rather, ‘Behold, obeying is better than an offering’ (I Sam. 15:22). The important thing is that you improve your actions, not improving the *maset*, the offering. Improving the *maset* will not be desirable in His eyes. [God is saying to Cain:] Whether you improve the *maset* or not, it is not desirable in My eyes, as it has no value.”
4. It may be that Onkelos is formulating an alternative etymology, using the wordplay of *itteta* and the term *nesiva*, “taken,” which is synonymous with the word *aitei*, “brought” (used in the previous verse). Indeed, a bride is “brought” or “taken” from her father’s house to her husband’s house.

An additional area in which translation creates difficulties is concerning words that express more than one meaning. The moment a translator picks a given definition, the reader loses every other potential meaning of the word. An example of this can be found in Genesis 2:25: “And they were both *arummim*, the man and his wife...” Immediately afterward, the next verse (3:1) states: “And the serpent was *arum*.” Of course, *arum* means different things in the two verses: it means “naked” in the first verse, while in the latter it means “clever” or “subtle.” However, the Torah clearly desires to link the two. As these two terms are unrelated in Aramaic, the translation forfeits the eloquence of the Torah.

The inevitable conclusion is that no translation can possibly maintain the full multiplicity of meanings of the original; the translator is compelled to pick one meaning only – generally, one of the simpler ones – and to abandon the rest. Consequently, the translation must necessarily turn the Torah into a shallower, more superficial book, without the unique depth and variegated layers hidden within the original text. This approach is expressed by the Sages in the Talmud: “R. Yehuda says: ‘Whoever translates a verse literally is a fabricator, and whoever adds to it is a blasphemer and an execrator’” (Kiddushin 49a).

A precisely literal translation of the text cannot encompass the conceptual truth of scripture, and is likely to lose its message. Conversely, a rendering of the message without the literal translation may succeed in transmitting the idea hidden in the verses, but it ignores the fact that this is a sacred text in which every word carries meaning. This, apparently, is the explanation of a statement in *Megillat Taanit* (Addendum):

And these are the days on which we fast... On the 8th of Tevet, the Torah was written in Greek in the days of King Ptolemy, and the darkness came to the world for three days.⁵

WHEN WAS THE TORAH FIRST TRANSLATED?

Despite the Sages’ negative view of the translation of the Torah, as seen in the above source, at some point in history they realized its contemporary exigency. When did the need for biblical translation arise?

5. This formulation of the Sages may present the inverse of the three days of preparation before the Torah was given at Sinai (Ex. 19:10–16).

Great Biblical Commentators

Aside from the problem of comprehension mentioned earlier – the chasm of time that may make it difficult to understand Tanakh – at the beginning of the period of the Second Temple an additional impediment to understanding the Torah came into being: a basic lack of familiarity with biblical Hebrew. From the time of the Babylonian exile and onward, the Aramaic language progressively spread among the Jews as well as among the other peoples of the Middle East. Gradually, the use of Hebrew decreased, until Aramaic became the dominant language in the region. This process necessitated a rendering of the Torah into the spoken tongue, because without such a translation the people had no access to the Tanakh. Only scholars who still knew Hebrew had such access.

According to the Sages, the first translations of the Torah occurred during the Return to Zion in the beginning of the Second Temple era (fifth century BCE). Nehemiah 8:8 describes Ezra's public Torah reading in the following way: "They read from the scroll, from the Torah of God, clearly, and they gave the meaning, so that the people understood the reading." This is what the Sages say about this verse:

Rav said: What does it mean: "They read from the scroll, from the Torah of God, clearly, and they gave the meaning, so that the people understood the reading"? "They read from the book, from the Torah of God" – this is Scripture; "clearly" – this is translation. (Megilla 3a)

The Rambam writes:

From the days of Ezra, the custom was to have a translator translate for the people whatever the reader would read in the Torah, so that they might understand the content of the words. (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 12:2)

Therefore, we may point to the period of Ezra as the first step in the development of biblical exegesis.

It may be that the primordial translation described in the book of Nehemiah was not a systematic rendition of the Torah in its entirety, but rather a partial translation as needed of difficult expressions. Later,

apparently in the era of the Mishna, translations of Tanakh became an accepted phenomenon throughout Jewish communities. The Mishna attests to this by enumerating the guidelines of simultaneous translation of the public Torah reading: “One who reads the Torah ... he should not read for the translator more than one verse; but in the Prophets, three” (Mishna Megilla 4:4).

