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Shema Israel

Bible Correspondance Course



The Bible

What is Truth?

A strange question perhaps, yet one that expresses both our confusion and our skepticism regarding truth. Confusion, because with a multiplicity of religions and a diversity of beliefs around us we may genuinely wonder, “*Where is the truth?*” Skepticism, for it suggests that truth does not exist; in fact, there really is no objective truth.

The Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, answers the question clearly. “*Hashem, God is the truth*” (Jeremiah 10:10; literal translation). For the Bible then, truth does exist; truth *is* association with God Himself. In fact, truth, *Emeth*, in the Hebrew language, is one of the 13 attributes of God. It falls seventh in the list in the exact center of the 13 attributes listed in Exodus 34:6; literal translation, a passage that is recited in the liturgies of Rosh Ha-Shanah Yom Kippur (Jewish New Year, Day of Attonement).

If truth is identified with God’s character, it does not come from us but is to be found outside of us – in God. This recognition implies that in order to find the truth we should not approach it with the preconceived idea that we know what the truth is. Instead, we should approach the truth with a question, “*What is it?*” This is the very same question, in fact, the ancient Israelites asked when confronted with the *manna*, the bread of God in the wilderness. “*What is it?*” they asked, and the question gave the name to this heavenly bread, for the Hebrew word *manna* means “*What is it?*” The meaning of the word *manna* suggests an important lesson regarding how we should approach Biblical truth. We should approach it with the question: “*What is it? What is truth?*” We should approach it with the same humble and honest mindset as the ancient Israelites approached the *manna* in the wilderness, asking “*What is it?*” Asking the question from this frame of reference no longer suggests confusion or skepticism. Instead, it implies sincere questioning from one who expects a true answer from above.

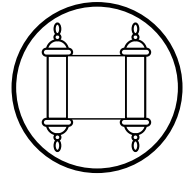
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BIBLE STUDY – Lesson # 1*

The Bible



notes

The Bullet of the Bible

Translated into more than a thousand languages, the Bible has sold more copies than any other book!

Paradoxically, it is the least understood and the least followed. Strangely, both Jews and Christians alike have found within its pages enough reason to justify their hatred for one another. This hatred sometimes flourishes *within* the hollowed grounds of Judaism and Christianity, as well.

The Bible has never been as available as it is today. The creation of the State of Israel, the discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the profusion of Biblical translations have contributed to its availability. The study of the Bible has been elevated to the highest scholarly levels. More than anytime in the past, people can now read the Bible and verify the historical truth of its words.

Yet the question remains, *Can the Bible change the human heart?* For, the Bible which was supposed to bring peace, love, and hope has on the contrary been used to justify war, murder and rejection. Subsequently, it is not enough to study the Bible, or to know all about it. Our minds, our hearts, our lives, must be inhabited by the dynamics of its holy words. “I learned all the Torah,” boasted the proud student of the Bible. “Good,” the Master answered, “but what did you learn *from* the Torah**?” (Mendel de Kotzk).

* Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New International Reader's Version of the Bible, Copyright 1998, by the Zondervan Corporation.

** The Torah – The first five books of the Bible

1. Where does the word “Bible” come from?

- The word “Bible” is derived from the Greek word *ta-biblia*, a translation of the Hebrew term *Ha-sefarim* meaning “*the books*” which appears for the first time in Daniel 9:2. This is the name of the Scriptures often given in Tannaitic literature (*Meg.* 1:8; *Git.* 4:6; *Kelim* 15:6, etc.). The Hebrew word was then translated into Greek by the Hellenistic Jews (Letter of Aristeas, the Wisdom of Ben Sira).

*In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, consulted **the books** concerning the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD that had come to Jeremiah the prophet, were to be the term of Jerusalem’s desolation - seventy years (Daniel 9:2). (TNK JPS)*

2. Where do the writings of the Bible come from?

Then Moses wrote down everything the Lord had said (Exodus 24:4). (cf. Exodus 34:27; Jeremiah 36:2)

- God’s Holy spirit spoke to and through His prophets

3. What external evidence do we have that the Bible comes from God?

- The confirmation of archaeology and history
- The confirmation of ancient literary and historical traditions
- The survival of Israel, guardians of the Scriptures
- The preservation of these Scriptures
- The impact of these Scriptures on human culture and civilizations (ethics, science, medicine, religion, philosophy, literature, art, etc.)
- The power of these Scriptures in the life of those who take them seriously
- The literary and philosophical superiority of the Bible (the first best seller) over all other human productions

4. What literary evidence do we have that all the writings of the Bible come from the same supernatural source?

- The unity of the Bible in spite of the great diversity of its authors (education, time, culture) suggests the same supernatural inspiration.

