

The Book of Genesis

Lesson 1 - Introduction

Today we start a journey that millions of Hebrews and Christians have taken over the last 3000 years. We are going to study the Torah, which is the first and oldest section of the original Hebrew Bible. Torah: a word that few Christians have ever heard of, and fewer have any idea what it actually is.

The Torah is the Hebrew name for the first 5 books of our Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. We're going to start with Genesis 1:1, and go right on through Deuteronomy 34. We're going to do something a little different, though. We're going to add back in the Jewishness that has been removed over the last 1900 years. Why would we do that? Because it is within the Hebrew/Jewish culture and language that the Torah was created, and its ONLY within that context that we gain proper understanding of what God is telling us. In fact, the entire Bible, OT and NT, was written by Hebrews, and entirely immersed in Hebrew culture. It was Moses, a Hebrew, who received the Torah from God, on Mt. Sinai, around 1400 BC. Though we typically think of Moses receiving only the 2 stone tablets of the 10 commandments from God while leading the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt, in fact the 10 commandments were just a tiny piece of all that Moses received in those several trips up and down that mountain. Moses actually received all that is now the first 5 books of what we call the OT.

Torah is not a word you'll find in our modern bibles. And, it's a tragedy that that is the case. In general, where in the ancient texts the word Torah appeared, today you'll find the word "Law"; this is a sad and somewhat intentional mistranslation, which first happened when the scriptures were translated to Greek, and was fostered by the desire of the early Church to distance itself from the Jews. Torah does not mean "law"; in an overly simplistic sense, it means "teaching" or "instruction." Yet, in a curious irony, even the Jews themselves began to adopt the view that Torah was "Law". And, they began applying the term Torah to all manner of religious writings to the point that Judaism, in general, has become a religion based far more on the doctrines of men, than the Word of God. Let me explain what has happened to the rather sloppy habit of applying the word "Torah" to any and every writing that even refers to Holy Scripture, by beginning with an analogy:

Over a hundred years ago, a company in Atlanta, Georgia wanted to join in the new and growing market for flavored, but non-alcoholic, beverages. Instead of hard liquor, they formulated a tasty addition to the "soft" drink market. It was called Coca-Cola, and it was a hit. Although originally marketed as a stimulant, its real niche was simply as a great tasting beverage. And, as the US began to enter a period of remarkable growth and prosperity, the demand for Coca-Cola skyrocketed, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Coca-Cola so dominated the soft drink market that a curious thing happened: it garnered a nickname: Coke. And, even more appropriate for our purposes is that Coke became so dominant that Coke no longer simply meant a specific brand of Cola drink, it came to be a name applied generically to ALL soft drinks. A common conversation you might have engaged in yourself sounds something like this: Husband, “ I’m thirsty, let’s stop and get a Coke”. Wife, “OK, sounds good to me”. Husband, “Good, what type of Coke would you like?” Wife, “I’d like a Root Beer”. Sound familiar?

Now, any American would perfectly understand that dialogue and not find it at all odd. They know full well that a Coca-Cola and a Root Beer is not the same thing. But, they also know that “Coke” in our modern vernacular **can** simply mean ANY soft drink, and so there is no trouble getting the meaning across.

Torah is the same way. Originally, the Hebrews called those 5 books given to Moses “Torah”. As centuries passed, two other groups of Hebrew writings were created and deemed to be “of God” and, therefore, scripture: the prophets and the writings. The Prophets are books like Amos, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jonah; the Writings included a variety of books such as Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Ruth. Even though the Hebrews now had three separately defined groups of scriptures: 1) K’tuvim (meaning Writings), 2) Nevi’im (meaning Prophets), and Torah (that given to Moses on Mt. Sinai), in common everyday conversation, at some point they began referring to ANY of the holy scriptures as Torah. So, the original Torah from Moses was “Torah”, and all the newer scripture was also generically referred to as “Torah”. That’s not so hard to understand, is it?

