

Parsha Ponders

Shemos | January 17, 2020 | 20 Teves 5780

Translation issues¹

ויצו פרעה לכל-עמו לאמר כל-הבן הילוד היארה תשליכהו וכל-הבת תחיון

Pharaoh commanded his entire people, saying: “All male babies that are born shall be thrown into the river, and let all female babies live”²

When the Egyptian exile seemed like it couldn’t get any worse, Pharaoh seemed to develop a genocidal bend. First, he ordered the Jewish midwives to kill all male babies that are born. When that plan failed, he commanded his entire people to throw all male babies that are born into the river. *Chazal* pick up³ on the fact that Pharaoh’s decree said to kill **all** male babies. Pharaoh was told by his astrologers that the savior of the Jewish people had been born, but they weren’t sure if he was Egyptian or Jewish. To avoid such a leader emerging, Pharaoh ordered to have all male babies killed. Moshe, who had just been born, managed to avoid the decree. The rest is history. However, the Aramaic translations of the Torah, known as the Targum, seem to say something else⁴. They interpret the verse to be saying that Pharaoh decreed against all **Jewish** male babies. This seems to exclude any decree against the Egyptians themselves. Can these two sources be reconciled?

One explanation⁵ for the Targum is that it could simply be that this is the simplest understanding of the verse⁶. The context of this verse is that the Egyptians were enacting harsh decrees against the Jews. As well, when Moshe’s parents sent their little baby to salvation on a little boat, he was spotted by the daughter of Pharaoh. She realized that Moshe was a Jewish baby⁷. If the decree was against both the Egyptians and the Jews, how could she have known he was Jewish⁸? It must be that the decree was only against the Jews. The Targum is giving the simplest explanation of the verse, while *Chazal* are elucidating the deeper intention.

In truth, *Chazal* say⁹ that Pharaoh had three stages of decrees. First, he commanded the Jewish midwives to kill any male babies born. When that plan failed, he ordered all the Jewish male babies to be thrown into the river. Subsequently, he even decreed on his nation. According to this, it’s possible to reconcile the Targum with what *Chazal* teach. Perhaps what *Chazal* mean is that first the midwives were ordered to kill any male babies born. Then, the midwives were ordered to throw all Jewish male babies into the river. When that didn’t work, he **ordered his entire nation to drown** all the Jewish male babies.

¹ Based on *Parshegen* to *Shemos* 1:22

² *Shemos loc. cit.*

³ *Sotah* 12a. *Shemos Rabbah* 1:18, *Midrash Tanchuma Vayakhel* § 4, and *Tanchuma Yashan Vayakhel* § 5 infer this from ויצו עמו, which is to be read that Pharaoh decreed even upon his nation. This seems to be *Rashi*’s intention as well (*ad. loc.*). See also *Sechel Tov ad. loc.*

⁴ *Targum Onkelos* and *Targum “Yonasan” ad. loc.*

⁵ Cf. *Biurei Onkelos*, who has the approach that *Targum Onkelos* tries to avoid increasing the sins of non-Jews whenever possible. Therefore, he avoided the implication that Pharaoh decreed upon his nation as well

⁶ *Targum Onkelos* tries very hard to stick to the *peshat*, although the same can’t be said for *Targum “Yonasan”*, who often weaves *Midrash* into every verse

⁷ *Exodus* 2:6

⁸ Granted, *Chazal* answer this by saying that she saw that he was circumcised (*Sotah loc. cit.*). However, this isn’t *peshat*, but *derash*. Cf. *Rashbam* and *Ibn Ezra ad. loc.*, who take this *derash* to be *peshat*

⁹ *Sotah loc. cit.*

The Targum understood that *Chazal* never intended to say that the Egyptian baby boys were killed as well. Therefore, the Targum clarified that only the Jewish babies were drowned¹⁰.

A third approach¹¹ goes with the simple understanding of *Chazal* that Pharaoh indeed decreed to drown the Egyptian babies as well. The original decree, as stated before, was just against the Jewish babies. However, on the day that Moshe was born, Pharaoh's astrologers sensed the coming of the Jews' savior. Although, the astrologers couldn't tell if he was of Egyptian origin, or Jewish. As a precaution, Pharaoh ordered that for that day¹² that all baby boys should be drowned, Egyptian or Jewish. Since the general decree was against the Jews, and the latter decree was for only one day, the Targum emphasized that it was against the Jewish people in general.

A final approach¹³ is very understandable. Indeed, Pharaoh in the end made a decree that all babies should be thrown in into the river. That doesn't mean that they accepted it. The Egyptians refused to cooperate with such a harsh decree, and in the end only the Jewish babies were drowned¹⁴. The Targum is simply relating what actually transpired, as opposed to relating Pharaoh's intended decree.

All of these explanations came from just a single additional word. We see from here just how complicated it is to translate the Torah. So much meaning is packed behind every word, and any interpolation or extrapolation could create contradictions or misleading statements. Nevertheless, the Aramaic translation of the Torah was done with unique precision. That's why reading it is part of the weekly study of the *parsha*¹⁵. It too, contains many lessons for us to learn.

Good Shabbos

¹⁰ Minei Targima and Nesina LaGer *ad. loc.* This is also suggested by the Maharil Diskin *ad. loc.*

¹¹ Shibolei HaLeKet, brought by the Chida in Penei Dovid. The latter also quotes this from the "Moreh", who I take to mean the Moreh Nevuchim

¹² This is indeed what is related in Midrash Tanchuma and Tanchuma Yashan *loc. cit.* However, Shemos Rabbah *loc. cit.* says that the decree against the Egyptians was for nine months, not one day

¹³ Chida *loc. cit.*

¹⁴ Indeed, this is the opinion of Shemos Rabbah *loc. cit.*

¹⁵ Berachos 8a; Mishneh Torah Hilchos Tefillah 13:25; Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 285:1