



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

SHELACH (CHAPTER 13:1–15:41)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

Moses sends twelve spies to Canaan to prepare the Israelites for its conquest; ten of the twelve spies return with a discouraging and frightening report which is embraced by the Israelites; Caleb and Joshua, two dissenters, urge the Israelites to reject the negativism and trust in God, which they refuse to do; for their infidelity, the Israelites are condemned to wander in the wilderness for forty years until the generation that left Egypt dies; Moses' intervention prevents a more immediate punishment; the laws of the meal offering and wine libations which accompany certain sacrifices are outlined; *challah*, a portion of the dough kneaded for bread, is to be set aside for the priest as a gift; laws pertaining to the idolatry of an entire community, individual idolatry, and blasphemy are discussed; a case of Sabbath desecration in the wilderness and the penalty are described; the requirement to place *tzitzit*, fringes, on the corners of a man's garment and why.

MYTHICAL FIGURES OR METAPHORIC DESCRIPTIONS?

There are designations applied to certain groups of people in Scripture, beginning in *Genesis* 6:1-2 and 4, where the Bible informs us that "It came to pass when men increased on earth, daughters were born to them. *Benei haelohim* saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and took those that they desired as wives." In verse 4, we read, "*hanifilim* were then on

earth, and later too, when the *benei haelohim* cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore offspring. They were the *giborim* of old, *anshei hasheim*.”

Who were these *benei haelohim*, *nefilim*, *giborim*, and *anshei hasheim*? And we add to this list, a name found in our *parashah* 13:22 (pages 118–121),¹ where the designation *benei ha’anak* appears.

In our “*Onkelos Highlights*” chapter 6 in *Genesis*, we note:

Scripture records an unusual episode concerning “sons of Elohim” in 6:2–4. Some ancient sources, such as I Enoch 6, Jubilees 5:1, Philo, Josephus, and one view in Rashi’s commentary, state that “Elohim” denotes renegade angels who were expelled from heaven and became “fallen angels.” This mythological interpretation was rejected by our targumist. He interprets “Elohim” as a derivative from the root “el,” meaning “power,” and renders it “great ones.” He also treats “nefilim” in 6:4 in a like manner: they were not renegade fallen angels but “mighty ones.” Many later Bible commentators, among them Saadiah, ibn Ezra, and Nachmanides, offer similar rationalistic understandings of these passages.

In our commentary in *Genesis*, “GREAT ONES” (which is how the targumist translates *benei haelohim*), we elaborate:

Bible: “sons of Elohim.” As noted previously (see Genesis appendix on 1:1 and commentaries on 1:27, 3:5), the biblical noun “Elohim” is based on the Hebrew root “el,” denoting power. It refers to God, idols, or powerful people, depending on the passage’s context. In this instance, the targumist accepts the rational meaning of “powerful people.” He rejects the non-rationalist view found in I Enoch 6:1ff, Jubilees 5:1, and one Rashi interpretation that the verse refers to renegade angels. Our targumist preferred the first meaning as it reflects his generally rationalist approach and because there is nothing in the chapter that suggests angels. Saadiah is explicit: “Sons of princes saw beautiful common women.” Ibn Ezra identifies the “sons of Elohim” as judges who knew the ways of God. Nachmanides elaborates that these judges should have executed justice properly, but they were corrupt, and their generation also acted improperly by not restraining them.

The *nephilim* is translated by the targumist as “mighty ones,” as we explain in our commentary, rather than as mythical figures:

Onkelos and Saadiah avoid explaining Scripture’s “nefilim” (literally, “fallen ones”) as renegade angels, and are consistent with their rendering of verse 2. They both use “mighty ones” (based on the language in Genesis Rabbah) because the offspring of the “nefilim” were called “mighty ones” later in this verse. Rashi interprets “fallen ones” as “they fell and caused the world to fall.” Ibn Ezra suggests that the phrase “fallen ones” refers to the psychological impact that these people had on those who saw them: they caused their courage to fall. Nachmanides cites Pirke d’R. Eliezer and the Babylonian

¹ All page numbers refer to the Drazin-Wagner *Onkelos on the Torah* volumes.

Talmud, Yoma 67b, where the “fallen ones” are identified as angels who fell from their holy status in heaven.

As to *giborim* and *anshei hashem*, the targumist renders them literally as “mighty ones” and “men of renown.” He understands that the terms are not designations of celestial creature or super-human beings, but descriptions of human attributes.

In the commentary to our *parashah*, “MIGHTY ONES” (page 118), we once again, note that the targumist translates consistently and avoids embracing midrashic mythical depictions:

There are over a half dozen terms in the Bible that some scholars and even rabbis suppose are depictions of mythological characters, demons, and fallen angels. However, scholars and rabbis who favor rationalist readings see the terms as descriptive exaggerations of the Israelite fear of people who enjoyed successful military endeavors. This is the approach of our targumist, who renders them all as “mighty ones.” What does the description “anak” (and its plural “anakim”) signify here? The word, like the others mentioned in the appendix, is obscure and the subject of different interpretations. These were people who wore many chains on their body—a possible reference to armor (Genesis Rabbah 26:7). They were tall and their necks (“onkim”) reached the globe of the sun (another interpretation in Genesis Rabbah and in the Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 35a, perhaps referring to their frightful appearance). Onkelos and Targum Jonathan to Joshua 11:21, 22; 14:12, 15; 15:14; and other verses; and to Judges 1:20 and other passages, as well as Saadia, explain the singular “anak” by the plural “sons of the mighty ones,” the nomenclature used by Onkelos in Genesis 6:4 for “nefilim.” Neophyti, Pseudo-Jonathan, and the Septuagint treat “anak” as a proper name.

