



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

NOACH (CHAPTERS 6:9-11:32)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

Noah is deemed righteous enough to be spared from the impending destruction of the wicked world; God tells him about the upcoming flood and commands him to build an ark; Noah gathers his family and animals into the ark in accordance with God's instructions; It rains for forty days, blotting out all existence; God promises not to destroy the world again; The rainbow becomes a sign of God's covenant that a flood will never again destroy the world; Noah debases himself by becoming drunk and curses his grandson Canaan; the story of the Tower of Babel and the dispersion of the world's population.

ANTHROPOMORPHISMS

The Torah, speaking figuratively, uses anthropomorphisms to describe God. "Anthropomorphisms" ascribe human form to a being that is not human. The Bible describes God, who has no body performing acts such as speaking, seeing, walking; and having a finger or hand. Our translator, realized that these portrayals of the divine are figurative, that they were placed in Scripture to help readers understand what is happening, but they are not precisely true. He uses his translation to point this out to his readers. He frequently does so by omitting the anthropomorphism and explaining what it intends to say.

But he does not always do so, for several reasons: (1) Replacing every anthropomorphism would alter Scripture too drastically and reduce it to an

unrecognizable text because the Torah has so many anthropomorphic statements. (2) He might retain the anthropomorphism when the description is included in a metaphoric phrase that he feels is well known and frequently used by his reading audience, like *tzelem Elohim*, “image of God”, where he even keeps *Elohim* with the anthropomorphic *tzelem*, and does not substitute the Tetragrammaton. (3) He also ignores the anthropomorphism when he cannot imagine that a person would accept the word or phrase literally, as in 2:8 where the verse reads, “The Lord God planted a garden. . . .” No one would think of God engaged in an afternoon of planting.

The use of *dachalta*, “fear”

One of the targumist’s techniques to transform anthropomorphisms is to substitute the physical portrait with certain words. One of these words is *dachalta*. We will discuss other words in future Guides.

The Torah describes why Noah was saved from the impending destruction of the world in 6:9 (pages 34 and 35),¹ “Noah walked with God.” This statement is an anthropomorphism; God does not appear on earth and walk like a human being.

The targumist altered the passage to read, “Noah walked in the fear (*dachalta*) of God.” The Aramaic *dachalta* means “fear” and suggests “worship.” Our translator felt that this was the Bible’s intent.

The targumist was reluctant to explain this anthropomorphism with another, as Rashi did when he relied on *Midrash Tanchuma* and *Midrash Genesis Rabbah*, that “with God” means that Noah needed God’s support while Abraham, who walked “before God” (17:1), could walk alone before God.

Another Anthropomorphism

In 7:16 (pages 40 and 41), *Onkelos* modifies another anthropomorphism by switching Scripture’s “the Lord closed (the Ark) for him (Noah)” to “the Lord protected him.” The verb “closed” suggests physical acts of reaching down, grasping the door, and swinging it shut.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

Our translator’s attempt to teach his readers the truth about God was unsuccessful. He wrote his translation around the year 400, but some 800 years later, Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) had to devote close to a third of his *Guide of the Perplexed* to teach again that God does not have physical features or emotions. Remarkably, Maimonides was criticized for his rational stand with strong language. One of the great

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

rabbis of his time wrote that smarter people than Maimonides knew that God has physical features.

Why do people want to or perhaps even need to think of God as having a body like humans? What is your view? Do you believe that a biblical phrase like the “finger of God” is literally true? Or can you accept the idea that the Bible frequently speaks in figurative language, as humans do, and that the words should not be taken literally?

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The idea that God has no body and no human emotions, according to its proponents, is a reasonable philosophical truth. Many who disagree rely on “faith.” They might say, “I am convinced that God does become angry at us when we do wrong, even though this is a human reaction, and He punishes us for our bad behavior. This is basic to my faith.” What other issues are debated between proponents of “reason” and “faith”? Would the nature of Sinai revelation, the belief in resurrection of the dead, prophecy, angels, and miracles, enter this arena of controversy? Discuss the “battle lines.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 8:1 and commentary, “REMEMBERED” (page 43). *Onkelos* does not change all biblical anthropomorphisms.
2. See 9:20 (pages 50 and 51) and commentary. Noah’s first act after leaving the Ark.
3. See 9:25 (pages 52 and 53) and commentary. Noah cursed his grandson Canaan rather than his son Ham.