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WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD STUDY

Torah and Talmud



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WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD STUDY

Torah and Talmud



Perhaps this title intrigued you, but you aren't sure why. After all, isn't *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) really something Jewish? And, isn't the *Talmud* a set of writings by Jewish rabbis collected two hundred years after Yeshua (Jesus) lived? And if so, why would a Bible-believing Christian care about the insights and comments from Jewish rabbis, scholars, and sages? You may be worried that your Christian friends might think it strange if you began studying Jewish writings, or your Jewish friends might be offended if they learned you were studying “their stuff.” Let me suggest four reasons why the study of *Torah* and *Talmud* can be valuable for Bible-believing Christians.

I. TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE ENTIRE BIBLE

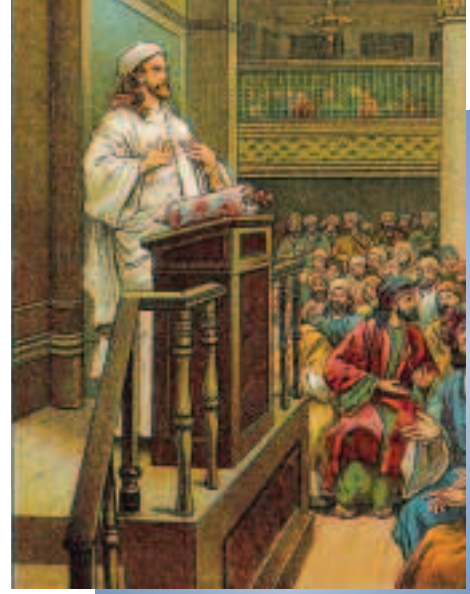
The word *torah* comes from the root word *yarah*, which in ancient Hebrew was an archery term, meaning to shoot an arrow straight to the mark. It also meant to teach or bring instruction. So in a truly biblical sense, *torah* refers to instructions from a loving God on how to live a life that “hits the mark.” The first five books of the Bible—sometimes called by the Greek name *Pentateuch* and referred to as “The Books of Moses” by both Christians and Jews—are also called the *Torah*, a more than appropriate use of the term, since these books contain God’s original instructions to His people on how to live in harmony with His will.

However, *torah* is most frequently translated “law” in English. In the New American Standard Bible, the English word “law” is used 505 times: 283 times in the Older Testament and 222 times in the Newer Testament. In comparison, the word “love” is used 572 times: 281 in the Older Testament and 291 in the Newer Testament. Since “law” and “love” get nearly equal billing in the Scriptures, perhaps it is as important that we truly understand God’s view of His law, as we do His view of His love.



To better understand

Perhaps many of the verses that contain the English word “law,” such as Psalm 119:1, should be thought of differently than the way we have traditionally interpreted their meaning. For instance, look at these two verses: “*How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the LAW of the LORD*” (Ps. 119:1). “*He who turns away his ear from listening to the LAW, even his prayer is an abomination*” (Prov. 28:9). In each of these passages, as in many others throughout the Bible, the word we read in English as “law” is actually *Torah* in Hebrew and refers to the full body of teaching in the Books of Moses, rather than a select group of commands or commandments.



Further, the Greek word for “law,” *nomos*, is used 158 times in the Newer Testament. Could it be that some of these references are to the fuller concept of *Torah* as well, actually meaning the whole Bible? For example, in Matthew 5:17, Yeshua is quoted as saying, “*Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.*” At the time of Yeshua, and still today in Judaism, the Hebrew Scriptures are thought of as having three divisions:

- the Law—the Books of Moses called *Torah*,
- the Prophets—the prophetic books, such as Daniel, called *Nevaim*,
- the Writings—the books of poetry, such as the Psalms, called *Ketuvim*.

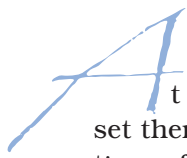
So, when Yeshua makes His statement in Matthew that He did not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets, He is using Hebrew shorthand to say that He did not come to destroy nor contradict any of the Hebrew Scriptures. He came to interpret it correctly. Therefore, our first reason to study *Torah* is simply to better understand the entire Bible, both the Older and the Newer Testaments.



2. TO BETTER UNDERSTAND YESHUA AND HIS DISCIPLES

Our second reason to study *Torah* is to better understand Yeshua and His disciples. The Scripture which they studied and quoted was what we call today the Old Testament. They referred to it as the *Tanakh*, an acrostic for **T***orah*—the Law, **N***evaim*—the Prophets, and **K***hetuvim*—the Writings. In both ancient and modern Judaism, the *Torah* is seen as the most important and widely studied section of the *Tanakh*. For example, each of Yeshua’s answers to the devil when He was tempted in the wilderness (Luke 4) come from the *Torah* in the book of Deuteronomy.

