

approaching EXTRA-BIBLICAL LITERATURE

by J.K. McKee

Many years ago when I was in elementary school, I was quoted Revelation 22:19 as proof that we did not need any more books in the Bible: “if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book” (KJV). In all probability, you have quoted this verse at some point in your spiritual experience, in order to uphold the authority of the Holy Scriptures, and perhaps in defense of some text of the Bible that someone is trying to downplay. Yet the context of Revelation 22:19 is clear enough that what is actually being emphasized is the importance of the prophesies of the Book of Revelation, not the role of extra-Biblical materials in the formulation of one’s theology.

Reading and consulting extra-Biblical literature and materials, is a definite part of the Messianic experience—and it is certainly witnessed in academic Biblical Studies. While we would all hold to the Holy Scriptures of Genesis-Revelation to be the inspired Word of God, there are many facets regarding the background and setting of such Scriptures, and how they were approached and interpreted by Second Temple Judaism, which can only be known by considering an array of other materials. Many of us are certainly familiar with how in various traditions, the books of the Apocrypha are considered canonical by Roman Catholicism, deuterocanonical in Anglicanism, and valuable history and philosophy in Jewish and Protestant scholarship. At the close of every calendar year, when Messianic people commemorate *Chanukah* or the Festival of Dedication, we make some effort to read from 1&2 Maccabees in the Apocrypha, reading about the Maccabees’ guerilla war against the Seleucid Greeks. Sometimes this is augmented with various readings from the Jewish historian Josephus. While not directly referenced in the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament, we do consider the Maccabean revolt an important historical event worthy of consideration and remembrance—which certainly affected the worldview of the First Century Jewish community that first received the good news or gospel.

Also throughout the year, certainly in Messianic Torah and Tanach studies, and likely also *Shabbat* teachings—someone will refer to various perspectives present from the Jewish Sages, found in literature like the Mishnah and Talmud. While there will always be those who are very skeptical of Jewish literature produced by those who were broadly dismissive of Yeshua

of Nazareth, it is not as though the Jewish Sages should be haphazardly ignored as not having any valuable wisdom or insight. Many of us consult literature such as the Mishnah and Talmud, to simply trace a history of interpretation and application of various Torah commandments, so we can best consider their implementation in our own modern lives. Extra-Biblical Jewish literature can help us enter into conversations of difficult Bible passages and issues, and provide us not only with an array of interpretational options, but also help us better realize that we are not the only people who have had to wrestle with difficult subjects presented to us by the Holy Scriptures themselves.

Many of us as men and women of faith legitimately feel that the canonical Holy Scriptures present enough material, stories, accounts, commandments, and subjects to keep us spiritually and mentally occupied for quite some time! Yet, as a matter of being diligent students of God's Word, extra-Biblical literature such as the Apocrypha, Josephus, Philo, the Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmud, Midrashim, and various Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman histories—all play **a role** in us understanding something about the background of various issues. What are some of the legitimate ways that this information can be employed in our Bible studies? How do we recognize misuses of extra-Biblical literature?

Encountering Extra-Biblical Literature in the Holy Scriptures

While at first glance, some people come to the quick conclusion that extra-Biblical literature has no place in the theological reasonings of today's people of God—the fact that the Scriptures themselves make reference to sentiments witnessed in bodies of material outside of the canon, is unavoidable. The fact that the Bible makes some use of extra-Biblical literature, means that it can play some role in us understanding background or perspectives. The Apostolic Writings themselves clearly do make some direct use of extra-Biblical materials.

Acts 17:28

"for 'In Him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His offspring'" (TLV).

During Paul's encounter with the Epicureans and Stoics at the Areopagus in Athens, it is contextually clear that in quoting "one of your own poets," that some pagan Greek has been referenced. There is no uniform agreement among examiners as to which classical Greek figure(s) Paul may have been quoting. In his commentary on the Book of Acts, David G. Peter-

son does offer a useful selection of options from classical antiquity:

"Paul offers support for the preceding claim by asserting that *"in him we live and move and have our being"*. This triad is used 'to bring out all sides of man's absolute dependence on God for life'. Some have argued that Paul is citing words originally addressed to Zeus in a poem attributed to Epimenides of Crete, who flourished in the sixth century BC. However, we do not have the original poem, and there are similar assertions by other Greek writers (e.g. Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 12.43). Whatever the source, Paul will have been using these words to convey the biblical truth that God, not merely the creation, is the environment in which we exist. As a personal being he can be known, understood, and trusted. In the syntax of the sentence, the words *'as some of your own poets have said'* most naturally relate to what follows. Paul goes on to quote Aratus of Cilicia (*Phaenomena* 5), a philosopher-poet from the third century BC, who said of Zeus, *"we are his offspring"* (*του gar kai genos esmen* [τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἐσμέν]). The poet will have understood these words in a pantheistic sense, but Paul appears to have viewed them in the light of the image of God theology in Genesis 1:26-27...He recognized that a search for God had been taking place in the Greco-Roman world, but condemned the result—the idolatry which was everywhere present and the ignorance of the true God which it betrayed (vv. 22-25)."¹

2 Timothy 3:8

"Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so do these people oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and worthless concerning the faith" (TLV).

Jannes and Jambres are not known anywhere by name inside of the Tanach, but within ancient Jewish tradition they are the names of the Pharaoh's magicians who used their black arts to counter the Divine signs issued by Moses (cf. Exodus 7:11, 22; 8:7, 18-19; 9:11). They are mentioned by name in both the Dead Sea Scrolls and Targum Jonathan:

"Moses and Aaron stood in the Power of the Prince of Lights and Belial raised up Yannes and his brother in his cunning when seeking to do evil to Israel the first time" (CD 5.18-19).²

"But the anger of the Lord was provoked, because he would go (that he might) curse them; and the angel of the Lord stood in the way to be an adversary to him. But he sat upon his ass, and his two young men, Jannes and Jambres, were with him" (Targum Jonathan on Numbers 22:22).³

¹ David G. Peterson, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp 499-500.

² Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 56.

³ [BibleWorks 8.0: Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on the Pentateuch.](#)

Titus 1:12

"One of them, one of their own prophets, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons'" (TLV).

The statement made by Paul about Cretans—regarding its originator as speaking prophetically of sorts—is often attributed to Epimenides, who was a Sixth Century B.C.E. poet. What is said would have been a well-known sentiment expressed about Crete in the ancient world. One of the oldest records of what Paul says is found in Callimachus' *Hymn to Zeus* 1.8, "Cretans are always liars,"⁴ dating to the Third Century B.C.E.

2 Peter 2:22

"What has happened to them confirms the truth of the proverb, 'A dog returns to its vomit,' and 'A scrubbed pig heads right back into the mud'" (TLV).

In his remarks on the condition of unreformed sinners, Peter first quotes from Proverbs 26:11, but then makes a quotation from an extra-Biblical source. This is likely taken from the Seventh-Sixth Century B.C.E. *Ahiqar*, a tale which spread throughout much of the Ancient Near East: "My son, thou has been to me like the swine that had been to the baths, and when it saw a muddy ditch, went down and washed in it..."⁵

Jude 14-15

"And about these also Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, 'Behold, the Lord came with myriads of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their works of ungodliness which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him'" (PME).

Jude 14-15 has some sort of quotation issued from the Pseudepigraphal *1 Enoch* 1:9: "Behold, he will arrive with ten million of the holy ones in order to execute judgment upon all. He will destroy the wicked ones and censure all flesh on account of everything that they have done, that which the sinners and the wicked ones committed against him."⁶

⁴ Stanley Lombardo and Diane Raynor, eds., *Callimachus: Hymns, Epigrams, Select Fragments* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 3.

⁵ J.M. Lindenberger, "Ahiqar," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 487.

⁶ E. Isaac, "1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), pp 13-14.

Hebrews 11:38

“The world was not worthy of them! They wandered around in deserts and mountains, caves and holes in the ground” (TLV).

While the bulk of the Hebrews 11 “hall of faith” refers to individuals and persons which can be found within the Tanach Scriptures, Hebrews 11:38 is widely agreed by examiners to include a reference to the Maccabees, from 2 Maccabees 10:6 in the Apocrypha, as they first commemorated *Chanukah* or the Festival of Dedication: “And they celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of the feast of booths, remembering how not long before, during the feast of booths, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals” (RSV).