These laws testify not only to the translator’s official position, but also to the supervision and restrictions the Sages saw fit to impose on translation. For example, the same Mishna subsequently lists verses that should not be publicly translated:

“The story of Reuven is read but not translated. The story of Tamar is read and translated. The first calf story is read and translated, the second is read but not translated. The Priests’ blessing, the story of David and Amnon are neither read nor translated” (ibid., 10).

In light of the Sages’ hesitations regarding biblical translation, they saw fit to choose one rendition and grant it primacy, with the goal of preventing an anarchy of do-it-yourself translations. From among the Aramaic translations of Scripture,⁶ the one that most accorded with the Sages’ viewpoint – both because of its faithfulness to the text as far as possible and the fact that it did not contain too many independent addenda – was Targum Onkelos. (This choice was as opposed to another famous *targum*, commonly attributed to Yonatan ben Uzziel and known as Pseudo-Jonathan, which weaves midrashic elements into almost every verse, as we will see below.) These qualities made Onkelos’s translation “the Targum,” granting it the distinguished position of the official translation of the Torah.⁷

But who was Onkelos?

THE IDENTITY OF ONKELOS AND THE TIME OF THE TARGUM’S COMPOSITION

We have no exact information concerning the identity of Onkelos and the time of the composition of his *targum*, and there are different

6. The limitations of this series do not allow me to analyze the Greek translations of Scripture, but their place of honor remains unquestioned.

7. See, for example, the following ruling of Rambam, *Hilkhot Ishut* 8:4: “If one says to a woman, ‘You are betrothed to me with this on the condition that I am literate,’ he must read the Torah and translate it with Targum Onkelos.”

views concerning the matter. Onkelos is mentioned in Tractate Megilla: “R. Yirmeya said, and some say [it was] R. Ḥiyya bar Abba [who said]: The translation of the Torah was composed by Onkelos the convert based on [the teachings] of R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua” (Megilla 3a).

However, this declaration is far from self-evident, and it is difficult to conclude based on this that Onkelos lived in the period of the Mishna (as I will shortly explain). It may be that the intent of the aggadic statement that Onkelos was a student of R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua is to state that Onkelos received his interpretation from the oral tradition, giving his *targum* the seal of approval.

Dr. Israel Drazin, an Onkelos scholar, claims that we should date Targum Onkelos around the year 400 CE.⁸ He offers two main proofs for this:

1. Onkelos is not mentioned in sources compiled before this time, such as the Talmud Yerushalmi and tannaitic midrashim (such as the *Mekhilta* of Rabbi Yishmael, the *Mekhilta* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, the *Sifra*, and the *Sifrei*).
2. Onkelos commonly quotes the abovementioned tannaitic midrashim, which were compiled about the year 400 CE. Furthermore, he consistently uses the version of the later editions of the Sages’ midrashim.

On the other hand, we should not date the life of Onkelos much later than this, since he is mentioned in the Talmud Bavli (e.g., Megilla 3a, Avoda Zara 11a, Gittin 56b).⁹

8. Israel Drazin, “Dating Targum Onkelos by Means of the Tannaitic Midrashim,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 50, no. 2 (1999): 246–58.

9. Many miraculous tales are attributed to Onkelos, the most famous being the passage in Tractate Avoda Zara in which the Roman emperor sends three Roman legions, one after another, in order to convince Onkelos to recant his conversion. Onkelos manages to convince them all of the veracity of the Torah, and it is they who convert – to Judaism. (The emperor Titus is identified as Onkelos’s uncle in the passage in Gittin.)

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF TARGUM ONKELOS

What characterizes Targum Onkelos, and what is so distinctive about his style that it earned him such distinguished standing?