“For many years You put up with them. By Your Spirit You warned them through Your prophets. In spite of that, they didn’t pay any attention. So

You handed them over to the nations that were around them” (Nehemiah 9: 30). (cf. Zechariah 7:12)

5. What ethical evidence do we have that the Biblical writers speak the truth?

“Why did you turn your back on what I told you to do? You did what is evil in my sight. You made sure that Uriah, the Hittite, would be killed in battle. You took his wife to be your own. You let the men of Ammon kill him with their swords” (2 Samuel 12: 9).

- The Bible writers present its heroes with all their failings.
- Read 2 Samuel 11: 1 – 12:9

6. What psychological evidence do we have that the Bible speaks the truth?

*“There have been prophets long before you and I were ever born. They have prophesied **against** many countries and great kingdoms. They have spoken about war, trouble and plague” (Jeremiah 28:8).*

- Prophets often spoke *against* the people – words they did not want to hear.

7. What historical evidence do we have that the Biblical prophets were inspired by God?

The Lord and King says, “But I am against you, Tyre. I will bring many nations against you. They will come in like the waves of the sea. They will destroy your walls. They will pull your towers down. I will clear away the stones of your broken-down buildings. I will turn you into nothing but a bare rock.

Out in the Mediterranean Sea your island city will become a place to spread fishnets. I have spoken,” announces the Lord and King. “The nations will take you and everything you have. Your settlements on the coast will be destroyed by war. Then you will know that I am the Lord” (Ezekiel 26:3-5). (cf. 2 Chronicles 36: 21; Jeremiah 25:9-12)

- The predictions of the Bible prophets always came true!

8. What is the main intention behind the creation of *oral tradition (*Torah be-alpe*) besides the written Scriptures (*Torah biktav*)?**

**Oral Tradition – The body of commentaries, expositions, and rabbinic explanations of points of Torah that were passed down from generation to generation in ancient*

times, starting with Moses.

“To build a fence around the *Torah* (*Abot* 1:1).

- Oral tradition was a preventive measure conceived by human wisdom to keep us from transgressing the divine Torah. Oral tradition is, therefore, essentially a work tool designed to safeguard faithful obedience to divine commandments. The tradition is not the commandment but is subject to it. The metaphor used in this connection by the sages is very suggestive: oral tradition is to the sacred Scriptures what the fence is to the land – *the fence is not the land.*

9. How did the *Talmudic rabbis differentiate between the Holy Scriptures and any other document?**

**Talmud – The collection of ancient rabbinic laws, commentaries, and traditions related to the Torah.*

- By designating the Scriptures as a *written* inspired document in comparison to the oral form in which the rabbinic teachings were transmitted.

- By qualifying the Scriptures as “Holy Writings” (*Shab.* 16: 1; *Yad* 3:2; etc.) in contrast to other writings.
- By applying the technical phrase (“make the hands unclean”) only to the books of the Bible; this expression conveys the common idea of “canonical” and is never used to designate extra-biblical documents including rabbinic literature.

10. What criterion is offered by the Bible to help us distinguish between the divine word and the human word?

“But what if a prophet says peace will come? Only if it comes true will he be recognized as one who has been truly sent by the Lord” (Jeremiah 28:9).
(cf. Deuteronomy 18:22)

11. How does the “New Testament” refer to the Hebrew Scriptures?

- The Greek word *graphe* (writings) used by the New Testament writers was borrowed from the Jews of Alexandria (Letter of Aristeas, vv. 155, 168) who had translated the Hebrew word *Ha Katub* (the Scriptures) a common title in Jewish circles (*Peah.* 8:9; *Taan.* 3:8; *Avot* 3:7; *Yad* 3:5; etc.).

- The first generation of Christians never preferred the apostolic writings to the Hebrew Scriptures and never used the terms “New Testament” and “Old Testament” to refer to the two documents. Church Father Eusebius of Caesarea (4th century C.E.) was the first to use the phrase “Old Testament” to designate the Hebrew Scriptures with the deliberate intention to exalt the New Testament writings and to diminish the “Old Testament” (*Ecclesiastical History*, VI, 25).

Jesus explained to them what was said about Himself in all the Scriptures. He began with Moses and all the Prophets (Luke 24:27). (cf. John 5:39; 1 Corinthians 15:3, etc.)

