



“The researches of many commentators have already thrown much darkness on this subject, and it is possible that, if they continue, we shall soon know nothing at all about it.”

“It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”

Mark Twain

Millions around the world have claimed the Bible as the foundation for their various religions, yet have failed to find unity amongst themselves. In fact, among these millions, wars have been waged of unsurpassed brutality and scope. Biblical literacy is not a high priority among such. Yet, even when people do undertake to read the Bible on their own, they find it largely bewildering. Young theology students often encounter enough disparity between their beliefs and what they read in the Bible to bankrupt their faith. For well more than a 150 years, theologians have been at the forefront of those challenging the historicity and moral authority of the Bible. In this article, we consider how holy disciples of Yehoshua interpret this Book of Books.

What is the Bible?

Before we can proceed, we must identify just what our Bible is, for that is hardly a matter of agreement at large. The Samaritans accept only the first five books of Moses (a.k.a. the Torah, Chumash, Pentateuch). Judaism's Bible for the last two millennia has been the Tanakh (known to gentiles as the “Old Testament”). Christians are divided in this regard. Catholics, Anglicans and the Orthodox churches accept what they call the Old and New Testaments as well as the Jewish Apocrypha, while Protestants accept only the two “testaments.”

Our Bible is that of Yehoshua and the original disciples—the Tanakh, with the possible exception of Esther, Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) and Shir haShirim (Song of Songs), the only books of the Tanakh not quoted in the New Testament.¹

¹Philo of Alexandria (20± BCE – 45± CE) cites all but seven of the Tanakh's books,

This is not suggest that we reject these books—only that we cannot affirm them with the same assurance as the other books of the Tanakh. Qohelet, for example, contains an abundance of wisdom, much of it well able to penetrate the most cynical among us.

Why the Bible?

The answer to this question has largely to do with quality of life—for the individual, for the family and for society. There are those who grow up with the Bible, taking it for granted as the word of God. Others point out its accounts where Israel was instructed to annihilate the men, women and children of various communities, concluding this cannot possibly be the work of a benevolent deity, that its tales of wonder are pure fabrications and that it is riddled with contradictions.

It is true that reading the Bible elicits an unending parade of questions, many of which no single person could possibly answer. So does life itself. It is also true that those of us nurtured in homes where the Bible is the foundation of good human relationships experience the fruit of its instructions first-hand. Around us we readily observe what life is like without the Bible—a demonstration of its darker episodes. As for miracles, we experience our own. The contradictions so-called are typically the product of superficial reading, remedied with closer scrutiny and analysis.

Our own experience is that the Bible helps us connect with our Creator, it greatly improves our present state of being and our relationships, and it offers us hope to surmount the frustrations, disappointments, shattered dreams and tragedies of this life.

To attain a reasonably thorough and consistent understanding of the Bible, we apply the following principles:

- 1. Recognize the Torah as the foundation of the entire remainder of the Bible.**
- 2. Recognize the Tanakh (with the possible exceptions of Esther, Qohelet and Shir haShirim) as the Bible and the Torah or Law of Yehoshua, his disciples and their community.**
- 3. Resolve either to accept the basic content of the Tanakh as originating from God or to regard it merely as human literature.**
- 4. Recognize that the New Testament, as valuable as it is, was not the Bible of Yehoshua, his disciples or their community.**
- 5. Read the most accurate version possible.**
- 6. Read the full passage in which a particular statement appears.**

Esther, Qohelet and Shir haShirim being among those absent. Yeshua ben Sira (a.k.a. Sirach; 3rd century BCE) cites or alludes to all but three of the Tanakh's books, Esther and Qohelet being absent. Fragments of Qohelet and Shir haShirim were recovered amongst the Qumran documents, while Esther was not. Purim, the holiday originating with the book of Esther, is also conspicuously absent from the Qumran community's calendar. See also the article "Bible Canon", §11, *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, New York, Funk & Wagnalls, 1901-1906.

7. Give the historical and cultural context due consideration—not only in terms of the works’ origins, but the message and intended readership as well.

8. Be vigilant, be wary as to the biases of the translators.

9. Consider *all* the statements about a matter in the Bible before reaching a firm conclusion.

10. Recognize that, though the word of God is infallible, the Bible, as we now have it, is not.

11. Read from the Torah, as well as other sections of the Bible daily.

12. Resolve to follow the Bible.

As noted above, the first five books of the Bible are commonly referred to as the Torah. Meaning literally “law” or “instructions,” these five were the entire Bible until later books were added. Over hundreds of years, other compositions were written and collected to form the Nevi’im (Prophets) and the Ketuvim (Writings), hence the acronym TNK or Tanakh.