It is seen that the Holy Scriptures actually do include quotations or significant references to extra-Biblical literature. In terms of background, be it historical or philosophical, this can be important. But does a quotation or significant allusion to an extra-Biblical source, automatically mean a wide-scale endorsement of such material as being inspired of the Creator God? Hardly. While it is recognized that Paul, for example, quoted from various Greek poets, no spiritual person today thinks that they should be considered canon. While Jude quotes from Enoch, there are considerable questions surrounding the preservation of the text of *1 Enoch*—and the Biblical Enoch is hardly the originator of the bulk of such information.

The Main Bodies of Extra-Biblical Literature

For your average Bible reader, simply encountering an obvious quotation or reference from extra-Biblical literature within the Biblical text, can come as quite a shock. More engaged Bible readers can often be familiar, at least in passing, with some bodies of extra-Biblical literature, via references they have seen in various study Bibles or commentaries. Many, while knowing that there are extra-Biblical materials “out there,” leave it to others to sort through such information.

How do you sort through some of the major bodies of extra-Biblical literature? Technically, extra-Biblical literature can involve anything from widely preserved and circulated religious and philosophical works, which in history were closely associated with the canonical Scriptures—to scraps of letters, ancient tomb inscriptions, and graffiti for that matter. Both Jewish and Christian scholars turn to a certain window of materials, which would at least represent some selection of religious and philosophical views present within the “broad Biblical period.”

The two major bodies of extra-Biblical literature, which have been widely accessible to both Jews and Christians since the Second Century C.E., are the works of Philo and Josephus. It is not uncommon to find this material on the shelves of many individual people and families today:

Philo Judaeus or Philo of Alexandria lived between 20-25 B.C.E. and died between 40-45 C.E. He is widely regarded as the first Jewish philosopher and believed that it was possible to present the teachings of the Tanach in palatable forms to students of Greek philosophy. On one hand, Philo's writings represent many of the key theological tenets that we see present in First Century Diaspora Judaism, but on the other he was also somewhat eclectic. Many of Philo's works should be seen in the construct of him trying to defend Jewish belief and custom against Jews being persuaded in the so-called superiority of Hellenistic dogma, as Philo would defend Judaism as being the "true philosophy" or "true mystery" that Hellenism was trying to seek. Philo, while arguing to a different sector of the Jewish community, the Diaspora community, actually held to a very high view of Moses and the Torah. Some of Philo's ideas are paralleled in parts of the Apostolic Scriptures, although compared to many of his Judean counterparts he would most certainly be considered a bit "progressive." Philo's works are valuable as they give us a glimpse into some of the ideas and beliefs of Diaspora Judaism, and are an excellent historical witness to its customs and traditions. (Single-volume compilations of Philo's works are available in English, and all of his works are in the public domain.)

Flavius Josephus lived between approximately 37-100 C.E. He was born into a well-to-do priestly family in the Land of Israel. At 16 he began a thorough study of the major Jewish sects of his time, and by 19 had become a Pharisee. At the age of 29, he made his way to Rome to see to the release of various priestly friends, and made the acquaintance of the Roman court. Josephus did not join the Jewish Revolt of 67 C.E. and was taken a prisoner by the Roman army. He "prophesied" before Vespasian that he would become caesar, in order to save his own life, believing that the Jewish people could survive in cooperation with Rome. When Vespasian was installed in 69 C.E., Josephus was freed and witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem firsthand in 70 C.E. After this he returned to Rome and be-

came an author of Caesar's court, compiling several histories of the Jewish people. Josephus' works are extremely valuable as they give us insight into the Judaism of the First Century and the development of early Christianity. They are an excellent external witness to the historicity of the Apostolic Scriptures, and throughout much of Christian history have been read as second in importance only to the Bible. (Single-volume compilations of Josephus' works are available in English, and all of his works are in the public domain.)

The next major set of extra-Biblical literature, with more of it tending to be accessed by contemporary scholars than laypersons, largely originates the period immediately before, and then following, the Apostles, for several centuries. In this series of texts we find a great deal of information on Jewish theological opinions circulating before the time of Yeshua, some of the theological opinions circulating after the time of Yeshua, various wisdom sayings, important Jewish traditions and applications of Torah, as well as the challenges the Believers in the Second and Third Centuries C.E. faced:

