

How Do You Study the Bible?

Each one of us as a man or woman of faith, continually treading on a spiritual journey, has a certain series of expectations when we read the Holy Scriptures. All of us affirm the great power of the Word of God to change lives, the need for each of us to be diligent students of the Word, and the requirement for us to be informed from the Word as it involves the interactions with God and humanity—and especially what the Bible teaches us about God’s character. We can identify with how Paul directed Timothy “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to encouragement, and to teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13, TLV). But aside from spiritual people all agreeing that the Holy Scriptures are to be the place where we turn for some decisive answers to life’s questions—how do we study the Bible? As we are considering some of the issues present in Messianic theology, it needs to be fairly noted that some of the controversies that we are facing today, come as a result of inadequate, and perhaps even inappropriate, ways of reading and interpreting Scripture.

Many people in today’s Messianic movement have been taught, either externally or internally, that the Bible is God’s “love letter” to them personally. None of us want to be caught dismissing how the Bible indeed conveys God’s good character and good intentions for humanity. Psalm 19:8(7) properly emphasizes, “The teaching of the LORD is perfect, renewing life; the decrees of the LORD are enduring, making the simple wise” (NJPS). There are many passages of Holy Scripture which the Lord has doubtlessly used to help you through a difficult time. Many of you can likely identify with how, when experiencing some crisis, you were guided to a passage like Jeremiah 29:11, “‘For I know the plans that I have in mind for you,’ declares *ADONAI*, ‘plans for *shalom* and not calamity—to give you a future and a hope’” (TLV). However, while it is important that God’s love has been conveyed to you via His written Word; those who study Scripture seriously, and especially those who are engaged in technical Biblical Studies, tend to *absolutely cringe* when someone says that the Bible is God’s “love letter” to humanity. The reason, that such persons do not like to hear others saying these sorts of things, is because the Bible was not written directly to Twenty-First Century, modern individuals, who can then interject their subjective feelings into various cherry-picked verses or statements. **The books of the Holy Scriptures were composed for ancient audiences beginning with the Israelites who left Egypt—to the Jewish, Greek, and Roman Believers who made up the First Century *ekklēsia*.**

It is to be commended that a significant majority of the people, in today’s Messianic movement, genuinely want to study the Bible at a deeper level. But, in order to study the

The Messianic Walk

Bible at a deeper level, a variety of guidelines do have to be followed. Simply picking up an English Bible version, and having a Strong's Concordance by one's side, is entirely insufficient in order for today's Messianic people to study the Bible at the level that they want to study it. Indeed, one needs to be able to read multiple English versions of the Bible and catalogue astute observations, have access to up-to-date Hebrew and Greek lexicons, if necessary be able to access Hebrew and Greek language tools, and also be able to access a selection of up-to-date Bible dictionaries and commentaries. The simple, yet complicated rule, of Biblical interpretation, involves (1) reading and interpreting the text for what it meant to its original audience, and (2) applying it in a responsible manner for modern people. Many of us will find, that when making the significant effort and attempt to read the Bible for what it meant to its original audience(s) first, that Scripture will actually be *more* relevant and critical for us living today, and not less.

Reading the Bible in an Observant Manner

For too many people who want to honestly and sincerely read and appreciate the Holy Scriptures, they tend to be handed a Bible, they are told to be sure to pray before reading the Bible, they are told that the Bible is the inspired Word of God—and that perhaps by reading the Bible, God will communicate something profound to them. Many contemporary Believers start reading the Bible, as though they have just been thrown into the deep end of a pool, without ever having had any swimming lessons. We should hardly be surprised, why not enough of today's Bible Believers do not have as comprehensive or as deep an understanding of Scripture as they ought to have. Because of not having enough guidelines to follow in reading Scripture, people tend to gravitate only toward a selection of Biblical books. For many in evangelical Protestantism, their understanding of God's Word tends to be limited not just to the Apostolic Writings or New Testament, but only a selection of texts in the Apostolic Writings or New Testament. Many Messianic people, in rightly wanting to (re)claim a foundation in the Tanach or Old Testament, can have a reverse problem of only focusing on the Torah or Pentateuch as relevant Scripture. And, many unnecessary and complicated issues have doubtlessly arisen, because not enough people know how to methodically approach books of the Bible or various (controversial) passages of Scripture.

How should you read the Bible in an observant manner? How can you get a great deal out of the text, as God's Holy Spirit focuses your mind and intellect on what a particular passage communicated to its ancient recipients, and how it applies to you living in the Twenty-First Century? There are some very important guidelines which you need to be aware of, as you read and plumb the depths of Holy Scripture.