1. Recognize the Torah as the foundation of the entire remainder of the Bible.

Only writings considered compatible with the Torah came to be included in the Tanakh. Why?²

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams rises among you, and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder which he spoke to you occurs, saying, “Let us go after other gods which you have not known and let us serve them,” you shall not listen to the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams. For YHVH your God is testing you, to know if you love YHVH your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after YHVH your God, and you shall fear him. And you shall keep his commandments, and you shall hear his voice, and you shall serve him, and you shall cling to him.

D’varim (Deuteronomy) 13:1-4

And YHVH your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your seed, to love YHVH your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, that you may live. And you shall return and obey the voice of YHVH, and do all his commandments which I am commanding you today. For you shall listen to the voice of YHVH your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in the book of this Torah. For you shall turn back toward YHVH your God, with all your heart and with all your soul.

²The Book of Yechezk’el (Ezekiel) was up for debate because some of its descriptions of various sacrifices and other particulars of temple worship do not match the Torah. However, it was acknowledged that the later prophet is describing a future temple in the setting of another age which would not fully replicate the past.

D'varim (Deuteronomy) 30:6-10

. . . heed the commandments of YHVH your God, which I am commanding you today, to be careful to do them. And you shall not turn away from all the Words which I am commanding you today, right or left, to go after other gods, to serve them.

D'varim (Deuteronomy) 28:13-14

. . . and the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may do all the Words of this Torah.

D'varim (Deuteronomy) 29:29

And Moshe (Moses) finished speaking all these words to all Israel, and said to them, Set your heart on all the words which I have testified against you today, that you command your sons to take heed to do all the Words of this Torah.

D'varim (Deuteronomy) 32:45-46

Once uttered, these instructions precluded acceptance of any oral or written instructions claiming to countermand the Torah.

Much later, Yeshayahu (Isaiah) confirmed this principle when he wrote, "Bind up the Testimony, seal the Torah among my disciples. To the Torah and to the Testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no dawn to them!"

Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 8:16,20

This is why Yehoshua said, "Truly I say to you that until heaven and earth pass, not one letter or one dot shall be abolished from the Torah or the Prophets, because all will be fulfilled. He who shall transgress one word of these commandments and shall teach others shall be called a son of worthlessness in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever upholds and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Matityahu (Matthew) 5:18-19

In his most detailed confrontation with the author of lawlessness, Yehoshua rebutted his foe with quotations from holy scripture. It is no coincidence that all three of these quotations came from the book of D'varim—in the Torah.

Once the primacy of the Torah is understood, the idea that a man or an organization could challenge it and have any credibility among the holy people is not only untenable, but ludicrous.

2. Recognize the Tanakh, with the possible exception of Esther, Qohelet and Shir

haShirim, as the Bible and the Torah or Law of Yehoshua, his disciples and their community.

Throughout his career, Yehoshua justified his teachings and his actions and his teachings by the authority of the Tanakh. Decades after his execution, far-flung disciples were “daily examining the scriptures if these things were so.” (Acts 17:10-11) Figures vary, but, according to David H. Stern, “There are 484 passages from the Tanakh cited a total of 695 times” in the New Testament.³

As radical as Yehoshua’s teachings were when uttered and remain to this day, they depend on the Tanakh.

For example, in Yochanan (John) 10:34-35, Yehoshua is quoted as saying, “Has it not been written in your Torah, ‘I said, you are gods’? If he called those gods with whom the word of God was, and the scripture cannot be loosed . . .” This is particularly important for a couple of reasons.

First, Yehoshua is not quoting from the books of Moshe, which we most often mean when referring to the Torah. Instead, these words are from Tehillim (Psalm) 82:6. So we see that other parts of the Tanakh besides the first five books are also Torah, which is to say they are authoritative instructions.

In addition, Yehoshua says “the scripture cannot be loosed.” This speaks both to the Tanakh’s place in governing human conduct and as setting the permanent standard against which all other oral and written teaching must be measured.

Because Yehoshua so oft and so vigorously criticized his contemporaries as to how they interpreted the Tanakh, many have misinterpreted this to mean his teachings superseded it. In reality, his teachings consistently adjure the correct interpretation and application of the Tanakh.

This stance demanded that his disciples also remain wed to the Tanakh, as is amply demonstrated by the abundance citations to it in their writings. The passage of time only reinforces this same imperative on today’s disciples who wish to faithfully maintain the course.

3. Resolve either to accept the basic content of the Tanakh as originating from God or to regard it merely as human literature, in part or in its entirety.

Yehoshua’s many quotations from the Tanakh give us a very definite view of how he saw it—as containing God’s instructions. Mark 4:4 is typical, where he quotes D’varim (Deuteronomy) 8:3, saying, “man shall live by everything proceeding out of the mouth of YHVH,”

³David H. Stern, *Complete Jewish Bible*, p. 1610, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., Clarksville, MD, 1998

One perspective sees the Tanakh as largely fable and delusions. The other sees it as a reliable history, relevant to the present and an accurate representation of the future.