But, wait, it gets more complicated. During the same time that the Torah, K’tuvim, and Nevi’im were created and being added to, another set of authoritative religious thought was being created, and this was called Tradition. It was also known as Oral Law, Oral Tradition, or Oral Torah (Oral because, rather than being written down, for a long time it was handed down verbally). In common day Christian-eze we could equate Church Doctrine with Hebrew Tradition. In other words, doctrine is not scripture, its our denominational beliefs and rulings and interpretations **of** scripture.....it’s the same idea with Hebrew Tradition. So, as time rolled along, the Hebrew doctrine, these Oral Traditions, Oral Torah, started carrying more and more weight among the religious leaders. Eventually, in common conversation among Jews, Torah came to mean anything that had to do with the entire body of scripture *and* the entire body of Traditions; a rather unfortunate blurring of the original meaning for sure.

The Hebrews of Christ’s day, and those of hundreds of years earlier, well understood what each other meant when they discussed “Torah” among themselves; they knew by the context of the conversation when Torah meant the original scriptures given to Moses, and when it meant any of the other religious literature and rulings. Unfortunately, we cannot overlook that fact that by Christ’s day, Traditions had become more important than God’s Word. Later, as gentiles entered the picture following Christ’s death, these same gentiles who were ignorant of the intricacies of Jewish culture and the Hebrew language, got confused about “Torah”; and even though Bible scholars have somewhat straightened it out over the years, Church leaders and teachers have been slow to pick it up.

Today, what we Christians call the OT, Jews call The Tanakh. Tanakh is an invented word: it takes the T from Torah, the N from Nevi'im, and the K from K'tuvim adds a couple of vowel sounds and presto.....Tanakh. The Tanakh and the OT are exactly the same thing, except in some cases the books are arranged in slightly different order.

Over the centuries, the Traditions that had been handed down by word of mouth were eventually formalized and written down. And, although these thoughts and rulings of the ancient Rabbis are still held in great esteem, this body of thought is constantly undergoing additions. The best way to think of all these Traditions is as commentary by religious leaders; commentary that consists of rulings and teachings. The fully compiled works of Tradition, or Oral Torah, became what is now called the Talmud. And, to further complicate matters, there are two major competing versions of Talmud: The Babylonian Talmud, and the Jerusalem Talmud. Each are enormous works that comprise many volumes.

So, let us be clear: The Tanakh, which is sometimes called the Hebrew Bible, is simply another name for our current OT. The Torah is but the first 5 books of the Tanakh (OT). The Talmud is NOT Holy Scripture at all. Rather, it's a huge gathering of Jewish religious commentary.

One of curious conditions of modern Christianity is that the OT has been all but forgotten. The common statement from the church today is, we are a NT Church. In other words, the implication is that either the OT is not for us, its for another people.....namely the Jews.....or it's for a past time.....or in seminary talk, a past dispensation. So the relationship set up between the OT and NT is that the OT is obsolete...interesting but irrelevant history.... and the NT is current and contemporary. Nothing could be further from the truth.

First of all, the title of OT is purely man-made, and is a relatively modern title given to that portion of the Bible. There is NO SUCH THING as the Old Testament as far as the Bible is concerned. The words Old Testament NEVER appear in the Bible. The idea behind the names of what we've come to think of as the two halves of the Bible is that the OT refers to the covenants made between God and Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. And, the NT refers to the covenants between God and mankind in general through Christ. So, if one is inclined to think that way, it would be better to think of the Biblical division as earlier and latter testaments, rather than old and new. And, by the way, testaments means covenants. They're synonymous.

See, the newer ones have not replaced the original covenants, but some have been transformed. Even Christ Himself when asked if the "Law" (the Torah) was now null and void with His coming, answered in about as forceful way as one can imagine.

Look in **MATT 5:17-19**

^{NIV} Matthew 5:17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Anyone who breaks one of

the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Christ did not come to do away with, or abolish, the Torah, He came to complete it. Not in the sense of complete as to finish, and finish in the sense of end; in your Bibles probably “fulfill” is the word used instead of complete. The Greek used here is the word “pleroo”. Go check any good concordance and it will tell you it means to fill up, to accomplish. But, in our modern English vernacular **fulfill** gives the sense of something that is ended. Rather, the true meaning of fulfill is to “fill full” or “fill up”. Pleroo would be a good word to tell the attendant at the gas station (if there WERE such things anymore).....because it has the sense of “fill’er up”; Christ came to fill full the Torah of meaning, or bring it to its fullest extent. When you ask the gas attendant to fill up your tank, you certainly don’t mean to bring your tank or your gasoline to an end, do you? You mean to give you all he can. That gives you an idea of what the word pleroo means.