Yeshua and His Disciples



At the time of Yeshua, the Sadducees accepted only the *Torah* as Scripture, a doctrine that set them apart from the Pharisees, who accepted the totality of the *Tanakh*. Jewish boys at the time of Yeshua were first taught the Book of Leviticus and then the Book of Deuteronomy. Typically, they memorized all, or at least large portions, of each of these books. What thoughts or questions must the child Yeshua have had as He studied the sacrificial system and priestly laws of Leviticus? Was He aware or thoughtful of how His role would fulfill the sacrificial requirements, and how the author of Hebrews would later refer to Him as our “great High Priest”? *“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession”* (4:14).

When Yeshua studied Deuteronomy, did He foresee the day when He would use these very verses to combat Satan in the wilderness?

- *“And Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE””* (Luke 4:4).

“He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3).

- *“Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD AND SERVE HIM ONLY””* (Luke 4:8).

“You shall fear only the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name” (Deut. 6:13).

- *“And Jesus answered and said to him, ‘It is said, “YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST””* (Luke 4:12).

“You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested Him at Massah” (Deut. 6:16).



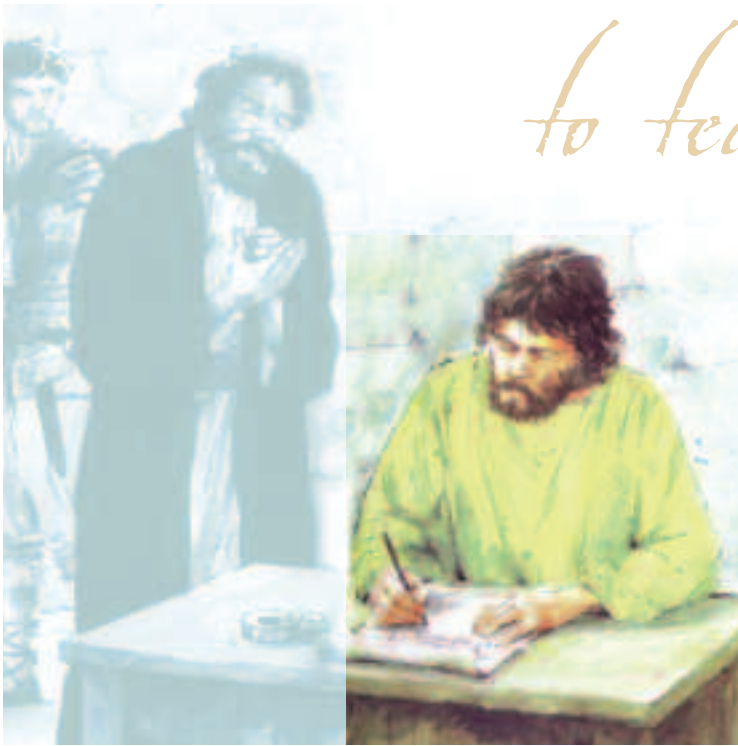
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Zealous for God

Obviously, studying the Bible Yeshua studied, memorized, and quoted will help us to know Him on a deeper and more meaningful level. However, this same concept of studying the Older Testament to understand the Newer Testament is not only crucial for understanding the life and words of Yeshua, but is also critical for understanding the rest of the Newer Testament as well. The Holy Spirit used the Apostle Paul to write more pages of the Newer Testament than any other person. Here’s how Paul described himself and his background: *“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city [Jerusalem], educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today”* (Acts 22:3).

To best understand Paul’s writings, we need to understand his training, and the many references to the Older Testament and to Jewish learning that he makes throughout his writings. Paul is often thought of as one who speaks against the law, but look at these quotes from the book of Romans:

to teach and to learn



- “Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law” (3:31).
- “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COVET’” (7:7).
- “So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (7:12).
- “But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good” (7:16).

Can we really understand Paul’s epistles if we do not understand his context and what he means when he refers to the Law?

Until the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, most Jewish teaching and commentary was passed on orally. One teacher disciplined another, who in turn passed on the teachings through memorized and repeated conversation. However, in the years following the destruction of the Temple, these centuries of teaching, debate, and discussion were written down in what today we call the *Talmud*, a word which comes from the Hebrew root *lamad*. Interestingly, it means both to teach and to learn.



Although the actual recording of the oral tradition happened over a period from roughly AD 100 to AD 500, the *Talmud* undoubtedly contains many of the teachings and discussions about the meaning of Scripture that were prevalent at the time of Yeshua. For example, two famous rabbis who lived in the century before Yeshua were Hillel and Shammai. The *Talmud* preserves some of the debates between the followers (or school) of Hillel and the school of Shammai. These debates were well known and the basis of regular discussion at the time of Yeshua. Generally, Hillel was more liberal and Shammai more conservative.

