



# 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

### VAYEIRA (CHAPTER 18:1–22:24)

#### SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

Abraham extends hospitality to three strangers; God tells Abraham that he will have a son; He informs Abraham that he intends to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but Abraham attempts to dissuade God from taking this action; Two angels rescue Lot and his family from Sodom; Lot's wife looks back at the destruction of the cities and becomes a pillar of salt; Lot becomes drunk and impregnates his two daughters; Abraham has a son Isaac who is circumcised; Hagar and Ishmael are cast away from Abraham's household, but Hagar is promised that Ishmael will become a great nation; the binding of Isaac on an altar.

### AVOIDING THEOLOGY: ANGELS OR MEN

Three men visit Abram, as Abraham was known before God changed his name, while he is recuperating from his circumcision. The *Targum* on 18:2 (pages 98 and 99)<sup>1</sup> translates the noun *anashim* in the verse literally, as “men.” However, many commentators write that the “men” were angels, as we point out in our commentary:

*MEN. None of the three men mentioned in this chapter are identified as angels, although two of them are called angels in 19:1. Why were the same beings called “men” when they appeared to Abraham and “angels” when they came to Lot (19:1)? Abraham was accustomed to visions, so angels to him were just like men—he was not*

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<sup>1</sup> All page numbers refer to the *Onkelos on the Torah* volume.

overwhelmed by their appearance. In contrast, Lot, unaccustomed to visions, was overawed and saw them as angels (Radak, quoting *Genesis Rabbah*). *Genesis Rabbah*, Rashi, Rashbam, Nachmanides, Chazkune, Sforno, and others state that the three were angels. Some commentators state that the angels' missions were to inform Sarah that she would have a child, to destroy Sodom, and to heal Abraham; each of the angels had one of these missions to carry out. As indicated in the commentary on 18:1 above, Maimonides regarded this encounter as a "vision." He did not accept the common notion that angelic beings existed. Maimonides insisted that the Bible referred to natural forces when it spoke of angels (see *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:4–7). Our targumist avoids the debate by translating Scripture's words literally.

Verse 18:2 raises a theological question: Do angels exist? The commentators mentioned in the commentary believe that they exist, consider *anashim* "angels," and seem to feel that when Scripture mentions them the word should be understood as non-human beings, and even when the Bible is not specific, as in this verse, we should read the passage as referring to them.

However, as our commentary mentions, Maimonides disagreed. He felt that God has no need for assistants and it is not rational to imagine that angels appear on earth to people in human form. Therefore, he understood Scripture's occasional mention of angels as a metaphor. The general population of ancients, Jews and non-Jews, thought that angels exist, so Maimonides used the term, but he explained that the noun denotes any process of nature that fulfills what we see as God's intent. Thus, for example, when the whale swallowed the prophet Jonah, the whale could be seen as an angel. Also, everyday winds and common rains can be described as angels.

What does our targumist believe? How does he handle the issue in his translation? At first glance, it appears that the targumist is inconsistent. In this verse, as we wrote, he does not mention angels even though other commentators do so. Scripture speaks of "angels" in 19:1 (pages 108 and 109) and the *Targum* translates "angels" with an Aramaic cognate there; leaving the word without change. In 32:31, he seems to accept the existence of angels when he renders *Elohim* as "angel of the Lord." However, a closer examination reveals that this is not an inconsistency.

We pointed out repeatedly that the *Onkelos* translator decided to avoid theological issues. This can be seen in the cited examples. In 18:2, he left the literal "men" and did not insert the idea from *Midrashim* that the visitors were angels. Similarly, in 19:1, he did not change the Bible's "angels" to "men" or "forces of nature," but rendered the passage literally. In both instances, he did not become involved in the theological issue. But, what about 32:31 where he inserted "angel" in place of Scripture's *Elohim*?

Chapter 32, verses 23 through 33, relates a tale of the patriarch Jacob wrestling with a "man" at the Wadi Jabbok, just before he is about to enter Canaan and encounter his brother Esau who had vowed that he would kill him. Maimonides states that this was a dream; Jacob was afraid and was wrestling in his dream with a surrogate of his brother. Other commentators state that this was an actual event. Some of these sages say that the

“man” was an angel. They derived this idea from 32:31 that has Jacob state that “I have seen *Elohim* face to face.”