The Apocrypha is a collection of books written sometime between the late Third and Second Centuries B.C.E., that by the First Century B.C.E. were added as an adjunct onto the Greek Septuagint. These texts primarily included history and wisdom literature. Most of these texts were originally written in Greek, although some were probably first written in Hebrew, the originals having been lost to history. The texts of 1-4 Maccabees and Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus) are very significant as secondary resources to the Bible. The Apocrypha gives us a good idea about the possible origin of some of the "sayings" of Yeshua and the Apostles, and the history of Judaism during the Greek period. Notably, the books of the Apocrypha are considered canonical in the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic, deuterocanon in the Anglican traditions. While the Reformers largely rejected these texts as canonical, because Judaism did, they are nevertheless approached by Protestant academics as a valuable source of secondary material that should probably be used in some of our theology. It is very easy for one to acquire an English Bible version with the Apocrypha included (KJV, RSV, NEB, REB, NRSV, ESV), or even a study Bible with commentary included (i.e., *Oxford Study Bible*, *New Interpreter's Study Bible*).

The Pseudepigrapha is a wide array of religious texts that were largely written in the names of the Biblical Patriarchs and other important figures, compiled largely from the Third to First Centuries B.C.E., although some of it dates to the First Century C.E. Much of this literature recorded oral traditions extant in the Judaism in this period, notably Diaspora Judaism, and for that reason most of these texts survive in Greek. The interpreter will find various sentiments and beliefs that may make their way into the Apostolic Scriptures. Texts of the Pseudepigrapha should be consulted on a case-by-case basis, as most of them are anonymous, are very broad sweeping, and some have undergone some noticeable changes from their originals.

The Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) are the collected works of the Qumran community from the First Century B.C.E. that were discovered from 1946 to 1956 in caves on the shore of the Dead Sea in Israel. The Qumran community was an eclectic apocalyptic group expecting the arrival of the Messiah and the overthrow of the Romans. They were Essenes who strongly opposed the Sadducean Temple priesthood and who thought that the Pharisees were too liberal in their approach to the Torah. Other than the historical traditions we have of Pharisaic theology, the DSS make up the second historical witness of another branch of Judean Judaism during the First Century. We can actually see some parallels between the DSS and views that are recorded in the Apostolic Scriptures. This does not mean that there is total agreement, but does reveal that many of the teachings of the Apostles were not unique to their time, and there were parallels elsewhere. The DSS should be consulted when one is searching for the theological views of the major branches of Judaism in the First Century. Oftentimes, what the DSS say will often be considered when a reference is made either in a commentary or some other work. (Several English translations of the DSS are available.)

The Mishnah is the written down form of the Oral Torah, or what was considered to comprise the Oral Torah by the First-Second Centuries C.E. Following the destruction of Jerusalem, the surviving Jewish Rabbis wrote down the Pharisaic oral traditions that guided their Torah observance. The Mishnah was composed by around 200 C.E. in a unique form of Hebrew. In Orthodox Judaism

today the Oral Torah is considered to be on par with the Written Torah or Chumash, and is authoritative to a lesser extent in Conservative and Reform Judaism. The Mishnah forms the basis of Jewish law, being divided into six distinct segments: agriculture, the appointed times, women, damages, holy things, and purities. The Mishnah certainly records the history and procedure of how things were done in the Temple and much of the *halachah* that Yeshua and the Apostles would have been exposed to in Judea. The Mishnah is an invaluable historical resource that gives us much insight into how the Torah was followed in the First Century, and there are many good, wisdom sayings in it. (Jacob Neusner has translated a single, one-volume edition of the Mishnah in modern American English that is extremely valuable for any congregational or personal library.)

The Talmud is actually a broad term describing two principal bodies of literature: the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. Both of these works are composed in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic, and span across two centuries from the Second to Fourth Centuries C.E. The Babylonian Talmud largely represents the interpretation and traditions of Eastern Judaism from Babylon building upon the Mishnah, and the Jerusalem Talmud represents the views and traditions of Judaism from Judea, although there are many, many crossovers. Reading through the Talmud can often be a very daunting task to the interpreter who is unfamiliar with reading legal briefs. Much of the Talmud is compiled in the form of "Rabbi X said in the name of Rabbi Y that Rabbi Z said. . ." Most who examine the Talmud in any detail are religious scholars and teachers, whereas your average interpreter will have to have a tractate pointed out in a commentary or reference book so as not to get lost. The Babylonian Talmud, the larger of the two, has several translations into English. A congregation should at least have an electronic version of the Talmud on hand for reference. (The most popular edition available is the Soncino Talmud, even though Neusner has edited his own modern English versions of both Talmuds).