We will enumerate a number of characteristics:

1. Targum Onkelos is a terse, literal translation that aims to explain the verses simply, and it does not add midrashic details. This is opposed to the Targum Yerushalmi, among others. For example, the words “And the woman saw that the tree was good for food” (Gen. 3:6), Onkelos translates simply: “And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat,” while the Targum Yerushalmi renders it “And the woman perceived Samael, the Angel of Death.”
2. Targum Onkelos avoids the anthropomorphization of God. Out of respect for the Divine, Onkelos avoids attributing human acts or ascribing human feelings to God. Here are a number of examples of this. Consider Genesis 7:16 – after Noah enters the Ark, the verse reports, “And God closed for him.” Onkelos translates this, “And God protected him with His word,” stressing that God protects Noah with His utterance. Onkelos uses this language in order to refute the possible interpretation that God closes the door of the Ark with His hand. In another example from *Parashat Noah* (Gen. 8:21), we find, “And God smelled the pleasant smell, and God said in his heart ...” In this verse, there are two expressions that express physicality: God smells an odor, and God says in His heart. Onkelos translates the expression “And God smelled” as “And God accepted with goodwill”; “God said in his heart” is translated “And God said in His utterance.”
3. When the Torah uses a metaphor, Onkelos is exacting in explaining the significance of the metaphor and not translating it literally, as this would be a ludicrous rendering of the Torah. For example, the words “And the Israelites were coming out with a high hand” (Ex. 14:8), Onkelos translates, “And the Israelites were coming out with a bare head” – that is, the nation leaves openly – replacing the biblical metaphor with an Aramaic one.

4. In translating verses of biblical poetry, Onkelos breaks away from his customary approach; he does not explain the verses according to their simple meaning but rather according to their prophetic content. For example, Jacob's blessing of Judah: *Velasoreka beni atono*, "And to the choice vine, his she-donkey's child" (Gen. 49:11): Onkelos renders, "The nation will build His sanctuary." The "choice vine" is seen as the Jewish people, since they are often compared in Tanakh to a grapevine;¹⁰ he reinterprets the word *beni* as related not to *ben*, "son," but *beneh*, "build"; and the word *atono* is translated as "His sanctuary," based on the Temple's *shaar ha'iton*, "the entrance gate."¹¹
5. The Targum attempts to prevent errors that may lead to the desecration of God's name. Sometimes, the Torah uses an identical word for something sacred and something profane. Thus, for example, the term *mizbe'ah* is used equally for an altar dedicated to God and one designated for pagan worship. Onkelos translates these words differently. He translates a reference to an altar for God as *madbeha*, cognate to *mizbe'ah* – for example, Genesis 8:20 reports, "And Noah built an altar for God," which he translates, "And Noah built a *madbeha* before God." On the other hand, the term he uses for pagan altars is *agora* – for example, Exodus 34:13 commands, "For you must demolish their altars," and Onkelos here applies the pagan *agora*. Even the word *elohim* is ambiguous; in Tanakh, this is sometimes a sacred name and sometimes a term for pagan deities. In the latter case, Onkelos uses the term *dahala*, fear – that is, inherently powerless objects that are invested with powers by those who worship them. This is how he renders, for example, Exodus 20:19: "Do not make for yourselves silver gods or golden gods" – "*dahalan* of silver or *dahalan* of gold."
6. The Targum strives to maintain the honor of the leaders of the Jewish nation, often concealing defects in the patriarchs' behavior. When the Torah describes an act by using a term with

10. For example, Jeremiah 2:21.

11. See Ezekiel 40:15.

an clearly negative connotation, Onkelos transmutes the negative word to a neutral word. For example, in the story of the theft of the blessings by Jacob, Isaac says to Esau, “Your brother came with guile and took your blessing” (Gen. 27:35). Onkelos renders this, “Your brother came with cleverness and received your blessing.” Thus, Onkelos changes two things: Jacob is described as “clever” rather than “guileful,” and instead of “taking” the blessing, he merely “receives” it. Consequently, a reader of the Targum perceives that Jacob is not a thief, but rather a clever man; furthermore, Jacob receives the blessings from Isaac, rather than taking them. Similarly, the Torah unequivocally states that “Rachel stole her father’s *terafim*” (Gen. 31:19), but Onkelos softens this and translates it as “Rachel took the images.”