1. Read the Biblical text as a whole: While many people have read the whole Bible through via various annual programs, very few, when approaching a known controversial passage, have first started their investigation by sitting down, and reading an entire book, preferably in a single sitting. While it might take a few hours for some books of the Bible, when you are able to sit down and remind yourself that in ancient times, many would first learn the Scriptures by reading them in such a manner, a great deal of information and context will be acquired. If you can believe it, many of the problems that we have with

interpreting specific verses, can take place because we fail to read those verses in the context of what is stated before or after such verses. Likewise, as you read an entire Biblical text, it is useful to have a journal handy, where you note various observations on the characters, setting, events, as well as specific questions that the text raises. Do not be fearful if you do not have all of the answers, even when committing a few hours of your life to read through an entire book of the Bible. In order to probe a book of the Bible at a deeper level, reading through an entire book of the Bible is the first necessary step.

2. Compare and contrast various English Bible versions: It is a sad fact, but there are people seen in the religious world today, who will take a single English Bible version, read a passage of Scripture, and stridently insist on various conclusions from it. While English Bible versions have their place, when it is known that there are different theological conclusions drawn from a passage or a verse, such conclusions may originate from how a passage or a verse is translated. When a Bible reader uses a selection of several English Bible versions, in initially approaching a particular passage or verse, it can be easier to detect that there is a variance of opinion with how such a passage or verse should be approached. While many of the differences witnessed among English Bible versions are stylistic, careful Bible readers should be able to detect how various differences witnessed can indeed be theological. Seeing such differences in passages of known controversy is important, before investigating any original language issues. (While there are various parallel Bibles available, where one can have a printed copy of different English versions to compare and contrast, Bible software will often give you the clear advantage of being able to customize which English Bible versions [and others] you can examine at the same time.)

(The recommended English versions that the publishers suggest you use, include, but are not limited to, the 1995 New American Standard Update or NASU, the Revised Standard Version/New Revised Standard Version/English Standard Version family, the New International Version; and for Messianic reading the Complete Jewish Bible and Tree of Life Version. All of these versions have been quoted or referenced in some way, throughout this workbook.)

3. Accessing original languages: Frequently, some of the differences which arise in interpreting Holy Scripture, originate from how Bible translators have chosen to render specific words or terms into English. *There is no "neutral" English Bible translation, as each translator or team of translators brings some presupposition to the text to be communicated from the source language into English.* Jewish translations of the Tanach, in English, will not be reflective of Yeshua of Nazareth being the anticipated Messiah, and as such various Messianic prophecies may be reflective of this. Christian translations of the New Testament, in English, are not too likely to be reflective of the position that the Torah or Law of Moses continues to remain relevant instruction for the people of God in the post-resurrection era. The Messianic Bible reader, in accessing any

The Messianic Walk

Jewish or Christian version, needs to keep these factors in mind. It does need to be recognized, that a number of English versions will indicate, in footnotes, where there are differences of opinion among a selection of translations.

There are a number of examples where employing both multiple English versions, as well as accessing the original languages which sit behind English translations, needs to be considered. The Sixth Commandment, as it appears in the venerable King James Version, reads as, "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13), but in newer versions such as the New Jewish Press Society Tanakh or New American Standard, Exodus 20:13 reads with, "You shall not murder." An English Bible reader should immediately be able to detect that there is some perspective difference present. Going a little further, it is witnessed that the Hebrew verb translated as either "kill" or "murder" is *ratzach* (רָצַח), noted immediately by the venerable *Brown-Driver-Briggs* lexicon to mean "murder, slay."¹

A well known difference of translation is witnessed in Romans 10:4, which in a version like the New American Standard reads as, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes," with a footnote also indicating, "Or *goal*." The 2005 Today's New International Version has the slightly different, "Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes," and the 2011 Common English Bible reads, "Christ is the goal of the Law, which leads to righteousness for all who have faith in God." Just among these English versions, it is detectable that some theologians apparently believe that the Torah or Law of Moses is terminated by the Messiah, or that the Messiah is the aim or purpose of the Torah, in that its instructions inevitably point to Him and to His salvation. Not surprisingly, a definition for the Greek *telos* (τέλος), as provided by *Thayer's Greek Lexicon*, is indeed, "*the end to which all things relate, the aim, purpose.*"²

A lesser known part of accessing Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek resources for Bible study—but an absolutely imperative one—concerns encountering quotations of the Tanach in the Apostolic Writings. Many people, when reading a passage from an English version of the Tanach or Old Testament, and then perhaps encountering a quotation from it later in the Apostolic Writings or New Testament, may not see it quoted word-for-word. Of course, it should be immediately remembered how some quotations of the Tanach in the Messianic Scriptures are only partial quotes, they may be slightly adapted by an author, or they may be amalgamated with other Tanach passages. Romans 11:27, "THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS" (NASU), is a likely amalgamation of Isaiah 59:20-21; Isaiah 27:9; and Jeremiah 31:33-34, with deliberate connections likely to be made to other Tanach passages and expectations as well.

