



LET'S STUDY *ONKELOS*

A Guide for Rabbis, Teachers and Torah Students to Study and Teach the *Parashat Hashavua* through the Eyes of its Most Important Translator

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Based on the five volume, *Onkelos on the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy), Understanding the Bible Text*, by Israel Drazin and Stanley M. Wagner, published by Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem/New York, 2006–2010.

STUDY GUIDE

BEREISHIT (CHAPTERS 1:1-6:8)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

God creates the world; He blesses the seventh day and sanctifies it; He creates a man and places him in the Garden of Eden, prohibiting him from eating from the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil”; The man, Adam, names the animals; A woman is created from Adam’s side; They eat from the forbidden fruit, are punished and banished from the Garden of Eden; Cain murders Abel and is punished; The world becomes populated and acts improperly.

USING THE TETRAGRAMMATON FOR *ELOHIM*

Elohim, a noun meaning God, creates the world (1:1, pages 3 and 2).¹ This is the Bible’s introduction to the creator of the universe, who later redeems Israel from Egyptian bondage and authors the Torah. But we do not find the word *Elohim* in the first verse of the *Targum*. Our commentary, with our additions in parentheses, explains:

LORD. Onkelos generally replaces the Bible’s Elohim with the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God. (Different versions of the Targum represent God’s name as either two or three letters “yud.” The word Adonai, meaning “Lord,” is a post biblical way of saying God’s name, which is written in the Bible by the letters “yud,” “hay,”

¹ All page numbers refer to the *Onkelos on the Torah* volume. The word *Elohim* also denotes mighty beings, such as judges, because *el* also means “strength” and “power.”

“vav”, “hay.”) Since the Aramaic translation was composed for the general population, the targumist wanted to avoid the plural form of *Elohim*, even though it denotes the majestic plural. (The singular form is “el.”) He probably felt that the people would mistakenly suppose that there was a plural deity. This change occurs thirty-one times in this chapter, with the exception of verse 27, where the context requires “God.” See also the commentary on 2:4, where both the Tetragrammaton and *Elohim* are used together.

It is clear from the decision of the *Onkelos* translator to substitute *Elohim* with the Tetragrammaton, and he does so 204 times in the Pentateuch, that polytheism was a concern in his day (in the late fourth century). Apparently, however, the Torah itself is not troubled that readers would regard *Elohim* as anything but a name or description of God. Otherwise why would the Torah have used it?

In rabbinic literature we find a homiletical interpretation, the suggestion that *Elohim* represents God as meting out justice, while the Tetragrammaton characterizes the Lord as being merciful. Hence, it is assumed in rabbinic literature that whenever these two names of God are used in the Torah it is purposeful, it shows how God is acting, either mercifully or with strict justice.

Those who believe that the two names of God represent His two attributes of justice and mercy understand that the *Midrash* is interpreting the beginning of the Torah that God wanted to create the world in accordance with His attribute of justice, but “reconsidered” because He knew that humanity would also require His attribute of mercy. Those who understand that, philosophically speaking, it is inconceivable that the all-knowing God would change His mind, recognize this statement as parabolic.

The *Onkelos* translator probably also knew that the rabbinic differentiation is a parable, designed to teach a lesson about God and the universe, and that it is not the plain meaning of the biblical text. Since the purpose of his translation is to provide the plain meaning of the Torah and not the lessons that can be drawn from its wording, he preferred to change the Torah’s designation *Elohim* to the Tetragrammaton rather than have the plural *Elohim* misunderstood as referring to many gods.

Interestingly, our translator was apparently convinced that his readers were not sophisticated enough to notice that Scripture’s *Elohim* is modified by a singular verb, *bara*, “created,” which is a clear indication that *Elohim* does not refer to multiple deities, and that the noun is a “majestic plural.”

In 2:4 (pages 10 and 11), however, in describing creation, the Torah states “the Lord God (Tetragrammaton *Elohim*) made heaven and earth” and *Onkelos* retains *Elohim*. This is not an inconsistency on the part of the targumist, although elsewhere, as we will see, he is guilty of some inconsistencies, as are all human beings. Where the Tetragrammaton, the Lord’s name, appears side by side with *Elohim*, our translator simply felt that the danger of misperception was not so pronounced to warrant the

substitution. Besides, how could he render *Elohim* as Tetragrammaton, the verse would then say Tetragrammaton Tetragrammaton and be read *Adonai Adonai*. (The word *Adonai*, “Lord,” is generally read whenever the Tetragrammaton appears to show God respect by not pronouncing His name.)

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

Does our translator exceed the bounds of legitimacy, of faithfulness to the Torah text, when he substitutes *Elohim* with the Tetragrammaton? Even if polytheism existed within the Jewish world when the translator lived, shouldn't the sacredness of the Torah words have restrained him from changing what the Torah states?

If our translator was correct in his assessment, why did the Torah use a word for God that could be misconstrued? If he was not correct, why did our sages regard his translation with such veneration, mandating that the *Targum* be reviewed every week by all Jews? What, if anything, can we learn about God and respect for God from the way our translator handles *Elohim*?

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Why does the Bible use different names for God? Why is idolatry usually associated only with idols and pagan temples? Are there other forms of idolatry, such as worshipping the “almighty dollar” or the frenzied devotion to sport teams or spending too much time watching TV? How should we define idolatry today? What is meant by the designation of *Elohim* as a “majestic plural”? What other attributes of God might fit into this description? Is regarding God as “creator,” “ruler,” and “judge” a “majestic plural”? Do we use the idea of “majestic plural” today?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 3:13 and commentary, “DECEIVED” (page 19). What did the “serpent” do wrong?
2. See 3:15 and commentary, “HE WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER . . . [TIME]” (page 19, continuing on page 18). *Onkelos* transforms a biblical phrase. What is an evil inclination? Does it really exist?
3. See 3:22 and commentary, “UNIQUE . . . HIMSELF” (page 21). Are humans unique?