If we accept the Tanakh at face value, we are accepting its claims to contain God's instructions for humanity. We then confront a stark choice—whether to conform ourselves to those instructions or not. The average person is not going to gravitate toward conformity for, as Paul wrote, “because the mind of the flesh is enmity toward God; for it is not being subjected to the Law of God, for neither can it be.” (Romans 8:7) Yet, if we truly wish to follow the footsteps of the New Testament Messiah, we have to accept his Bible as our Bible and to accept it on his terms.

4. Recognize that the New Testament, as valuable as it is, was not the Bible of Yehoshua, his disciples or their community, neither was it a part of it.

The New Testament⁴, particularly the life and teachings of Moshiach Yehoshua, is an essential basis for our faith, we being so far removed from his face-to-face teachings and from those directly receiving them. Without it, we would not know our Moshiach, our elder brother and our King. We would have no idea *how* the Father redeems us and the actual ransom he paid. As we can observe from those around us, we would have a profoundly dimmer awareness that YHVH owes us nothing for our feeble good works and that our motivation to do good must be love and not mercenary, in spite of the Tanakh's coverage of these issues.

Having said that, it remains crucial we also understand that Yehoshua's disciples had no New Testament. As stated above, the Tanakh was their Bible.

The writings we can attribute to the disciples were composed piecemeal, apparently over many decades. When the disciples read fresh compositions by one of their peers, *they did not accord them a status comparable with the Tanakh*. To merit peer acceptance, these *had to conform fully to the Tanakh* first, and to their own personal experiences with Yehoshua.

As the eyewitnesses died off, the priceless nature of any written accounts they left behind, few as they apparently were, became urgently realized, especially as competing accounts arose. As more time elapsed, the representations of Yehoshua's life and teachings would only become more varied—some being genuine, others propagating utterly baseless legends and/or counterfeit teachings. The community most firmly rooted in Yehoshua's Bible, the Tanakh, was the community most familiar with him and

⁴ The unfortunate moniker, “New Testament” is a grossly misleading label of Catholicism and her misguided daughters. It and the term “Old Testament” together convey the garbled message that the first body of scriptures is “the Old Covenant,” while the latter body supersedes the “old” as “the New Covenant.” In actuality, it is the Tanakh [more particularly, Yirmayahu (Jeremiah) 31:31-37] that describes the true New Covenant, its terms and its parties. In recognition of this, disciples refer to the portions of the latter collection we accept as the *Kitvei haShlichim*—Writings of the Emissaries, using the more popular term only for broader clarity for those beyond our community.

his expectations and best equipped to discern which writings were reliable and which were spurious. The fact that we have been preceded by nearly a hundred generations of discriminating disciples does not numb us into suspending judgment today.

Before addressing what this means to us in specific terms, it is appropriate to cast some light on some popular misconceptions about the New Testament.

The Christian perspective on what the New Testament is and what it contains is essentially Roman Catholic:

The Catholic New Testament, as defined by the Council of Trent⁵, does not differ, as regards the books contained, from that of all Christian bodies at present . . . Since the Council of Trent it is not permitted for a Catholic to question the inspiration of these passages.⁶

Being daughters of Catholicism, Protestants accept the Catholic New Testament as their own, even while contesting Rome's authority to define the same. Catholics and Protestants are perfectly comfortable asserting that the New Testament is "the holy word of God," even while disregarding its instructions on a wide variety of issues, from pastoral qualifications to congregational adjudication to sexual and gender decorum.

Rome's canonization of its New Testament means no more us than its canonization of the apocrypha or its interpretation of these writings. As it was in the 1st century, we accept whatever in the New Testament is fully compatible with the Tanakh and reject what is not.

Incompatibility of a New Testament scripture with the Tanakh is most often a flag which, upon further analysis, reveals either a transmission or translation problem, most often with just a word or verse. However, sometimes it can involve longer passages such as the end of Mark, well known and acknowledged by scholars to be spurious.

In some instances, as with the Apocrypha, incompatibility with the Tanakh disqualifies entire books. For us, this is the case with Galatians and 2 Peter. (See also our separate articles regarding spurious scriptures.)

Galatians is a book which firmly pits itself against not only the Tanakh, but against Yehoshua's teachings and even against Paul's letter to the Romans. Its criticism of Ya'akov, Kefa and Yochanan is bitter, sarcastic and unreconciled. It is also very telling that the conflict it describes is not resolved to its author's satisfaction, but left an open wound. As such, the wound remains, not only for the author, but for every subsequent reader of the work. For us, Galatians value is not its doctrine, but as a vivid witness to profound divisions that arose early between those claiming Yehoshua as their Messiah. It is a sobering testament as to why Judaism cannot and will not embrace Christianity.