7. The rendition of the Targum follows the halakha. Sometimes, Onkelos translates the verse according to the tradition of the Oral Torah rather than according to the simple meaning of the verse. For example, Genesis 9:6 states, “One who spills the blood of a person, by a person shall his blood be spilled,” establishing the death penalty for homicide. Onkelos translates this verse in the following way: “One who spills the blood of a person, by witnesses upon the utterance of judges his blood shall be spilled.” In other words, the death penalty requires eyewitness testimony and a judicial verdict. Another example is the rendering of the famous phrase, “Do not cook a kid in its mother’s milk” (Ex. 23:19), which Onkelos transforms into “Do not eat meat in milk.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF TARGUM ONKELOS

There is no doubt that Targum Onkelos succeeded, for over a millennium and a half, in maintaining its honored place among the Jewish people as the authoritative and sanctified translation of the Torah. In every publication of the Torah with commentaries, Targum Onkelos maintains its place of honor, and throughout the Jewish world, the weekly study of the Targum is a halakhic obligation of “twice Scripture, once *Targum*” (Berakhot 8a; *Shulḥan Arukh*, *Oraḥ Ḥayim* 285).

Great Biblical Commentators

As we have shown, the words of the Targum were chosen by Onkelos with exactness and precision, and with pedagogical and theological goals; therefore, one who reads Targum Onkelos must delve into it in order to understand it thoroughly. For this purpose, the works of a large number of commentators and researchers, old and new, are available to use in the study process.

May we all merit the blessing of the Talmud:

R. Huna bar Yehuda says in the name of R. Ammi: A person should always complete his portions together with the congregation, twice Scripture and once *Targum* ... For if one completes his portions together with the congregation, his days and years are prolonged. (Berakhot 8a–b)

Chapter 2

Saadia Gaon

BIOGRAPHY

Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon¹ ben Yosef (882–942) – known by the acronym “Rasag” – is considered one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the early medieval period. Rasag was well versed in many disciplines: biblical exegesis, Jewish philosophy, Hebrew language, prayer, and halakha. He was born in Egypt,² but was active mainly in Babylonia, where he served as the *rosh yeshiva* of the talmudic academy in Sura (near Al-Hira in modern-day Iraq). Rasag was the first Jewish scholar to compose a systematic Jewish philosophy, and he was the first Jew to write a comprehensive commentary on the Torah. These compositions were designed to address the challenges of the time, and they served as Rasag’s weapons of war against phenomena that threatened to tear apart the Jewish community, as we will shortly see.

During the course of his life, Rasag passed through all of the Jewish centers of Torah and Arab centers of education that existed at the time. In Egypt, he married and had a number of children, two of

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1. “*Gaon*” was the title used for heads of yeshivot in Sura, Pumbedita, and Eretz Yisrael from the seventh to the eleventh centuries, probably based on Psalms 47:5. Hence the period was called “the time of the *Geonim*.”
 2. In the area of Faiyum in Upper Egypt – hence his Arabic name, Sa’id al-Fayyumi.

whom are known by name: She'erit and R. Dosa Gaon. It was in Egypt that Rasag started his professional life as well, writing the *Agron*, the first Hebrew-Arabic dictionary. At the age of about thirty, he moved to Israel, apparently to Tiberias, where he lived until 921, after which he moved to Babylonia.

Upon his arrival there, he joined the yeshiva of Pumbedita and led the yeshiva for eight years under the title "*Alluf*." In the year 928, the Exilarch David ben Zakkai invited Rasag to become the *rosh yeshiva* of Sura, and Rasag accepted this invitation. Throughout all his years of service in the yeshivot of Babylonia, Rasag never stopped writing; he composed halakhic works and responsa to questions he received from across the Jewish Diaspora.

In 930, a sharp dispute broke out between the Exilarch and Rasag, compelling the latter to flee to Baghdad. During the years of his "exile" from Sura, Rasag wrote his important books on the subject of philosophy, including his magnum opus, *Emunot VeDe'ot*. In 937, in the wake of his reconciliation with the Exilarch, Rasag returned to his position as *rosh yeshiva* of Sura, where he remained until his death in 942.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In order to understand the background and importance of Rasag's writings generally, and of his commentary to the Torah in particular, we must examine the cultural background of Rasag. We can point to two historical developments that influenced Rasag's creative endeavors, one internal and the other external.