In *Numbers* 13:32 and 33, we encounter the term *anshei midot* (verse 32), which the targumist translates as “men of stature,” and *nephilim benei anak min hanephilim*, which is translated “mighty ones . . . sons of Anak, of the mighty ones” (verse 33). These were the descriptions of the inhabitants of Canaan whom the Israelites were expected to conquer, but instead the people were filled with dread and fear.

Our commentary on page 123, continuing on page 122, clarifies:

MEN OF STATURE. The biblical “middot,” “measure,” is sometimes used to denote a person of great “character,” as in II Samuel 21:20, Isaiah 45:14, and I Chronicles 11:23 and 20:6. However, here, because of the context, since the spies were not complimenting the inhabitants of Canaan, Onkelos renders it “stature.” Rashi offers a second notion when he explains: the men appeared to them to be so large that the observer felt compelled to comment on their “measure,” as with Goliath in I Samuel 17:4. As is found in the commentary on verse 22, the spies’ recollection of the Canaanite inhabitants as giants was in all probability simply their fearful reaction when they saw them. Pseudo-Jonathan takes a third approach, “all the people in it are expert poisoners,” understanding “measure” as the calculation of ingredients.

MIGHTY ONES . . . SONS OF ANAK . . . MIGHTY ONES. Onkelos translates “nefilim” as “giboraya,” “mighty ones,” as it translated “anak” in verse 22. However, it retains the Hebrew, “anak,” here without translating it. The difference may have been prompted by the fact that verse 22 has “ha’anak,” with the definite article “the,” so that “anak” could be understood as an adjective, whereas the usage here “sons of Anak” seems to be a noun. However, Rashi (based on the Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 34b) understands “anak” as an adjective for “tower”: “they towered over the sun by virtue of their height.” Rashi and Sforno accept the ancient superstitious legend that defines “nefilim” as “fell,” from the Hebrew “n-f-l,” “to fall.” These are the angels who fell from heaven in the days of Enosh. They see a reference to these angels in Genesis 6:4.

Finally, it will be edifying to read *Genesis Rabbah* 26:7 (in the translation of H. Freedman in the Soncino edition) found in our appendix on page 388, describing a certain race or group or family that instilled fear among the inhabitants of the land:

They were called by seven names: Nephilim, Emim, Refaim, Gibborim, Zamzumin, Anakim, and Awim. Emim, signifies that their dread (“emah”) fell upon all; Refaim, that all who saw them melted (“mirpeh”) like wax; Gibborim: R. Abba said in R. Jokhanan’s name: the marrow of each one’s thigh bone was eighteen cubits long; Zamzumin: R. Jose b. R. Chanina said: they were the greatest of all masters of the arts of war; Anakim: The Rabbis explained it as signifying that they were loaded with chains (“anakim”) upon chains. R. Acha said: their necks reached (“onkim”) the globe of the sun and they demanded: “Send us down rain.” Awim denotes that they cast the world into ruins, were themselves driven from the world in ruin, and caused the world to be ruined, as you read, A ruin, a ruin, a ruin (“awwah awwah awwah”) will I make it (Ezekiel XXI, 32). R. Leazar b. R. Simeon said: It signifies that they were as expert in the knowledge of different kinds of earth as a serpent, for in Galilee a serpent is called “awwiah.” Nephilim denotes that they hurled (“hippilu”) the world down, they themselves fell (“naphlu”) from the world, and filled the world with abortions (“nephilim”) through their immorality.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

The targumist has relieved us from the angst that has accompanied the expropriation of the mythic aggadic tales especially concerning the *nephilim* into both our folklore and that of the Christian faith. Here is a case where the *peshat*, literal translation, leaves many fewer questions than the fanciful interpretations of those whose imagination soared, not because the biblical text necessarily encouraged such “stretches.” Myths abounded in many ancient cultures. They were portrayed on walls of caves and recounted by the “elders,” passing them on from generation to generation. Their longevity practically assured credibility. To dismiss them took courage and intelligence, attributes that our targumist most certainly possessed.

The dictionary defines “myth” as “a widely held but false notion” (Oxford Dictionary, page 987), but that it may be an “allegory,” “fable,” or “parable.” Can we find some measure of justification for the mythic interpretation of the groups who appeared in the biblical narratives?

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The tragic episode of the “spies” has spawned many fascinating interpretations. For discussion purposes, we raise a number of important questions in our “Beyond the Text” (pages 134 and 135) that merit your attention:

One of the central events in the Bible is the story of the spies who were sent to reconnoiter the Holy Land in advance of the impending military offensive to conquer the land. While it is unclear in chapter 13 exactly whose idea it was to undertake this effort, Moses reveals in Deuteronomy 1:22 that the spies were sent at the request of the people. The objective of the mission was not to determine whether it was a wise idea to conquer the land, but rather to create a military that would facilitate victory. We have pointed out before that it is not to be regarded as a flaw or imperfection in our faith in God if we take the human steps necessary to achieve success without totally relying upon Him. The request, then, could not have been the “sin” of the people. The spies, however, reporting and interpreting negatively about what they saw, committed a wrongful act, for their testimony called into question the promise made by God that the Israelites were liberated from Egyptian bondage in order to inherit the land (Exodus 6:2–9).

Put yourself in the place of the people listening to the report of the ten “spies.” How would you have reacted to it? Was the punishment the people received commensurate with their “wrongful act?”

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 14:9 and commentary, “STRENGTH” (page 124). *Onkelos* and others translate an unusual biblical phrase similarly.
2. See 14:17-19 and commentaries. The targumist transforms several verses that reflect a more contemporaneous theology.
3. See 14:44 and commentary, “DID EVIL” (page 135). *Onkelos* and Saadiah translate *va’yapilu* differently than most commentaries, as well as the other *Targums*.