⁵The 19th ecumenical council at Trent ran from December 1545 to December 1563.

⁶Reid, George. "Canon of the New Testament." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 3. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908

Even were one to find some way of harmonizing it with the Torah, one would have to concede it has led more of its readership to challenge the Torah than any other composition in history.

Unlike Galatians, which has had practically no detractors in Christianity, 2 Peter was considered questionable as far back as we have records, and it has never shed that status among many New Testament scholars. However, doubt alone is not the criteria, but, again, compatibility or lack thereof with the Tanakh. Its characterization of Lot as a righteous man is the opposite of what we find in the Torah—a selfish, incestual alcoholic who offered his daughters to a mob of homosexuals. If the Torah offered Lot redeeming qualities or redemption itself in the face of such egregious sin, the appellation of righteousness could be accommodated. Absent that, such a representation is a serious affront to the relationship of any father with his daughters.

While this approach cannot help but open us to vehement criticism from Christian quarters, ironically, our literacy in the New Testament and adherence to its instructions far exceeds that of Christians. The fact such views do not engender popularity may call to mind Yehoshua's recurring statement, "Many are called, but few chosen," or "Enter through the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many are the ones entering in through it. For narrow is the gate, and compressed is the way that leads away into life, and few are those finding it." [Matityahu (Matthew) 20:16; 22:14; 7:13-14]

5. Read the most accurate version possible.

Our next principle is to read the Bible in the most accurate form we can access. This harkens back to the statement, "man shall live by *everything* proceeding out of the mouth of YHVH."

For those who can, there is no substitute for reading the Tanakh in its native Hebrew and Aramaic. In the case of the New Testament, other than Shem Tov Matityahu (Matthew), the earliest version we have is the Greek, which, in large part, is itself a translation of Hebrew.⁷ Nonetheless, being one translation away from the original language is better than being twice removed.

For those not fluent in the languages of the Tanakh and the New Testament, a rather literal, interlinear translation is the next best thing. The edition by Jay P. Green, Sr. from Sovereign Grace Publishers has both the Tanakh and the New Testament. Artscroll is gradually issuing interlinears for the Tanakh. Alfred Marshall's interlinear of the New Testament published by Zondervan captures nuances missed by many other versions. J.N. Young's Literal Translation is another good resource for English speakers.

⁷This was demonstrated by Robert Lisle Lindsey and David Flusser when, in translating the Greek New Testament into Hebrew for Israelis, they noticed the ease at which awkward Greek phrases often lent themselves to clear Hebrew. Puns and other features lost in the Greek reemerged in the Hebrew.

The trend in Bible translation has long favored paraphrases. These read with ease and are more readily accessible than “word-for-word” renditions, which are considered awkward and a chore to read. There certainly is merit to an easier read, but, as with everything, it comes with a price—often hidden, sometimes exorbitant.

Take for example Mark 7:18-19. The New American Standard Bible (NASV), touted to be among those English translations most true to the original text, renders it as follows:

And He said to them, “Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.)

In the New International Version (NIV), it reads:

“Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”)

Here is the same passage from Green's Literal Translation:

And He said to them, Are you also so undiscerning? Do you not perceive that all that enters from the outside into the man is not able to defile him? This is because it does not enter into his heart, but into the belly, and goes out into the waste-bowl, purging all the foods.

Notice how there is no “thus he declared all foods clean” in the literal translation. Why not? Because it simply is not in the ancient Greek texts.

As Yehoshua said, what we ingest which the body cannot use gets purged from the body into the toilet. That which is cleansed in this example is hardly what ends up in the commode, but the body which eliminated the foul substance. The Greek here is not at odds with the Torah, but the translators' persistent bias against Torah observance is well-evidenced in such renditions.

Here is another example of a garbled translation from the Greek New Testament to the English:

. . . whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Matityahu (Matthew) 16:19 (KJV)

In his forward to Alfred Marshall's *Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, J.B. Phillips writes, “I am glad, for example to see that Dr. Marshall has not missed the peculiar Greek construction in Matthew ch. 16, v. 19, where Jesus tells Peter that “what he binds

on earth” will be “what has been bound” in Heaven. There is a world of difference between guaranteeing celestial endorsement of the Apostle’s actions and promising that his actions guided by the Holy Spirit will be in accordance with the Heavenly pattern!”⁸

Young’s Literal Translation, though awkward, reflects Phillips’ observation:

. . . whatever thou mayest bind upon the earth shall be having been bound
in the heavens, and whatever thou mayest loose upon the earth shall be
having been loosed in the heavens

Despite the fact very few English translations render the proper sense here, the very quirkiness of such passages should call the reader’s attention to the need for further inquiry. Sometimes the question is resolved with a quick look at an interlinear; sometimes it is much more involved.