Yeshua takes stands that sometimes agree with one and sometimes the other. For example, in Matthew chapter 19, when Yeshua is asked about divorce, his listeners were probably eager to see if He sided with the more liberal school of Hillel, who allowed divorce for any reason, or with the more conservative Shammai, who was very restrictive on the subject. Here

A page from the *Talmud*

Yeshua comes closer to the school of Shammai in His answer. Later, in Matthew chapter 22, Yeshua is asked, “Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” He gives an answer almost identical to that recorded in the *Talmud* by Rabbi Hillel. Reading these debates and commentaries in the *Talmud* help us hear Yeshua words much closer to how His followers first heard them. That lively debate and discussion about how to interpret various passages of the *Torah* has continued through the history of Judaism to this very day.

The Newer Testament is rife with references to this body of rabbinic teaching and debate. For example, “And all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4). Have you ever wondered what rock Paul was referring to? The *Talmud* says that from the time that Moses struck the rock at Horeb

and brought forth water (Exod. 17:6) until the death of Miriam (Exod. 20:1), that water-giving rock “followed the Children of Israel through the desert and provided water for them each day” (Taanis, 9a and Bava Metizia, 86b). It seems clear that the Apostle Paul is referring to this story recorded in the *Talmud*. If we remain ignorant of the *Talmud*, we remain ignorant of many of the references and concepts mentioned in the Newer Testament.

If you give it a chance, you will be blessed to learn from the insights of these Jewish teachers, who deeply love the Word and seek to understand its most profound meaning. As you begin to study

these resources, you’ll find that you sometimes agree and sometimes disagree, but you will always be challenged to think more deeply about the Word of God, struggling to rightly interpret His instructions for living a life that hits the mark. Debate over the meaning of biblical text is very Hebraic, so relax and join in.

3. TO HELP US PRACTICE WHAT WE PREACH

Our third reason is simply to practice what we preach—that we believe in the whole Bible, the Older *and* the Newer Testaments. Christians proclaim the authority of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. As a matter of fact, let me share statements from two of the largest Protestant denominations regarding the authority of Scripture. The official Southern Baptist statement of Faith and Message says:

“The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.”

The official statement of the Assembly of God regarding the inerrancy of Scripture reads, "WE BELIEVE...The Scriptures are inspired by God and declare His design and plan for mankind."

Most books written on Christian apologetics, defending the faith, spend a large amount of time discussing the Genesis account of creation and its logical defense. Yet, for many of us, the first 39 books of our Bibles have seen little use. If we say that the Bible is the Word of God from beginning to end, let's take some time to study the beginning. Not only will you be blessed, but you will begin to live the life of scriptural authority in a deeper way. You will enrich your understanding of Yeshua and His first followers, and you will drink deeply of the fountain of God's revealed truth.

4. TO HELP ESTABLISH A DIALOGUE WITH JEWISH FRIENDS

Isn't it
about
time we
begin to
explore our
roots and
appreciate
those who
cultivated
them?

The fourth and final reason I encourage Christians to study *Torah* and *Talmud* is to prepare for a meaningful relationship and dialogue with our Jewish friends and neighbors. The misunderstandings and false assumptions we have about Judaism leave us open to the lies and bigotry of anti-Semitism. It is hard to have a dialogue, let alone develop a meaningful friendship, with someone you know little about, and most of what you know is based on misinformation. The Church owes a great debt to Judaism. Many of our practices from hymn-singing to public reading of the Bible, from baptism to teaching our children about God, come to us as first practiced in Judaism. In addition, our Bible, our spiritual heritage, our Messiah Yeshua, the disciples and apostles are all Jewish. Isn't it about time we begin to explore our roots and appreciate those who cultivated them?



Sometime following the Babylonian exile, Judaism began to develop a schedule to read through the *Torah* in a year. Yes, all those popular Christian plans to read through your Bible in a year are yet another idea we borrowed from Judaism. Initially, this reading schedule varied some from local synagogue to local synagogue, but during the time when the *Talmud* was being recorded, this schedule also became standardized. Today, in synagogues around the world, the same set of passages from the *Torah* is read and discussed each week.

Establish relationships



If you are interested in learning more, please check out the United States Bridges for Peace Web site. Each week, a new audio devotion based on that week's scheduled *Torah* reading is posted and available for online listening. You can even sign up to receive it automatically via Podcasting. Just go to www.bridgesforpeace.com, click on the USA flag, and then click on "Torah Devotional."

Please join me in a walk through the *Torah* and the *Talmud*, the beginning of God's Word to humanity. Together let's explore our Hebraic heritage and see what we can learn of Him.

By Jim Solberg
BFP U.S. National Director

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All Scriptures are taken from the New American Standard Bible. This version capitalizes all Old Testament references quoted in the New Testament.

Many pastors, Bible teachers, and laypeople have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding "yes"! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3).

