CHAPTER 24

Sinai—The Mountain of God

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24.1 The Revelation at the Burning Bush in Masoretic Text and Its Translations

The story about God revealing himself to Moses in the burning bush (Exod 3:1–6) tells of the very first time that Moses met the Almighty. The episode begins with Moses, who has been wandering in the wilderness shepherding his father-in-law’s flock, arriving at a place that the Bible introduces as “the mountain of God, unto Horev” (Exod 3:1). That Moses decided to investigate the unusual sight of a bush burning without being consumed implies that he did not realize he was approaching a holy place. A further verse says that an angel of the Lord appeared in the flame, but that Moses continued to walk toward the bush apparently unaware of such a presence. Only when he came near did he hear God’s voice calling to him by name, telling him not to come any closer and to remove his shoes, as the ground on which he was standing was holy. Moses then understood that God was revealing himself, and his terrified reaction was to hide his face, fearing to look upon the Lord.

In this article I discuss this “mountain of God” and its appearance in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic literature and art as the site of God’s revelation at the burning bush (Exod 3:1–6), and on occasion of Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah (Exod 19, 24:12–18). I trace the way the Hebrew biblical text was translated and interpreted for readers and artists who did not know Hebrew but nonetheless had to become familiar with the texts. Jewish exegeses of the Bible, especially in connection with ambiguous words or phrases found in the text, include both straightforward explanations (peshat) and the homiletically viewed interpretations of Midrash (derash). Reading the text in any language other than the one in which it was originally written—in this case Hebrew—forces one to accept the translators’ explications, which may lead to somewhat different visualizations of the various episodes.

The Greek Septuagint (ca. 250 BCE) was the very first translation of the Hebrew Bible and was at the core of the philosophical commentaries by Philo and Josephus Flavius (ca. 20 BCE–100 CE). The other early translations were from Hebrew to Aramaic. The two best-known versions, Targum Onkelos and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, are thought to have begun as oral traditions as early
as the first century among learned individuals who translated the Bible into
the vernacular in the synagogues, and it was only later that the Aramaic texts
were written down.¹

These Aramaic *targumim* were not mere translations of the text. Rather,
they incorporated unique midrashic interpretations of thousands of words
in the original Hebrew. In the introduction to their translation of *Targum
Onkelos* into English, Drazin and Wagner note that *Targum Onkelos* is
considered the most literal and concise of the Aramaic translations of the Bible,
but that the rendering of the five volumes of the Pentateuch contains more
than ten thousand deviations from the straightforward (peshat) meaning of
the Hebrew text.²

The Hebrew description of Moses and the burning bush tells about Moses
and the flock of his father-in-law coming to *har-ha-Elohim* (the mountain of
God). However, the verse in the Septuagint reads:³ “And he brought the sheep
nigh to the wilderness, and came to the mount of Horev” (Exod 3:1), omitting
the phrase *har-ha-Elohim*. Further on in the text, *Targum Onkelos* says: “Now
Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the chief of Midian. He
led the flock to a good grazing site, to the wilderness, and came to the moun-
tain upon which the glory of the LORD was revealed, to Horev” (Exod 3:1).⁴ Thus,
in *Targum Onkelos* the first verse serves as an introduction to the revelation
of God on the site and its special sanctity, as it is described specifically in Exodus
3:5: “Then He said, ‘Do not come closer here. Remove your shoes from your
feet, for the place on which you are standing is a holy site.’” The same verse in
*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* adds a specific detail, noting that the site of the burn-
ing bush will be the place (*atra*: אטר) where Moses will receive the law: “And
He said, Approach not hither, take the shoes from thy feet, for the place on
which thou standest is a holy place; and upon it thou art to receive the Law, to
teach it to the sons of Israel.”⁵ This addition in Onkelos’s translation is clearly

¹  A. Shinan, *תורמים ואגדה בו: האגדה בתרגומיה האرامית של ויתנוה בrios* (Targum
and Its Legend) [Hebrew], (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993), 12.
²  Israel Drazin and Stanley M. Wagner, *Onkelos on the Torah: Understanding the Bible Text* (New
³  Lancelot C.L. Brenton, trans., *The Septuagint Bible Online: The Common Man's Prospective,
translation of the Greek Old Testament Scriptures, including the Apocrypha* (1851), <www
.ecmarsh/lxx/>.
⁵  John Wesley Etheridge, *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch:
With the Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum from the Chaldee* (Piscataway: Gorgias, 2005),
vol. 1, 440.