One crucial fact that must always be borne in mind by one reading only in translation is that one is not reading the original message itself, but merely an interpretation of it—and the biases of the translator(s) are inescapably imposed on the emerging message. Consider what we call those who translate live statements from one language to another: Interpreters!

Seeking the most accurate form of the Bible also includes drawing from more than one textual tradition, which requires a little explanation.

The Tanakh has come down to us from the ancient Jewish community almost entirely from three sources: the Masoretic Text (MT), the Dead Sea or Qumran Scrolls (Q) and the Septuagint (LXX). In the case of the Chumash, we can add the Samaritan Pentateuch. The New Testament is preserved in the Received Text or Textus Receptus (TR) and in composite or critical texts, both drawing from ancient manuscripts. We also have the Shem Tov book of Matityahu (Matthew) in Hebrew. Sometimes one English or other modern language translation differs from another due to choices made by the translators. In other cases, it is a different Hebrew or Greek source text from which the translators are working.

The Masoretic Text is the standardized Hebrew text of Judaism today. It has been handed down with far greater care (so far as we have documentation) than any other source. Scribes go to great lengths to preserve the integrity of the text, adding up the numeric values of every character and taking other such measures. The Qumran Scrolls are about a thousand years older than the oldest surviving manuscripts of the Masoretic Text, affording us the opportunity to analyze the transmission accuracy of the latter. The Septuagint is the translation of the Torah into Greek by Jews, to which was subsequently added the remainder of the Tanakh. It often gives us valuable insight into how Jews interpreted scripture—most particularly the Torah—prior to the New Testament era.

⁸2nd Ed., London, Samuel Bagster & Sons, Ltd., 1959

A famous example is Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 7:14, where, in both the Masoretic and the Qumran sources, we read:

Therefore YHVH himself shall give you a sign: behold, the young woman shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

This reference to the “young woman” is quoted in Shem Tov’s Hebrew Matityahu. It is in the Septuagint that we read that this young woman is a “parthenos” (maiden), affirming how some of the Jews (who else could read Hebrew at a time when not even all Jews could) viewed the prophecy, well before Yehoshua’s birth.

In this case, the Septuagint is not the Word itself, but an interpretation thereof—and not by Christians, who had not yet appeared on the scene, but by Jews, normative enough Jews to ensure the translation’s wide dissemination.⁹

To examine every manuscript of every Bible verse is obviously way beyond most if not all of us; neither is it always necessary nor even advisable. However, when a particular verse or passage seems out of character with other parts of the Bible, that is when we might well consider what lies beyond whatever the version currently in our lap.

6. Read the full passage in which a particular statement appears.

In Yirmayahu (Jeremiah) 28:2-4, we read:

So says YHVH of Hosts, the God of Israel, saying, “I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will again bring into this place all the vessels of the house of YHVH which Nevuchadnetzar king of Babylon took away from this place and brought them to Babylon. And I will bring again to this place Yechonyah the son of Yehoiakim, king of Yehudah, with all the exiles of Judah who went into Babylon,” says YHVH. “For I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.”

When we read the whole chapter, we find that these are not the words of God at all, but the words of a false prophet which he attributed to God.

Quotes can be lifted out of the Bible to support all kinds of senseless ideas, many in opposition to one another. Theologians, like politicians, are not above taking sources

⁹ Anti-missionary Tovia Singer argues strenuously in his book, *Let’s Get Biblical—Why Doesn’t Judaism Accept the Christian Messiah* for a much later development of the Prophets and the Writings by Christians. However, Septuagint versions of Chronicles, Job and Esther each quoted by extra-biblical sources by the 2nd century BCE. The Septuagint version of Daniel is cited by the 1st century BCE. The *Jewish Encyclopedia’s Bible Translations* article states, “It is not known when the other books of the Bible were rendered into Greek. The grandson of Ben Sira (132 B.C.), in the prologue to his translation of his grandfather’s work, speaks of the ‘Law, Prophets, and the rest of the books’ as being already current in his day.”

out of context to suit their will.

Some statements lend themselves more readily to misuse in this regard than others. For example, in Yochanan (John) 9:31, we read the statement, “. . . we know that God does not hear sinners.” In 1 Yochanan (John) 1:8, we find, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” To conclude from these two scriptures that God hears no one or that this is an example of the New Testament contradicting itself would not only be myopic but wrong. When we acknowledge the context of the first statement—that it is not from Yehoshua’s lips, but an ordinary citizen being grilled by the Sanhedrin, we can accept it with the appropriate limitations.