The Midrashim are largely commentaries composed of "conversations" or sustained passages of Scripture on various books of the Torah and Tanach. These works are all closely associated with the composition of the Talmud, and stopped being writ-

ten between 450-500 C.E. In the midrashic method of investigating Scripture, texts are often reinterpreted as applying to Israel or to Israel's messiah. The Midrashim give us important clues as to how various Tanach texts have been interpreted by the Jewish community. Some of the Midrashim add material beyond the Biblical text, and others expound upon texts in a moralistic way to turn people in repentance toward God. The Midrashim are frequently consulted by Messianics wanting to see various Jewish opinions on Tanach texts, but the fact that these often appear four to five centuries after Yeshua can guide examiners to treat these sources as tertiary, and not secondary. (Soncino and others have produced various English translations of the Midrashim.)

The writings of the Church Fathers are actually a very broad series of texts compiled anywhere from the early Second Century through the late Fourth Century. These texts include letters, apologetic treatises, and historical summaries of the challenges that the early Church faced. While many in Messianic community are quick to judge these writings, we cannot lump them all together as being "this" or "that," or all being "anti-Semitic," as they are simply too diverse. The writings of the Church Fathers were composed by many different individuals spread over a large geographical area, and it is best that we examine them on a case-by-case basis by who wrote what and the circumstances in which the person wrote. Just like the Talmud, searching through the writings of the emerging Church of this period is like jumping into an unfamiliar ocean. These texts give us important clues as to how Christian communities applied the Scriptures to their lives, as well as many of the persecutions they experienced at the hands of the Romans, and their tense relations with the Synagogue as well. We also get a glimpse at some of the heresies that circulated in the Second Century, and how the immediate successors of the Apostles handled them. An important section of these writings is the Fourth Century work *Church History* by Eusebius. When dealing with these texts, one will often have to be pointed to a specific reference via a commentary or reference source. (There are several English translations available of these writings, most of which are in the public domain.)

Beyond these collected volumes of extra-Biblical literature, the next range of materials considered would be some the extant historical and phi-

losophical works of civilizations contemporary to Ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism, and with it archaeological inscriptions and any other form of writing or artwork. For the Tanach, some of the main civilizations to be considered include those of: Sumer, Egypt, Canaan, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. The classical civilizations of Greece and Rome, and their many works, are certainly considered to play some role as background material for the Apostolic Writings.

These main collections of extra-Biblical literature I have just mentioned comprise most of the material that the able researcher will consult in his or her examination of the Scriptures. Consulting this literature, more than anything else, should give us a better view of the world(s) of the Bible, and into the contemporaries of Israel. Many, if not most, of references to these works are going to be found via a technical or critical commentary, so please do not start digging without someone pointing you in the right direction.

An Irresponsible Use of Extra-Biblical Literature

Upon hearing about the existence of various collections of extra-Biblical literature, far from some people dismissing such materials as being off limits to consider for background studies and in better understanding the times of a particular Scriptural text—other people are seen to come to the conclusions that the existence of various bodies of extra-Biblical literature has been suppressed from them, that such texts were forcibly removed from the Holy Scriptures by religious authorities, and that the time has come for us to demand their re-introduction into the Bible.

It is to be fairly noted that various ecumenical study Bibles not only will include the books of the Apocrypha, but that there will be some running commentary on them as well. Study Bibles focusing on background and times will be seen to make generous references to extra-Biblical materials. And, the more technical and detailed a commentary on a Biblical text, the more likely there are going to be scores of references to materials outside of the Bible proper. However, for a wide scope of Jewish and Protestant scholars, the canon of the Tanach has been determined, and for the latter so has the canon of the Apostolic Writings. Extra-Biblical materials are not to be approached as being the *final* authority for men and women of faith. Extra-Biblical materials can be employed when evaluating different perspectives on issues seen in religious history, and sometimes may be employed not in a comparative way to establish some sort of commonality—but instead a contrasting way. When one examines Ancient Near Eastern mythology or classical Hellenistic philosophy in Biblical Studies, it may very well be to see how starkly different the Biblical message actually is!