The external development was the rise of Islam. As a result of the success of the Muslim conquests of the seventh century, many Jews around the world found themselves under Muslim rule and surrounded by Muslim culture. One of aims of the Muslim faith was to strengthen Islam in the world by conversion of those living under its rule. Sometimes this was enforced, but mostly it was accomplished by giving greater rights to those who converted to Islam. The effect of the Jewish community's exposure to Muslim religion and culture was ambiguous. On the one hand, Muslim civilization enriched the cultural world of the Jews; on the other hand, there was the danger that this exposure might seduce some to abandon Judaism for Islam.

In parallel, perhaps because of these phenomena, an additional development occurred within the Jewish community. In the second half of the eighth century, about a century prior to the period of Rasag, a sect developed inspired by the actions of Anan ben David; it claimed that, essentially, Judaism should be based only on Tanakh, without relying on any outside information at all.³ The command of Anan, founder of the sect (in fact, members of the sect were identified as Ananites), was: “Investigate thoroughly the Torah, and do not rely on my words.” Anan regarded the *mesora* as an invention of humans, and therefore not binding; only that which is written in the Torah is obligatory. Two centuries later, this position solidified into that of the well-known Karaite sect. Practically, the main point of contention was the relationship between biblical law and the tradition of the Oral Torah, both in principle and regarding specific laws. Of course, the *Geonim* preceding Rasag also categorically opposed this phenomenon, but they did not feel threatened by it – perhaps because in the geonic period preceding Rasag, the Karaite sect had not yet solidified. However, in the time of Rasag, the sect had already begun to become more active and to influence many Jews.

It is the struggle against these two phenomena – Islam and the Karaites – that constitutes the foundation of Rasag’s commentaries on the Torah.

3. The background for this challenge to rabbinic authority was based, apparently, on the fact that the founder of the sect, Anan ben David, did not receive the position of Exilarch. Anan was a striking personality, and his charisma and intelligence, combined with his compelling methodology, led Jews who were opposed to the Babylonian leadership to coalesce around him. R. Abraham ibn Daud, who lived in twelfth-century Spain and composed *Sefer HaKabbala*, describes the factors for the development of Karaism in this way:

And in [R. Yehudai Gaon’s] days, there arose Anan and Shaul his son, may the name of the wicked rot. This Anan was from the Davidic dynasty, and was a Torah scholar at the start, but they identified that he was flawed. Because of this, he was not appointed as *Gaon*, and he received no help from heaven to become the Exilarch. Because of the jealousy and pettiness in his heart, he collected a following and began to seduce and lead Israel away from the tradition of the Sages, and he became a Rebellious Elder... He fabricated out of whole cloth unsound laws and rules by which no man should live. For after the destruction of the Temple, the sectarians had petered out, until Anan came and strengthened them.

RASAG'S COMMENTARIES ON THE TORAH

Rasag's commentary on the Torah is divided into two parts:

1. *Peirush HaKatzar* (The Short Commentary): A translation of Tanakh into Arabic (*tafsir*: the Arabic term for scriptural exegesis),⁴ including some brief explanations beyond the literal translation – for popular use (Jews and non-Jews).
2. *Peirush HaArokh* (The Long Commentary): Also written in Arabic, but meant for educated readers. Includes discussion of various topics in the disciplines of linguistics, halakha, and philosophy.

We will first discuss *Peirush HaKatzar*.

Characteristics of *Peirush HaKatzar*

As to most of his works, Rasag composed an introduction to his *Peirush HaKatzar*. In the introduction, he describes the impetus for writing the commentary:

I composed this work only following the personal request of one of the students, who requested that I dedicate a book to the simple meaning of the Torah without including any linguistics, metaphors, synonymy, or antonymy. I should cite neither the questions of the heretics nor my responses to them. I should not explore ramifications of the rational commandments, nor the performance of the revelatory commandments. Rather, I should only translate the simple meaning of the verses of the Torah.

I realized that what he asked me has great value: that readers should understand the content of the Torah – narratives, commandments, and the rewards and punishment – in sequence and concisely...

And if subsequently, a reader should want to understand in depth each and every rational commandment and the

4. Rasag wrote a translation of the entire Tanakh, but here I will address only his commentary on the Torah.

performance of the revelatory ones, as well as how to refute the claims of the challengers of the sections of the Torah, he can find all of that in my other book. This brief one may inspire him to this end and lead him to his object.