This context issue is also at work in the “foods” episode cited above. The situation described in Mark 7 has nothing to do with kosher foods; it has nothing to do with *what* the disciples were eating. The author introduces the incident in the first couple verses of the chapter by informing us that the Scribes and Pharisees took exception, not with what the disciples were eating, but the fact that they did not first wash in accordance with Jewish oral tradition.

For the sake of both simplicity and brevity, the context in the above examples may be found within a few verses. However, in other cases, more or less parallel statements or accounts are often found in other books. For example, the Ten Words (or Commandments) are found in both Sh’mot (Exodus) chapter 20 and Devarim (Deuteronomy) chapter 5. The wording is nearly identical in both, but the slight differences, both intended and important, enhance our understanding. The books of Melechim (1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings) are paralleled by Divrei Hayamim (1 & 2 Chronicles) and, to a lesser extent, by passages in Yeshayahu (Isaiah) and Yirmayahu (Jeremiah). Biographical material about Messiah Yehoshua is found in the four Testimonies or Gospels, each lending details not found in the others.

7. Give the historical and cultural context due consideration—not only in terms of works’ origins, but the message and intended readership as well.

Because the scriptures deal so much with universal issues, there is much we can learn from it without even passing familiarity with its origins and its transmission to our time. Yet much is lost without some acquaintance with the culture of its writers, and no small amount gets misconstrued as a result.

The cultural and linguistic origins of the Tanakh are not seriously disputed. However, Christianity has, since at least the early second century CE, been intent on sanitizing itself of all vestiges of anything Jewish. Therefore, the vast majority of New Testament scholars emanating from its seminaries are insistent that the entire New Testament was originally penned in Greek.

It is true that the majority of the most ancient New Testament manuscripts extant are Greek and that several of its books (such as Paul’s writings) were penned originally in Greek. Therefore, knowing how a passage reads in the Greek indeed brings us a couple millennia closer to the original than an English translation.

Ya'akov (James) 2:2 is an example of the Greek bringing us closer to the cultural context than the typical English translation. As rendered in Green's Literal Translation, it reads as follows:

For if there may come into your synagogue a man with gold ring, in gay raiment, and there may come in also a poor man in vile raiment . . .

Notice the use of the familiar term "synagogue." This is the term used in the Greek text—a word borrowed by the Jews designating their houses of worship even today. Despite our familiarity with this term, the NASV supplies "assembly" and the NIV employs "meeting"—both demonstrating an effort to distance themselves (and the reader) from the Jewish source culture. So here we have an example of how the Greek retains some of the cultural context, and a faithful rendering of the Greek can do likewise.

In the above simple example, the Greek connects us more firmly with the cultural context. This is not always the case, for Yehoshua and his disciples were not conversing in Greek, but in Hebrew¹⁰.

In Yochanan (John) 10:22-23 we read:

And the Feast of Dedication took place in Jerusalem, and it was winter.
And Jesus was walking in the temple, in Solomon's Porch.

This is an instance where, though the account comes to us in Greek, it is an acquaintance with Jewish culture that provides the context. The occasion is Chanukah, which, though the Hebrew word for dedication, has been absorbed into the English language as a celebration with which most have at least passing familiarity.

So here are two cases, one involving a familiar Greek term, the other a familiar Hebrew term, both of which have been absorbed into the common English vocabulary, both avoided by editors and translators in favor of terms which divorce the reader from the Jewish context of the scriptures. Were no one familiar with New Testament Greek, we would have no access to these writings. However, interpreting the Greek in a state of cultural disassociation often leads to erroneous conclusions.

Consider the conversation recorded in Yochanan (John) 21:15-19 in which Yehoshua asks Shimon Kefa (Peter) three times if Shimon loves him. Many have pointed out that, in the first two queries, the Greek word for love is agapao, while Shimon answers with a different word for love—fileo. Finally, Yehoshua restates the question using fileo, at which point Shimon is clearly unnerved. For those acquainted with Greek, there is a

¹⁰New Testament scholars have typically disputed Jewish use of Hebrew in the New Testament era. However, while this objection was never tenable, discoveries such as the Qumran and Masada scrolls and the Bar Kokhba letters amply demonstrate Jewish fluency in Hebrew, as well as in Aramaic and Greek.

certain temptation to analyze the significance of these two words for love as used in the conversation. Of course, the conversation did not occur in Greek, but in Hebrew, which has no words corresponding distinctly with *agapao* or *fileo*.

Examining the Greek New Testament enables us to check the accuracy of an English translation and to consider viable alternatives to questionable renderings—both essential tasks. However, we are misled if we fail to acknowledge the Hebrew language and culture in which the actual events, discourses and conversations occurred, of which the Greek itself is but a translation.

The other facet of cultural context pertains to the readership intended by those who penned the words we now read.

We have just noted the reference to Chanukah in Yochanan. In the Acts 27:9, we find the following:

And much time having passed and the voyage already being dangerous, because The Fast already had gone by, Paul warned them, saying, “Men, I see that the voyage is about to be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and of the ship, but also of our souls.”