The noun *Elohim* is used in the Bible to describe anyone with great power because the singular form *el* also means “strength” and “power.” Since God is the most powerful being, He is “the” *Elohim*. However, the word is also employed for judges and angels. Since the sages did not want to say that Jacob claimed that he saw God, some of them said that when Jacob mentioned *Elohim*, he meant an angel.

Our targumist had the same problem. He also did not want to say that Jacob saw God. He accepted the wording that *Elohim* here means “angel,” but may have had in mind an especially powerful person or a strong natural force, such as fear of his brother, which was Maimonides’ view. Additionally, he may have agreed with Maimonides that Jacob was having a dream, and even though angels do not exist in nature, they can exist in dreams. Thus, there is no evidence that our translator was taking a theological position. As with the other verses, he was simply rendering the plain meaning of the text as he understood it.

## **ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS**

### **ON ONKELOS**

Our “*Onkelos* Highlights” on page 222 discusses chapter 32 and angels.

*Should we believe in the existence of angels? If they exist, do they interact with humans? There is no clear-cut answer to this issue, which is frequently discussed as a relevant topic in Bible studies. While some answer yes to both questions, others suggest that biblical references to angels always come within a context of dreams. There are researchers who maintain that our targumist wrote his translation, among other reasons, to teach theological lessons, such as the existence of angels. However, a careful reading of the Aramaic text reveals that this is not true. In 32:2, for example, our targumist renders Scripture’s malachim (literally) as “angels,” but does not clarify whether the noun should be understood as a heavenly being or as a metaphor. Even though one view in Genesis Rabbah maintains that Jacob sent heavenly angels to his brother Esau in 32:4, our targumist and many early and medieval Bible commentators render malachim as “messengers.”*

It is clear that however “angel” is defined the term has become part of the cultural heritage of the Jewish people. Hence, on Friday evenings in Jewish households, many sing *shalom aleichem*, inviting the Sabbath angels into their homes. In the prayers many Jews recite before going to sleep, there is a statement mentioning angels that is recited thrice: “In the name of the Lord, God of Israel, at my right (hand) is Michael, at my left (hand) is Gabriel, before me is Oriel, behind me is Raphael and upon my head is God’s *Shekhinah* (divine Presence).” And there are many, many more examples of angelology in Jewish tradition. So, while it is important to discuss how we view “angels,” we cannot seek

guidance from *Targum Onkelos* because of the parameters the targumist set for himself as a translator. Yet, it would be well to clarify our own view on the existence of angels. Can you respond to the questions raised in the beginning of our “*Onkelos Highlights?*”

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Our “Beyond the Text” (pages 106-107) provides valuable insights and thoughtful material for reflection and discussion. The following is part of it:

- a. *The importance of visiting the sick is highlighted (by the rabbis) since the Lord Himself “appeared unto” Abraham while he was recuperating from his circumcision. The healing value of such visitations has only recently been adequately recognized. If it is so important, why was it not mandated by biblical law among the many other social commandments? Is a rabbinic mandate considered more than simply a recommendation?*
- b. *“Say little and do much” is extolled in the Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 87a, for Abraham said that he would merely fetch a morsel of bread, yet he brought his guests a sumptuous meal. Should this lesson be forcefully imparted to political leaders? How do you explain the human tendency to actually do less than we promise to do?*
- c. *Do not deviate from the custom of the place in which you find yourself, for the angels, spiritual beings who had no need for food, indulged in eating and drinking since they had descended to the earth (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 86b). What if the customs of the locale or community are contrary to Jewish values; can we still follow them?*

## **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. See 18:8 and commentary, “TO HIM” (page 101). *Onkelos* ignores a Masoretic notation.
2. See 18:25 and commentary, “THE JUDGE OF ALL THE EARTH REALLY DOES JUSTICE” (page 105, continuing on page 104). A biblical interrogative is changed into an affirmative statement.
3. See 18:33 and commentary, “THE GLORY OF THE LORD ASCENDED” (page 107). Does God move about?