The two Testaments, earlier and latter, OT and NT, work together. You cannot separate them as has been attempted for centuries. The OT is the foundation of the Bible. The Old Testament sets the stage for the NT. The Old Testament lays down all the premises by which we understand the New Testament. It’s The Bible, Act One. The NT is formed based on the OT; it’s a continuation of the OT. It’s Bible, Act Two. In fact, about 50% of the statements in the NT ARE the OT. They are completely intertwined. It’s pretty tough to read any book, see any play, and watch any movie by starting in the middle. We may well get something out of it. But, we are just as likely to take the part we see in the wrong context, and come to some conclusions that are several degrees off course. That’s what we do when we attempt to understand the Bible by beginning with, and not going beyond, the NT.

But, let me tell you something that you might have never considered: the Bible that Jesus, then the early Disciples, then the Gospel writers, Paul, and even John the Revelator studied and taught from was the OT. Let that sink in for a moment. There was NO NT when ANY writer of the Bible was alive. The ONLY Bible that existed for these men...and for Christ...was the Hebrew Tanakh, our OT. Any and all references to Holy Scripture by Jesus or the Apostles were to the OT. The admonition we get in ^{NAS} **2 Timothy 3:16 “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;”** was specifically referring to the Hebrew Bible because there was no such thing as a New Testament in that era. While I have no problem at all in accepting the NT as holy, inspired of God, and entirely belonging in our Bibles... that statement from Paul to Timothy was in no way referring to something that did not even exist yet. It was not meant to be prophetic...Paul was not speaking to a future time. He was speaking about the Torah, the writings, and the prophets. Paul had no idea that several decades after his death, that there indeed would be ADDITIONAL writings added to the holy canon of the Bible...writings that we call The New Testament.

In fact, in it’s most correct application.... and it would help us when reading the New Testament if we could grasp this...Biblically speaking, the word **Scripture** or **Holy Scripture** ONLY refers to what we call the Old Testament. The ONLY Scripture that exists today is the

Old Testament. The New Testament, while inspired and of God, is just that...the New Testament. We would gain far more understanding of the Bible if we could dispense with the term Old Testament and call it what Jesus and all the apostles called it..... the Scriptures. So, by all rights, our modern Bibles consist of two portions: the Scriptures and the New Testament.

I hope this makes the impact on you that I intended. While it has been the mode of the church for centuries upon centuries to imply, if not outright state, that the OT is of no value to a modern Believer.....that the OT principles no longer apply since the advent of Christ..... it was the OT that the original group of 12 disciples of Christ taught from....it was what Jesus Himself taught and quoted and venerated so highly.....it was what the Apostles taught the Gospel message from. And, that is because the Gospel message is an OT message. That's right, the complete Gospel is spoken of in the OT. Jesus didn't write a new gospel..... He simply fulfilled that which was previously written about.....by the writers of the OT.

Listen to what Jesus says in John 5:46-47..... ^{NAS} **John 5:46 "For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me.⁴⁷ "But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?"**

Saying ***if you believed Moses*** was just a common way of speaking in that day....it was an idiom..... ; it meant "if you believed the Torah". Moses, the Law, and the Torah were all interchangeable terms to the Jewish people. But the point is, Jesus says " HE (MOSES) WROTE OF ME". Even more, Christ was explaining that if we don't believe or even KNOW what Moses wrote....and it was Moses who wrote the Torah..... how are we to comprehend what Jesus was saying?

The OT, and the Torah we'll study, are full of references to the coming Messiah and the spiritual principles that He will bring to their highest level of significance. I'll point this out as we come across them, and connect the dots.

Now, as the OT is the foundation of the NT, the Torah is the foundation of the entire Bible. Even someone who has never studied the Bible is aware that Genesis is the story of beginnings.....of God creating the world. How do we start to study anything, let alone trying to comprehend God, if we don't begin at the beginning? And, that's just what we're going to do in this Torah Class.