The author of the Book of Acts, assumed familiarity on the part of his readers to “The Fast” also known as Yom haKipurim or Yom Kippur. When he says the disciples returned to Jerusalem from a Shabbat’s journey away, he assumes we know how far that is.

Similarly, when Paul writes of being “puffed up” five times in his first letter to the Corinthians, he is doing so in the context of the Feast of Matzah, to which he also makes direct references.

Such passing references abound. They inform a particular readership, including them in the context of what is written, even as their meanings and implications elude others.

8. Be vigilant, be wary as to the biases of the translators.

In sections 5 and 7 above, we have already raised the issue of translator bias and given strategies to mitigate it. However, thus far, the focus has been the inherent challenges of migrating from one language and culture to another. The biases themselves require special attention. This is both because biases are ever present and they involve, not just technical hurdles handled with impartiality, but they reflect motives as well.

It seems we encounter these most often in New Testament simply because it is there that we have antinomian (anti-Torah) gentiles translating Jewish material that is alien to them, though the gentile imprint on Tanakh translations is also well-represented.

In Tehillim (Psalm 2:12, we have נשקוֹבֵר, typically rendered in gentile translations as “kiss the Son.” Jewish translations into English render the phrase, “do homage;” the Septuagint has “δραξασθε παιδειας” or “accept correction.” The word translated “Son”

is בַּר (bar), which later, post-exilic Hebrew eventually did borrow from Aramaic as a result of the Jews' deportation to Babylon. However, Kefa (Peter) in Acts 4:25, attributes this psalm to David. The Hebrew for "son," בֶּן (ben), is used in this psalm in verse 7, where it says, "You are my son. Today I have begotten you." Returning to verse 12, there is no definite article. Truly this psalm is messianic, but, in this instance, Christian translators discredit themselves with a combination of excessive zeal and insufficient reverence for the native text.

This is not to suggest Jewish translations into English are unbiased. This is readily evident in Tehillim 110, where we find the phrase לְדָוִד מִזְמוֹר, typically translated "a psalm of David." This identical phrase occurs in five other psalms. Grammatically, both the Hebrew and the English phrases are somewhat ambiguous. However, it is generally understood to mean "a psalm *by* David." This creates a problem for normative Judaism if David's Master is being spoken to by YHVH. Therefore, Jewish translators often give this psalm unique treatment, rendering the phrase "A psalm *about* David" or "A psalm *regarding* David." It is not that this is grammatically incorrect; it is simply inconsistent—and this simple inconsistency obviously has profound implications.

9. Consider *all* the statements about a matter in the Bible before reaching a firm conclusion.

Whoever answers a matter before he hears, folly and shame it is to him

Mishlei (Proverbs) 18:13

Some claim the Bible is full of contradictions. We say it is full of paradoxes. These force us to put forth considerable effort in reaching conclusions rather than be passively spoon-fed. They compel us to confront and conquer our own doubts.

Anyone doubting whether or not such paradoxes are intentional need not limit the search for widely separated passages under the assumption of a certain amnesia inherent in the Bible. In Mishlei (Proverbs) 26:4-5 we find:

Answer not a fool according to his foolishness, lest you become like him, even you. Answer a fool according to his foolishness, that he not be wise in his own eyes.

If we apply but one statement in all cases, we become the fool.

Skeptics will gleefully cite Paul's reference to the "God of peace" in Romans 15:33 and contrast it with Sh'mot (Exodus) 15:3 where we read, "YHVH is a man of war." Yet humanity hardly needs the promise of peace from an impotent God who, powerless to subdue his enemies, is unable to implement his plan.

Texts have been lifted out of the Bible to support all kinds of opposing views. It is futile to simply marshal the scriptures that seem to affirm a view if we fail to address those that might challenge it.

10. Recognize that, though the word of God is infallible, the Bible, as we now have it, is not.

In the Bible, there is no shortage of paradoxes intentionally composed as such. In addition to these, there are scribal errors.

Well-known is the discrepancy between 1 Melachim (Kings) 4:26 and 2 Divrei Hayamim (Chronicles) 9:25. In the former, we read that King Sh'lomo (Solomon) had forty-thousand horse stalls; in the latter, the number is four-thousand. It seems inescapable that we have before us a text transmission problem.

The skeptic will say, "If God is omniscient and wants his will clearly known, could he not and would he not prevent such errors?"

We respond that God's will remains abundantly clear, despite the deficiencies of the human hand. In this case, we need only know that Sh'lomo had thousands of horses, thousands of horsemen and chariots to go with them. The point is not show many horses and chariots he had in particular, but the fact that he violated the Torah, where it says, ". . . he shall not multiply horses to himself . . ." [D'varim (Deuteronomy) 17:16] A second point is also clear: God performs much of his work through imperfect human beings. As he does so, he allows for inevitable blemishes on our part, nevertheless accomplishing his perfect goals.