12. What is the New Testament teaching about the instruction of the Hebrew Scriptures?

*“Do not think I have come to get rid of what is written in the Law or in the Prophets. I have not come to do that. Instead, I have come to give **full meaning** to what is written. What I’m about to tell you is true. Heaven and earth will disappear before the smallest letter disappears from the Law. Not even the smallest stroke of a pen will disappear from the Law until everything is completed. Do not break even one of the least important commandments. And do not*

teach others to break them. If you do, you will be called the least important person in the kingdom of heaven. Instead, practice and teach these commands. Then you will be called important in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:17-19) (cf. Matthew 23: 2-3)

- The Greek word *plerosai* (here rendered by “fulfill”) means literally “to fill to the full.”

13. What is the message of the Bible?

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).

- Read also, Malachi 4:5; John 1:1; Revelation 22:20; Hebrews 11:1).
- The Bible is framed with “In the beginning...” a reference to creation, and “the day of the Lord...” a reference to re-creation. This fact suggests that the central message of the Bible concerns faith in creation and the hope of recreation.

14. What is the purpose of the Scriptures?

Your word is like a lamp that shows me the way. It is like a light that guides me (Psalm 119:105).

- The Hebrew word for light is *or* from which we get the English word *orb*. This word is derived from the same root as *Torah*. Thus, the purpose of the Scriptures is to lighten our path and guide our steps.

15. How should we study the Scriptures (methodology)?

In that year I learned from the Scriptures that Jerusalem would remain destroyed for 70 years (Daniel 9:2).

- The Holy Spirit
- Prayer (see Daniel 9:3-23)
- Humility (see Daniel 8:27 where Daniel is described “not understanding”)
- Use intelligence (*bîn*) in order to gain understanding
- Existential and historical reading (serious commitment); the Bible speaks to us, in life and in history (*davar*)

- The Bible has been misused to justify iniquity; a certain reading of the Bible may lead to Auschwitz – justifying the extermination of the Jews because Jews crucified Jesus
- Read the *whole* Bible including wisdom literature (Job, Esther, Ecclesiastics), be aware of texts dealing with the silence of God, interrogatives etc.
- Read the Bible *with* Israel and not *against* Israel.

*The Bible, Book of Books**

Why has the Bible survived centuries and crossed all borders? What makes this Book so powerful?

The word “Bible” says it already. Derived from the Greek word *biblia* which means “books,” the word Bible suggests its essence and its role. This is *the* book for it contains all the books. It is the witness *par excellence*.

History

After all the sophisticated doubts cast on the accuracy of the Bible in the nineteenth century, increasing historical and archaeological discoveries have continually verified the accuracy of the Bible in an extraordinary and unexpected way.

For example, the idea that Moses wrote 1500 years before Christ, made people smile, simply because it was believed that writing was unknown at that time. However, the discoveries of the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet, the ancestor of all other alphabets (sixteenth century B.C.E.), and of the Ras Shamra texts (fifteenth century B.C.E.) have confirmed the claims of the Bible against the attacks of critics and rationalists who said writing had not yet been invented.

The story of the Flood also received a cold shoulder, until similar stories started to crop up from various traditions, from South

America to India, from the American Indians to the Eskimos.

Archaeological digs have brought to light ancient Biblical sites: Ai, Megiddo, Jericho, Hazor, Shiloh, Beth-shemesh, Lachish, and from these sites some of the most incredible stories of the Bible have been confirmed.

Also, the way history is reported in the Bible attests to its truth. Contrary to most historiographers of long ago, the Scriptures do not exalt the exploits of its heroes. The unrighteous as well as the righteous are depicted. And even the failings of the righteous are presented. The first man,

Adam, falls into sin; Abraham, the patriarch, lies; Jacob deceives his brother and hurls doubts at God and the great King David murders and commits adultery. The Bible tells it like it is! It has not tried to revise history which speaks to the veracity of its writings.

Unity

The Greek word *biblia*, the origin of the word “Bible,” is in the plural. The word translates the ancient Hebrew designation *hasefarim* “*the books*”, as seen in the book of Daniel (Daniel 9: 25) and especially in the tannaitic literature (Meg 1:8; Git 4:6; Kelim 15:6). Yet “*the books*” are, in fact, one book. The Bible has many authors, from different periods, backgrounds and cultures, yet it is still one book – a remarkable phenomenon!

* Jacques Boukhan, “Ha-Shem, the God of Israel,” *Shabbat Shalom*, Autumn, 1999, 18-20.