While one can witness partial or amalgamated quotes from the Tanach in the Apostolic Writings, many of the apparent differences that one can

¹ *BDB*, 953.

² *Thayer*, 620.

encounter, when the Tanach is quoted in the Messianic Scriptures, occur because it is not the Hebrew Masoretic Text being quoted, but instead the Greek Septuagint. What is commonly called the Septuagint (LXX), is an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, produced approximately two centuries before the arrival of Yeshua the Messiah. The Septuagint was used within the Mediterranean Jewish Diaspora, and so it should hardly be a surprise why the Septuagint is quoted throughout the Greek Apostolic Scriptures. The single longest Tanach quotation, in the New Testament, is how Jeremiah 31:31-34 is quoted in Hebrews 8:8-12. Apparent differences between these two passages in one's English Bible version can be easily explained when it is recognized how Jeremiah 31:31-34 is quoted from the Septuagint. There are printed English translations of the Septuagint available, which you can use as a "crutch" if necessary.

4. Accessing Bible dictionaries and commentaries: While there are many issues regarding a controversial Bible passage or verse which can be resolved by considering translation from the source language into English, many issues cannot, in fact, be resolved by translation. Many of today's biggest theological controversies do not, in fact, concern translation—but they instead involve an evaluation of the location and setting of a text's audience, and potential background witnessed in ancient bodies of extra-Biblical literature, history, or philosophy. Various passages are interpreted differently, simply because different schools of thought have different perspectives in approaching the text. The answer you need for interpreting or applying a passage of Scripture, might actually be found in accessing a Bible dictionary, encyclopedia, or even a technical commentary. These resources should never be accessed *first*, without you having done some homework of reading and wrestling through a Biblical text yourself. Obviously, if the answer you are seeking is found in a quotation from ancient history, or even some archaeological find from Biblical lands, accessing a Bible dictionary or commentary will be necessary.

Tools for Studying the Bible

Each one of us, in our personal quests to study the Bible, does know that we need to have some key tools available at our disposal, for investigating things in more detail, and also for weighing whether or not some of the theological conclusions we might be coming to are at all accurate or appropriate. We are each called to be adequate students of God's Word, and as good students we need to have the right resources to interpret the Bible, understand its background, and be respected in the wider world of ideas. Whether you are someone who will be involved in facilitating various teachings in your local Messianic congregation, helping in a Bible study, or you simply want to be a person who can add useful and constructive thoughts to discussions on Holy Scripture—not enough of today's Messianic people are equipped with a selection of useful tools, to study the Bible, and enter into some conversation of Biblical Studies. While you may not need to have as an extensive library as I have in my office, there are a few resources which you need to consider adding to your personal library.

The Messianic Walk

Study Bibles

Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible (ed. Spiros Zodhiates; Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993)

The *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible*, available in KJV, NASB, and NIV, has important words underlined and keyed to *Strong's Concordance*. It includes an abbreviated Hebrew and Greek dictionary, and is a good tool to use for Bible studies with those who are completely unfamiliar with the original languages. Each book includes a brief introductory section. Note that it leans toward dispensational theology. The NASB edition due to its literalness in modern English is the preferred edition. *This happens to be the main, personal reading Bible that I use and carry.*

ESV Study Bible (ed. Grudem, Wayne, ed.; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008)

The *ESV Study Bible*, employing the English Standard Version (2001), has become a significant, widely available, evangelical and conservative study Bible. The *ESV Study Bible* includes extensive introductions, annotations, and essays from many of the well known and appreciated evangelical scholars of the late Twentieth and early Twenty-First Centuries. The *ESV Study Bible* includes a wide selection of perspectives as they involve Biblical historicity, as well as theology. The *ESV Study Bible* does notably lean toward a Reformed or Calvinist perspective in many places, and there are things that today's Messianic people would disagree with. Still, the *ESV Study Bible*, on the whole, is a useful tool for us to engage with a great deal of contemporary evangelical theology.

New Interpreter's Study Bible, NRSV (ed. Harrelson, Walter J.; Nashville: Abingdon, 2003)

The *New Interpreter's Study Bible* should be considered as a token, liberal study Bible. (This resource is actually not as liberal as various volumes in the *Oxford Annotated Bible* series are.) Today's Messianic people do not tend to be well informed that much in critical theories surrounding the composition of the Tanach (OT), nor do they know how to approach various Left of Center schools of thought regarding interpretation of the Apostolic Writings (NT), either. The *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, while not too likely to be used as your primary study Bible, is nonetheless something that you will need, in order to be informed as to what many standard, liberal theological opinions have been, certainly going back to the mid-Twentieth Century. This publication also notably includes the books of the Apocrypha, along with introductions and annotations.