Intentionally blemishing God's instructions in writing is matter of grave consequences. On the other hand, the irony of the following example seems to indicate a sense of divine humor—perhaps even mockery of those who discount his involvement in the Bible.

We have already cited D'varim (Deuteronomy) 8:3, where it is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but man shall live by everything proceeding out of the mouth of YHVH." This is how the statement comes to us in the Masoretic and Qumran texts. However, Matityahu, at least in the Greek, substitutes the title, God, for the name, YHVH, as does the Septuagint. Shem Tov's Matityahu says "Man shall not live by bread alone, etc." Luke 4:4, which parallels Matityahu's narrative, comes to us in two basic versions. In the Received Text, it reads like Greek Matityahu; in the standard critical texts, it reads like the shorter Shem Tov, minus the "etc."

Obviously, the original statement is not being transmitted verbatim in each case. If one desires to nurse one's doubts with such variety, there is ample rope to hang oneself. Nonetheless, the fundamental message and lesson remains consistent and crystal clear.

11. Read from the Torah, as well as other sections of the Bible daily.

One cannot always be parsing the Bible. It also needs also to simply be read and imbibed—as instruction, as history, as narrative and as poetry. To have its various statements on any given topic come to mind as one reads it freely does not come with

occasional reading. This experience is the byproduct of daily reading.

And it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this Torah in a scroll, from before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear YHVH your God, to keep all the words of this Torah and these statutes, to do them; so that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or to the left; so that he may prolong his days over his kingdom, he and his sons in the midst of Israel.

D'varim 17:18-20

The brothers at once sent both Paul and Sila to Berea during the night; who having arrived went into the synagogue of the Jews. And these were more noble than those in Thessaloniki, for they received the word with all readiness, daily examining the scriptures if these things are so.

Acts 17:10-11

The last scripture warrants some elaboration. Today, we are accustomed to having our own copy of the Bible in our home. In those days, this was a luxury far beyond the reach of all but the most wealthy.

It takes over sixty animal hides to make a scroll for just the first five books of the Bible. Such a scroll, meticulously copied by hand, every character verified with a numeric cross-check, costs about \$50,000 today (likely far more by the time you read this).

Thus, the Bereans were going to the synagogue daily to read the scriptures. Even well after the invention of the printing press, going to the synagogue to read was necessary due to books remaining prohibitively expensive. Meanwhile, most gentiles were illiterate.

Add to this the fact that the Catholic church vigorously suppressed the dissemination of and access to the Bible. At mass, it was read only in Latin until well into the 20th century, a dead language among the parishioners. Those such as William Tyndale, Jan Hus and John Rogers involved in translating it into the languages of the populous were executed. One risked burning at the stake for mere possession of such a translation.

While a number of reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin translated the Bible for their followers, scriptural literacy is currently about as weak in the Protestant world as it remains in Catholicism.

Today, not only is the Bible itself readily available; the array of study aids to accompany it is astounding and also readily accessible. The ease at which we can avail ourselves to these resources masks both the very dear price paid for that privilege and the accountability we bear for our use of them.

12. Resolve to follow the Bible.

The Torah claims to be the word of the Almighty Creator. If this is not so, it is rubbish. If it is so, his words, by virtue of his very authority, are law. If it is so, its instructions should govern our personal, familial, congregational, local, commercial and national conduct.

We humans are hard-wired with oversized appetites and aspirations which get us into considerable trouble because they cannot possibly be satisfied in this lifetime. If we attempt to satiate them as mortals, we inevitably do so at great expense and sorrow to those around us.

The laws of human conduct are no less real than those of physics. In the Bible, we have them clearly articulated so that we can implement them. In the world about us, we have the fruit of others' lives to observe. We can follow a plethora of paths alien to the Bible. We can lead a life of experimentation—be our own guinea pigs. So the choice is rather stark.

We are also predisposed toward contemplating why we are here and being preoccupied with what, if anything, we can expect after death. We can sublimate these questions, yet they persist. We swallow Darwinian modalities even as we admire those who sacrifice their lives on behalf of others.

The Bible claims that life does have meaning, that we do have a purpose and that there is more to life than this temporary, physical existence. For those so inclined, the door is opened to explore and to grow.

Once we pass through that door, our journey has both a private, individual facet, fueled to a large extent by the personal initiative we invest in partnership with God's greater investment. There is also the collaborative aspect of the journey in which we nurture one another as a community. Since our values and practices are Bible-based, having a common and sound set of principles by which we interpret scripture is essential to our survival as a community and the success of our collaborative efforts.