Now, let me set up a few ground rules. That is, the basis on which our Torah study will proceed. First, I am not here to persuade anyone about the truth of the Holy Scripture. While seekers are most welcome here, this is not a seekers class whereby we attempt to show that the Bible is the Word of God. We begin with the assumption that it IS God's Word and that it is true.....all of it. If the Bible is not true, then we might as well all pack up and go home because we're wasting our time. Therefore, I have no intention of justifying the Holy Scriptures by offering scientific proofs about God creating the world; science is utterly inferior to God. I'm not going to explain that maybe a huge frozen comet brought all the water necessary to create the oceans. Or why the Bible doesn't precisely mention Dinosaurs. Or whether the Big Bang Theory is correct. In other words, this is not a class on Creation Theory. I may touch on this VERY lightly, incorporating some interesting facts, but only by way of explanation, not trying **to**

prove anything. God created everything from nothing. He did it exactly the way He wanted to and is fully able to do so.

Second, we are going to read every single word of the Torah. We're not going to skip anything....not a single verse. I will read the verses out loud, and ask you to follow along in your Bibles; these lessons are being recorded and since the Holy Scripture is what this is all about, I need to be sure it can be heard on the recording. We'll move fairly rapidly some times, and other times we'll go much slower. At some points we'll stop and actually have a lesson that could last the entire hour on a specific topic.....such as the Menorah, or the Tabernacle, or a couple of other things that are of vital importance because of the times we are in, yet are rarely ever visited in the modern Church. This is an extremely in-depth study that, I promise you, will challenge your thinking.....and build your faith.

Third, I will read, mostly, out of the Complete Jewish Bible. One reason for this is that it is NOT the official Bible translation for any denomination that I'm aware of. And, that is intentional. This class is not about teaching denominational traditions and doctrines. Whether you're Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, Lutheran, or Jewish, you'll find common ground in Torah Class. Let me be perfectly clear that you do NOT have to have this same Bible in order to do just fine in this class.....any competent, standard version that you have is good. However, the words may be slightly different; particularly because many of the names of people and places in the Bible I'll read from give the actual original Hebrew name, rather than the English name. This may also sound slightly different than your version because the Complete Jewish Bible is taken from the original Hebrew texts. Many translations today are taken from the Septuagint, which is a Greek translation of the Hebrew, done over 2 centuries before Christ was born. If you prefer, see me after class and I'll tell you how you can get the same Bible I'll be reading from. But, let me stress, it is absolutely NOT necessary. That said, if you do NOT have this Bible version, and can afford the \$25 to get one, I think you'll find it a good addition to your study materials.

Fourth, at times I will show you certain words in Hebrew that we need to examine, because they add a great deal to our understanding. Oftentimes I've found that looking at the Hebrew is like going from B&W TV to color; what you see in B&W is not wrong, it just doesn't give you the depth that color does. What you'll soon learn in Torah Class is that Hebrew has certain words that simply don't have nice, neat English equivalents. The word "Torah" is itself a good example of that, as is the common Hebrew expression "Shalom". But, those are just the tip of the iceberg. The other thing to realize is that just as many important Hebrew words in the Scriptures do not have a good English equivalent, they also do not have a good GREEK equivalent. So, when the Bible was translated from Hebrew to Greek, then from Greek to Latin, then from Latin to English, much depth and understanding was lost. We're going to do our best to try and recover some of that depth.

Fifth, my goal is that we have continuity. When studied properly, the OT flows like a beautiful river. Too often the OT is presented as a series of interesting stories, and it can be hard to put it together. Actually, the OT is very much (though not entirely) in chronological order and, if I may make a generalization, a good way to look at the OT is as God presenting Himself to us, but through the history of Israel. Let me say that again; the OT is very much a history lesson.

It's a history of Israel. It's the history of the Jews. And, it is our Christian history because it was out of the Hebrew Bible, culture, and religion that Christianity came. Remember, Christ was a Jew. Born to Jewish parents, raised in the Holy Lands, He was an observant Jew in every way. Most of the great stories and events about Christ in the NT occurred during the required pilgrimages to Jerusalem for every Jewish male, as called out by the Laws of Moses. And, naturally, Christ obeyed. Even the first several thousand believers of Jesus as Lord and Savior were all Jews.