The Complete Jewish Study Bible (Rubin, Barry, gen. ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2016)

The *Complete Jewish Study Bible* includes an updated edition of David H. Stern's *Complete Jewish Bible*. Most importantly, *The Complete Jewish Study Bible* is a compiled work of both Messianic Jewish and Christian scholars,

including introductions, annotations, and select articles. For a number of these Messianic Jewish scholars and pioneers, this will be one of their last major theological contributions to the Messianic movement. There is a diversity of approach to a number of the issues addressed in this resource, and some of you may be surprised what Bible passages include annotations, and which do not. Still, no Messianic library should be without a copy of *The Complete Jewish Study Bible*.

Jewish Study Bible (eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

The *Jewish Study Bible* is an ecumenical Jewish resource including perspectives from Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism based on the NJPS translation. It does represent some liberal theology in various places, but overall is a good, easy-to-access reference source to have for Jewish perspectives on Scripture. Each book includes an introduction, most texts include commentary, essays on various Jewish theological issues are included, and there is a thorough glossary of theological terms unique to Judaism.

Hebrew and Greek Language Tools

Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament (eds. Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter; Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2003)

Easy-to-use volume for referencing Hebrew words for those who are unfamiliar with the Hebrew language. Words are keyed to *Strong's Concordance* numbers and include a brief theological explanation.

Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament (ed. Spiros Zodhiates; Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993)

Excellent lay resource to have for referencing Greek words, by a native Greek speaker. Words are keyed to *Strong's Concordance* numbers and include a detailed theological explanation. This dictionary is slightly influenced by dispensational theology.

Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, 4 vols (ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988)

ISBE is a good, well respected encyclopedia in both conservative and liberal circles. A revision of the original 1915 edition, the present version reflects new scholarship and many more theological points of view. *ISBE* is generally more conservative than the newer *ABD*, but does not include as many Jewish references.

Anchor Bible Dictionary, 6 vols (ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992)

The Messianic Walk

ABD has become a standard, relatively up-to-date Bible dictionary, in many conservative or liberal theological circles. Theologically it is liberal in many places, but is quite factual in terms of archaeology, manuscript information, and history. What is unique about *ABD* is that it is a major work produced with Jewish-Christian dialogue in mind, and Rabbinical opinions and extra-Biblical Jewish sources are referenced every bit as much as Christian opinions and outside sources are referenced.

Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period (eds. Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002)

Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period is an excellent, one-volume reference work listing critical topics unique to First Century Judaism, their relation to Rabbinical Judaism and the development of early Christianity, and background historical information of the time.

Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs (ed. David W. Bercot; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998)

Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs is a valuable tool to have if you are unfamiliar with the writings of the Church Fathers from Second-Fourth Century Christianity. The Church Fathers' theological positions on a diverse range of subjects are listed by heading with elongated quotations.

Interpreting the Bible as a Messianic Believer

Today's Messianic movement is to be highly commended as having a very high view for the role of Holy Scripture in theology and lifestyle practice. However, as each of us is probably well aware, there are scores of interpretations and viewpoints present—regarding many issues in the Scriptures—which do not tend to be witnessed in other religious venues. Furthermore, as an emerging faith community—in contrast to much of Judaism and Protestantism—there are an entire array of theological and spiritual issues which today's Messianic movement is internally discussing, (strongly) debating, and even (outright) avoiding. While it is very good that your Messianic congregation or assembly likely has Torah studies, Bible studies, and small groups which encourage open discussion—**learn to be targeted with your remarks**. While there are going to be people who want to add to discussions on important issues and subjects, many of their comments are not going to be as well founded as they ought. When it comes time for you to interject something, make sure that it is based in Holy Scripture, with a number of the guidelines we have just summarized being followed.

The Messianic movement is a very unique move of God, in that we do frequently find ourselves sitting between the great theological traditions of the Jewish Synagogue and evangelical Protestantism. While we should each be willing to always question and reevaluate our beliefs, it is not as though every single tenant of religious faith that is Jewish or Protestant is somehow "wrong." Both the Synagogue and evangelical Church, as human institutions, have their share of mistakes—but they have also contributed, in their own significant ways, to civilization. It is our responsibility, as Messianic Believers interpreting the Word of God, to not haphazardly dismiss the positive virtues of our

How Do You Study the Bible?

Judeo-Protestant heritage. If we decide to truly disregard something that has been handed down by Jewish or Protestant interpreters, we need to be able to have a reasoned explanation for doing so. If we are to develop our own, unique, Messianic interpretation of a Biblical book or passage—it needs to be firmly rooted within the text of Scripture, with us able to adequately explain ourselves. For many of you who have studied God's Word for many years, this will not be a problem. For some of you, you do need some help to better focus your attention, as you contribute to our collective Messianic vitality.