Today's Messianic Judaism, while tending to recognize the useful place that extra-Biblical literature can play in one's examination of the Bible, its times, and a history of interpretation—considers the canonical Scriptures of Genesis-Revelation to be the final authority. Perhaps extra-Biblical tools should be consulted, and some may even possess a *secondary* level of authority on various issues, but they should never supersede the Bible. However, the broad and increasingly more unstable independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement, does not tend to have the same sort of governor on it. While there are those in the Hebrew Roots movement who will rightly stick to the Biblical canon as being authoritative, there are others who are very much of the mindset that certain texts have been suppressed in history, with knowledge deliberately withheld from them, and that they need to be reinserted into the Bible. The increasing plethora of "restored name versions" that very much are seen to litter the Hebrew Roots movement—in addition to offering eclectic renderings of canonical Biblical passages—are most certainly seen to include additional texts beyond those of the Apocrypha (to generate sales?). The independent Hebrew Roots movement can be seen to be rather haphazard in its employment of extra-Biblical materials.

While collections of extra-Biblical literature such as the Apocrypha, Dead Sea Scrolls, Mishnah and Talmud, and even various early Christian works, all play some role in a detailed examination of Scripture and issues of faith—those who become overly enthusiastic about a study of *1 Enoch* and the Watchers or Nephilim, among other examples, can quickly lose sight of the much larger and more imperative issues presented to us by the Bible itself. It might be slick and exciting for some to want to dig into some *presumed* "forgotten truth" in a text that sits outside of the canon—but which parts of the Biblical canon remain not only untouched, but entirely unread, by far too many of us? When was the last time any of us read through, much less studied, the Book of Obadiah or Paul's letter to Philemon? While it is important for us to be informed as students of Holy Scripture, as to what some of the beliefs and views were of various people who lived within the Biblical period—our theological questions and inquiries must originate out from the Biblical text itself, as we see the Bible interacting with the world. Our theological questions and inquiries should not, in contrast, be imposed onto the Bible from either the world, or extra-Biblical literature.

To What Extent is Our Theology Affected by Extra-Biblical Literature?

While each period of the Biblical record across the ages is different, and encounters the people of God interacting with different sectors and seg-

ments of the broader world—extra-Biblical literature does affect our theology to some important degree. *What were the values of the broader world in which the people of God found themselves?* More frequently than not, our consultation with extra-Biblical literature takes place during our examination of the Apostolic Writings—mainly because there is more material for us to consider from Second Temple Judaism and the Roman Empire, as the further you go back in history, the less extant resources you have. This does not mean, however, that there are not Ancient Near Eastern histories and mythologies, which might aid us in better understanding the Tanach, as there surely are.

As you read Holy Scripture from the beginning, to the arrival of Yeshua of Nazareth and the early Messianic movement—how might you employ various extra-Biblical materials in your studies? The account of Creation and the Flood in Genesis is paralleled by myths such as the Enuma Elish and the Epic of Gilgamesh, but where in Genesis God is witnessed to judge the Earth for its sin, in the Epic of Gilgamesh the gods destroy the Earth because they cannot sleep. When you read the commandments of the Torah as a modern person, you might think that some of their instructions are cruel, harsh, and unenlightened. Perhaps when comparing and contrasting Torah commandments to the Code of Hammurabi, dating from the Eighteenth Century B.C.E., one will see that Moses' Teaching is perhaps not so inflexible. And surely, today's Messianic people can frequently recognize that when reading the Apostolic Writings, that considering various parallels in bodies of literature like the Mishnah, Talmud, or Dead Sea Scrolls has added some insight into difficult sayings of Yeshua. No body of extra-Biblical literature is considered as an authority that overrides Holy Scripture, but such material can aid in making the Scriptures much more clear on various matters.

Because of the open-mindedness of many people within today's Messianic community, when initially encountering extra-Biblical literature, some people are going to give it more importance than is justified. In response, others in wanting to uphold Biblical authority, will see that bodies of extra-Biblical literature are dismissed. Yet, having a fair-minded regard for consulting extra-Biblical literature is necessary—because there are modern and post-modern issues which the Holy Scriptures do not directly or indirectly address, perhaps requiring one to at least consider if other materials from the broad Biblical period may address it.

As you proceed into deeper and more complicated Bible studies, remember that extra-Biblical literature does play **a role** in your interpretation and application. Make sure, however, that your attention and interest are not taken away from the Biblical text itself, and that your studies become more interested in things other than God's Holy Word.