Realizing all this, I have written this book as only a translation of the simple meaning of the text of the Torah, precise according to reason and tradition.

So, according to his own words in this introduction, Rasag's main aim was to translate the Torah into spoken Arabic, in order to make it accessible to everyone. Rasag stresses that *Peirush HaKatzar* does not deal with the philosophical questions that arise from the Torah, nor does it provide a comprehensive explanation of the mitzvot of the Torah; rather, it is a literal translation. The student interested in deepening his understanding of the Torah is directed to *Peirush HaArokh*: "This brief one may inspire him to this end and lead him to his object." After the student understands the simple meaning (*peshat*) of the verses in the short Torah commentary, the student may proceed to study *Peirush HaArokh*.

Still, we must ask – does Rasag really "only translate the simple meaning of the verses of the Torah"? Analysis of this commentary shows that he often goes beyond the narrow translation of the text's *peshat*. First, he adds concise explanations. Since his target audience included non-Jews as well, who knew little or no Hebrew, Rasag wanted to make the books of Tanakh accessible by means of a biblical translation and commentary.⁵ In addition, with his translation Rasag hoped to bolster

5. See Y. Blau, "Al Targum HaTorah shel Rav Saadia Gaon," in M. Bar-Asher, ed., *Sefer HaYovel LeRav Mordechai Breuer* (Jerusalem, 1992), 634:

There is no doubt that Rasag's translation was directed toward Jews who did not understand Scripture in its Hebrew original. This may be clearly proven from his commentary (which includes his translation), because the very content of the commentary gives testimony as valid as a hundred witnesses that it is directed toward the Jews alone; a non-Jew could never hope to understand the halakhic debates in it. The question is: Was the translation (as distinct from the commentary) also directed only to Jews, or perhaps it was also for non-Jews? This is the testimony of Ibn Ezra in a famous passage from his commentary on Genesis (2:11): "Perhaps he did this" – i.e., translating the names of "the families

the Jewish faith, to bridge differences of opinion, and to dispel errant and misleading beliefs, including that of the Karaites. The language of the translation is clear, logical, and understandable by the Arabic-speaking target audience,⁶ even at the expense of literal precision in translating the Torah's text.

Additionally, Rasag intended for text to be understood in an unequivocal way, without the ambiguity of the source language, apparently in light of his debates with the Karaites. So, too, Rasag goes beyond the literal translation in order to convey various messages and to prevent possible philosophical and theological errors.⁷

and the countries and the animals and the birds and the rocks” into Arabic – “for God’s honor, because he translated it into the Ishmaelite tongue and into their script, so that they should not say that there are words in the Torah that we do not comprehend.”

6. Rasag’s method of translating scripture is very similar to Rambam’s definition of proper translation. Rambam, in his letter to Rabbi Shmuel ibn Tibbon, concerning the translation of *Moreh HaNevukhim*, writes (*Iggerot HaRambam*, Y. Shilat Edition [Maaleh Adumim, 1988], vol. 2, 532):

And I will explain to you everything after mentioning one principle, namely: whoever wants to translate from one language to another and intends to exchange a single word for a single word and keep the order of the syntax and the content – he will toil greatly, and his translation will be very dubious and distorted...and it is not fitting to do so. Rather, the translator from one language to another must first understand the content, and then relate it so that the meaning will be understood in the other language. This is impossible without changing order, and translating one word with multiple words, and multiple words with a single one, and omitting words and adding words, so that the meaning is arranged and understood according to the target language.

7. In the Kapakh edition of Rasag’s commentaries, published by Mosad HaRav Kook (as an independent volume, as well as in Mosad HaRav Kook’s *Torat Hayim* edition of the *Humash*), R. Kapakh renders the translation of Rasag into Hebrew only in the following cases: (1) the word, expression, or verse is not unequivocal and Rasag chooses one of a kaleidoscope of possibilities; (2) Rasag goes beyond the simple literal translation; and (3) the translation constitutes specific commentary. R. Kapakh, in his great modesty, expresses the reason for this in his preface (p. 8) to the collection of Rasag’s commentaries on the Torah:

My first work in this collection was to gather from our master’s translation all of the words, expressions, and alterations that imply some commentary and to turn them into Hebrew. This selection required of me great care from two perspectives: one, that I should not translate the translation, making this just a

More specifically, *Peirush HaKatzar* has a number of characteristics (examples from Genesis):

1. *Avoiding anthropomorphization*: Rasag avoids translating and literally explaining verses that attribute physical characteristics to God.⁸ For example, in 17:22, the verse states, “And God went up,” and Rasag renders, “And the glory of God went up.”
2. *Exegetical clarifications*: For example, the Torah explains Eve’s name (Ḥava) by saying (3:20), “For she was the mother of all who live,” and Rasag translates, “of all who live and *speak*,” since Eve was not the mother of the animals.⁹
3. *Identification of places, nations, objects, and animals*: Rasag often identifies different nations mentioned in Tanakh, as well as locations, various flora and fauna, etc. For example, Rasag identifies the sites mentioned in the first eight verses of chapter 14 as places known in his era. Similarly, Rasag uses the names of precious stones known in his time to identify the stones of the breastplate.¹⁰
4. *Theological and philosophical clarifications*: For example, Malki-Tzedek declares (14:15), “Blessed be Abram to High God,” and

superfluous act, and onerous for the reader. After all, this is Scripture, and what value is there in turning the Hebrew words of the living God, and the style given to Moses at Sinai – into my inferior Hebrew?

8. In this, Rasag follows in the footsteps of Onkelos. In his book *Emunot VeDe’ot*, Rasag dedicates a chapter to the question of anthropomorphization of God in Tanakh (I:9). Among other things, he writes:

It is a tradition handed down by the great scholars of our nation, who are trustworthy in matters of faith, that in any place in which they discover something that gives rise to doubts, they do not translate it in the language of physicality. Rather, they transform it into that which is fitting.

9. Rasag brings this example in his introduction: “If we leave the expression ‘all who live’ with its simple, widely understood meaning, we deny reality. This would imply that the lion, ox, donkey, and other animals are descended from Eve.”
10. Regarding Rasag’s identification of the four rivers coming out of the Garden of Eden, Ibn Ezra (Gen. 2:11) comments caustically: “There is no proof that the Pishon is the Nile... as he has no tradition... Perhaps he saw them in a dream? And he has erred in some of them, as I will explain in the proper places; consequently, we will not rely on his dreams.”

Rasag translates, “to *the* High God,” to eliminate the possibility that Abraham’s God is merely the chief of a pantheon.

5. *Alterations to prevent the desecration of God’s name:* For example, the Torah reports (12:17), “And God plagued Pharaoh and his household with great plagues on account of Sarai, Abram’s wife,” but Rasag renders this, “And God informed Pharaoh that he would bring on him and his house great plagues on Sarai’s account.” This is in order to avoid the claim that God punishes Pharaoh even though Pharaoh does not yet know that Sarai is a married woman.

Characteristics of *Peirush HaArokh*

Unfortunately, we have no complete manuscript of *Peirush HaArokh* of Rasag, only parts of the book of Genesis and parts of the book of Exodus. *Haval al de’avdin*, this is a true loss. In any case, in his introduction to *Peirush HaArokh*, Rasag explains the methodology of his commentary to his readers:¹¹

It is fitting for every thinking person to always understand the Torah according to the simple meaning of the words, as common and most useful among those who speak his language... unless sense or reason contradicts it, or if the simple meaning of the expression contradicts a different, clear verse or the prophetic tradition.

Accordingly, Rasag’s *modus operandi* is to explain the verses according to their simple meaning, unless:

- Sensory perception of the world refutes the *peshat*.
- Reason refutes the *peshat*.
- Verses contradict each other.
- The Sages’ tradition refutes the *peshat*.

I will bring an example only for the last of these four items: rejecting the *peshat* when it contradicts the Sages’ tradition. As we have said above, the purpose of Rasag’s commentary is, among other things, to strengthen

11. These rules are applicable also to *Peirush HaKatzar*.

the oral tradition in opposition to the Karaite position. Therefore, in a considerable number of halakhic passages, Rasag ignores the *peshat* of the verses. Instead, he explains the verse according to the *mesora*, and he uses *peshat* and reason to substantiate the Sages' law.