The variety of the writings (poetry, prose, genealogy, oracles, laws, etc.) and the authors, over a period of 2,000 years, is traversed by their deep unity.

In almost all the books of the Bible, the prophets stand untiringly in the way of the kings, to remind them of love and justice, but at the same time always echoing the same hope. The reason behind this literary unity is found in the faithfulness of its heralds. Progress in the Bible is sung in terms of a return to the past, a “Teshuva.” The unity of the Biblical text explains itself by the fact that it is inspired by the same Spirit. Only an author able to travel through time and space would be successful in achieving this unity. Thus, the unity of these writings gives testimony of supernatural inspiration. It testifies to the existence of Someone who survives the ages, who was present with Moses, with David, and with Ezra, who was in Jerusalem as well as in Nineveh, on the mountain as well as in the belly of a fish.

Truth

Is it any wonder that Biblical truth is held in high esteem, both morally which governs relationships between people, and by the ideal and hope that press them forward far beyond themselves? The ethics of Israel were so different from the cultures around them that it could not help causing astonishment! The rationalists were so stricken by the ethics of Israel that they opted for a later date (people back then weren't supposed to have such exalted ethics)! But it has recently been observed that the language and the structure

of the Biblical legal texts were of the same type as the alliance treaties of the second millennium before Christ. The superiority of these laws and their universal application suggest they have an origin that transcends human societies. Even atheists draw from these laws when they preach nonviolence, honesty, or the respect of human rights.

Moreover, the values of dietetic and health laws, which the Bible promotes, are the same ones promoted today. It is now acknowledged that pork is not healthy, and doctors are increasingly recommending a vegetarian diet, similar to the one in the Bible (see Genesis 1:29), as the ideal. Research in psychosomatic medicine has confirmed many assertions of the Bible underlining the relationship between the spirit and the body. *A cheerful heart does good like a medicine* (Prov. 17:30).

Prophecy

Biblical truth transcends time and circumstances. It even makes predictions. Today, in the 21st century, we are able to look back and confirm the accuracy of Bible prophecy. Take the prediction of the fall of powerful cities like Babylon (Jeremiah 51:8), Nineveh (Nahum 3:1-7), and Tyre (Isaiah 23), which no one at that time could foresee. Amazingly, the Bible also predicted the successive rise of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome (Daniel 2 and 7). All these events were predicted centuries in advance of their occurrence. Prophecy even assumed the risk of using numbers to date upcoming events with accuracy. Within the Bible, the ancient Hebrews were familiar with these

fulfillments of prophecies. The patriarchs heard it as a promise of deliverance that would be fulfilled during the Exodus. The exiled from Babylon took comfort in the predictions of Jeremiah about their return from exile. Saul, the king, cried out while envisioning his downfall. King Hezekiah learned of his death and its postponement by healing. Births were announced well before time. So, the Biblical word not only is witness to past events; it also shows itself as an unexpected and sudden witness to the present as well as the future.

Old and New Testaments

For these reasons the Bible will always remain relevant. To qualify its nature as “old” or “new” is nonsense. The Bible, if it is inspired from the Almighty, cannot be “Old Testament” or “New Testament,” because God, the Eternal remains always the same. During the fourth century C.E., when Eusebius of Caesarea utilized the expression “Old Testament” for the first time to designate the Hebrew Bible, it was with a clear anti-Semitic attitude to diminish what had been until then commonly called the Scriptures, with the intent to exalt the “New Testament.” In fact, nothing in the New Testament foresaw such an opposition. The authors are Jews as are the ones in the Old Testament; the events are situated in the extension of the history of Israel and are interpreted in reference to ancient prophets. In addition, the Law is always observed. A pious Jew could also consider these writings as those of the prophets of old and equally venerate them. What has been called the New Testament bears all the qualities met in the

Hebrew Bible: the ethical ideal that pierces an open heart, the victories over disease and death, the fulfilled prophecies, and also the extraordinary preservation of the documents. All these are arguments in favor of inspiration from above.

But the proof can never be found in arguments alone: its confirmation by archaeology and history, the miracle of its unity, its high ethical and spiritual ideal, its fulfilled prophecies, and its actuality. Indeed, proof is found essentially at the level of each one of us, Jew or Christian, believer or nonbeliever, to the measure that we will wager on that Word and accept it. For if we open this old Book and venture our eyes and our soul into the journey of its pages, we will then discover more convincingly than ever, its power and its truth.

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