Sixth, we need to understand that the Torah is first, and primarily, a manual for living the life God intended for mankind to live. The 3 million or so Israelites that Moses was leading through the desert wilderness, to the Promised Land, had come from 4 centuries of life in Egypt. They were a rabble that had thoroughly opted for the ways of the Egyptians. By giving Moses the Torah, God explained to Israel the beginning of everything, who He was, why the world had arrived at the corrupt place it had, and how to live a righteous life. What is a righteous life? It is YOU living in harmony with God. These things have NOT changed.

Seventh, the Torah, as is all of the Bible, is literal. It means what it says, and it says what it means. But, let me explain what literal means when dealing with the Bible: just as in our own conversations, at times we use idioms or puns, we use sayings that only those in our common culture can understand. I like the example of "go fly a kite". That is, somebody asks you to do something for him or her, and you respond, "go fly a kite". Now, all Americans know what that means. It means, in its most basic sense, "no". Further, it can mean that "you have no interest at all in what they're proposing" and perhaps even question their sanity. But, if I respond with "go fly a kite" to a Frenchman or a Brazilian, they will be rather perplexed with the answer. It makes no sense to them. What does "kite-flying" have to do with anything they just asked me about? It's the same way with many biblical Hebrew words and phrases. They carried a perfectly clear meaning at one time, but to our 21st century ears, sometimes it doesn't compute.

So, literal does not necessarily mean "word for word". If we took "go fly a kite" word-for-word, we'd be in trouble. Literal, therefore, means the literal MEANING intended within the context of the culture it was created. And, in the case of the bible, the culture was Hebrew, and that culture changed and evolved dramatically over the 1500 years the writings of the Bible occurred. That is to say, the Hebrew culture at the time of Abraham bore no resemblance to Hebrew culture in the time of Moses, and that bore no resemblance to Hebrew culture in the time of Christ. Most often, the literal meaning in the Bible IS word-for-word. The trick is that one must understand the Hebrew culture in the various eras of the Bible to understand what is being communicated. And, of course, there is a certain amount of symbolism in the Bible. And, there is poetry, and there is straightforward history, and there are parables, and several other literary devices as well. But, symbolism is generally pretty easy to identify. Here's what I'm getting at: modern gentile Christianity has tended to treat much of the really hard to understand parts of the OT as allegorical statements, when in fact they are not allegory. There is a little allegory in the OT, but very little, and I'll identify it when we come across it. Generally speaking, the problem has been a total misunderstanding of what was being said, due to reluctance to research and study ancient Hebrew culture. Rather, there's been a not-so-subtle attempt over the centuries to twist and turn the Bible into something that agrees with

some pre-conceived denominational doctrine. We're not going to do that here.

One other thing about literal. Many phrases in the Bible are *both* literal and symbolic. That is they mean exactly what they say, and on another level, they are also symbolic of something larger than itself. You'll also find this rather inscrutable "duality" occurring with biblical prophecy; because many prophecies happen, and then they happen AGAIN! Rather than going in to examples, I will try to point some of these out to you as we progress.

Eighth. Torah Class will not answer every question you have about God. There are many matters in the Bible that are simply left open ended. Some matters are not addressed at all, and others are incomplete. A good example is the work of the Holy Spirit.....in Hebrew, the Ruach Hakodesh. The Holy Spirit is mentioned very matter-of-factly a number of times in the OT, but there is very little information about Him that is given. Much of what we think we know about the Holy Spirit are men's assumptions; conclusions drawn from what little Biblical information that does exist about that subject. This is what I call, doctrine. I choose to let these mysteries remain mysteries. Oh, at times we'll speculate.....but it will be presented as speculation or opinion, not absolute truth. Sometimes that speculation will be in the form of what the great Hebrew sages of ancient times thought about a particular subject.....in fact, I'll incorporate that kind of information on a number of occasions because, if nothing else, it explains how the Hebrew mind operated during certain eras.

Now, get ready for one of the most intense and exciting rides of your life. A man in his 70's who has been coming to Torah Class regularly for a long time.....a man who is a long time Christian and former missionary.....told me recently that he has learned more about who God IS in the last few months than at any time in his life. What you get from all this is up to you. I hope you commit the coming journey you have in studying God's Torah to much prayer and personal dedication. I believe you'll find it life-changing.

See you next week, when we'll start with Genesis 1:1.