An example of this can be found in Exodus (21:24–25):¹² “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot. A burn for a burn, an injury for an injury, a bruise for a bruise.”

Rasag describes a debate with Ben Zuta¹³ concerning the question of whether the verse means that the assailant should actually lose a limb, or merely to provide monetary compensation:

R. Saadia said: We cannot explain the verse literally. For if a man struck the eye of his fellow, reducing the latter's vision by one-third, how can it be that he will be struck to just such a degree, no more and no less? Perhaps he will be rendered totally blind! The burn, injury, and bruise are even more difficult: if they are in a critical place, [the assailant] may die, and this is ludicrous.

Ben Zuta said to him: But is it not written in another place (Lev. 24:20): “As one causes a wound to a person, so shall be done to him”?

The Gaon answered him: The term “to” sometimes mean “upon.”¹⁴ It means to say: so must a punishment be put upon him.

Ben Zuta responded to him [with the verse]: “As he has done, so shall be done to him” (ibid. 24:19).

The Gaon responded: Did not Samson say [of the Philistines] (Judges 15:11), “As they have done to me, so have I done to them”? Now, Samson did not take their wives and give them to others

12. As mentioned, we do not have all of the commentaries of Rasag, but Ibn Ezra quotes him often. The commentary of Rasag on this verse is taken from Ibn Ezra's long commentary to Exodus 21:24.

13. Ben Zuta was a Karaite sage who debated Rasag about the meaning of a number of verses.

14. In other words, in biblical Hebrew, the term “in” is ambiguous; thus, the meaning of the verse is “so shall [a monetary punishment] be imposed upon him” and not to cause a wound or defect in the body of the assailant.

[which the Philistines had done with Samson's wife]; he simply meant that he had dealt them a deserved punishment.

Ben Zuta responded: If the assailant is indigent, what shall his punishment be?

The Gaon responded: And if a blind man puts out the eye of a seeing man, what shall be done to him? On the contrary, it is conceivable that the poor man may become wealthy one day and pay, but the blind man will never be able to "pay"!

Another example of Rasag's deep involvement in the battle with the Karaites is his commentary on Exodus 34:18, concerning the Karaite custom of creating a leap year (that is, a thirteen-month year) in order to ensure that Passover falls in "the month of the fresh ears" – that is, when the barley ripens: "Whoever defies our ancestors' tradition, along with their practical customs as witnessed by all, and instead presumes to reach an opinion by thinking alone ... I will find fifteen responses to him."

Rasag speaks at length about this point, giving a special mention to Anan, "may his memory be cursed."

In his arguments against the Karaites to substantiate the Sages' traditions, Rasag cites only verses from Tanakh and logical argument, not assuming the Sages' traditions, which the Karaites did not accept.¹⁵

15. In his famous poem "*Esa Meshali*," Rasag mocks the Karaites and proves that the Oral Torah is the essential basis for understanding and following the Written Torah. The reason for this is that the Torah requires explication and specification beyond what is found in it. Here are a number of stanzas from this long poem:

The Law of our God they have twisted and flipped
Allowing the forbidden, the allowed they forbid
Without any reverence or fear.

What of the sukka's height and breadth?
How many cubits along its length?
The rule of its foundations?

How many grains must be saved for the poor?
Is it inscribed in the written law,
or hidden in the text?

HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF RASAG

If we wish to point to the person who had the most profound and wide-ranging influence upon the development of the Jewish tradition in the early medieval period, it is indisputably Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon. Rasag was a revolutionary in many fields. In the discipline of linguistics and halakhic writing, his work marks a turning point and paradigm shift in the Jewish tradition. In the realm of *parshanut*, he is one of the founding fathers and trailblazers of the Jewish exegesis of Tanakh.

However, it appears that his most important achievement was his response to the challenges of his age and his combating various sects and trends with his commentary to the Torah and his magnum opus *Emunot VeDe'ot* in an uncompromising way. In so doing, he protected and preserved the tradition of the Jewish people.

The laws of tzitzit – in the text are we taught
How many strings and how many knots?
Does it specify eight or ten?

All of these, and many more
I ask of readers of the written lore
Are any such details written down?

Were it not for the Talmud and the Mishnah
Where all these are addressed – in the Oral Law
All of these and many more...