



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

By Stanley M. Wagner and Israel Drazin

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

BO (CHAPTER 10:1–13:16)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

The eighth and ninth plagues afflict the Egyptians; God designates the month on which the Israelites will be liberated as the first month of the year; the Israelites slaughter lambs and sprinkle blood on their doorposts; the first Passover is celebrated; Egypt's first-born die during the tenth plague; the Israelites despoil Egypt and depart; the need to remember the Exodus; firstborn offerings; *tephillin*.

THE PLAGUE OF DARKNESS - *TARGUM ONKELOS* AND RASHI

We have already mentioned that many classical commentators relied upon the *Onkelos* translation to understand the biblical text. This does not mean that they always agreed with the *Targum*. Rashi, who thought that *Targum Onkelos* must be treated with respect as if it was given to the Israelites at Mount Sinai along with the Torah (Babylonian Talmud *Kiddushin* 49a) and used it more than any other commentator, did not hesitate to disagree with the targumist when he thought it was necessary to do so.

Rashi uses no fewer than seven expressions to introduce a targumic comment. Some commentators suggest that each of them reflects a nuanced approach to understanding the *Targum*. For example, Rashi might state in his commentary: *ketargumo*, "(it is) as the *Targum* translates," or "*Onkelos tirgeim*, "*Onkelos* translated," or *hametargeim*, "the *Targum* translator," or *vetirgumo*, "and its *Targum* translation is."

We have, in our *parashah*, an interesting example of Rashi rejecting a targumic rendering of a biblical phrase. In commanding Moses to launch the ninth plague, the plague of darkness, “the Lord said to Moses, ‘lift up your hand toward the heaven that there may be darkness upon the land of Egypt, *vayamesh choshekh*” (10:21, pages 56 and 57).¹ Our commentary notes:

The Hebrew phrase “vayamesh choshekh” may be translated in many different ways. Rashi cites and disagrees with Onkelos, which states that the plague of darkness will commence “after the darkness of the night departs,” that is, in the morning. Rashi translates the Hebrew, “the darkness of the plague will exceed the darkness of the night.” Ibn Ezra understands it as the Mekhilta, “the darkness will be so intense that one can feel it.”

Midrash Hagadol has still another view that is different than *Onkelos*: “the darkness had substance: even if one brought many lamps, he could not get light” (commentary, page 340).

Ehrlich in his *Mikra Ki-pheshuto* (page 153), after suggesting that the phrase means that “(the Egyptians) had to feel around in the (thick) darkness,” adds, rather sarcastically, that “also the commentators had to “feel around in the (thick) darkness” in order to find an interpretation of this biblical statement.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

Why did the commentators differ? The focus of all of the interpretations of *vayamesh choshekh*, revolve around the meaning of *vayamesh*. Sometimes it is difficult to identify the root of a Hebrew word, and when a root is identified, it may have a variety of connotations. In this case, *vayamesh* may be related to *emesh*, “nightfall,” or *mashash*, “to grope, or feel.”

But, this does not end the difficulty. Is the Torah speaking about a miraculous nightfall, when there should have been daylight, as the targumist suggests, or was there a palpable darkness that could be felt, as opined by ibn Ezra? Or, does the phrase mean that the darkness was so intense that people had to grope around to find their way, as understood by a *Midrash*, Rashi and Ehrlich?

GENERAL DISCUSSIONS

There have been many attempts to interpret the “ten plagues” not only as signs and wonders wrought by God in order that Jews would recount His miracles to future generations so that they would know that “I (God) am the Lord” (10:2 page 54 and 55),

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

but also as symbols of a corrupt society that had to be humbled. Hence, in the first plague, water could symbolize Egyptian wisdom, or technological superiority, that turns to blood when, in a society, technology outstrips morality; or in the third plague, dust is transformed into lice for in the Egyptian society, humans were trampled upon as dust of the earth; or, as in the case of the ninth plague, the darkness, in which “people could not see one another” represents a society engulfed in moral “darkness,” in which people were “unconcerned” for the welfare of one another, while “all of Israel had light in their dwellings (10:23 page 56 and 57).”

The essence of a religious commitment is altruism, an unselfishness that encourages beneficence, humanitarianism, and acts of benevolence, until it becomes a moral beacon of light that shines upon all elements within a society if it is to flourish. The prophets of old remonstrated against those who would distort the meaning of Judaism when they brought sacrifices into the Holy Temple as their expression of loyalty to God, but exploited and maltreated their fellows in the market place.

Would people who today focus upon ritualistic elements, but ignore the social commandments requiring honesty and integrity, be as culpable in their behavior as the people in Temple times? Do you believe that rituals are only good if they propel people to be a decent human being, and have no value unless they are, at the same time, a moral human being?

Is the imperative to be good only a legal imperative, or does it require compassion? Is it only a personal commitment, or are we commanded to establish a community based on social justice? Is it at all possible to socially “engineer” the moral society?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 11:8 and commentary, “WHO ARE WITH YOU” (page 60). The targumist clarifies a biblical metaphor.
2. See 12:8 and commentary, “UNLEAVENED BREAD” (page 65) and appendix (page 342). Matzah or matzot, a change that may reflect a *halakhah*.
3. See 12:38 and commentary, “STRANGERS” (page 70). Who were the *eirev rav* that left Egypt with the Israelites?