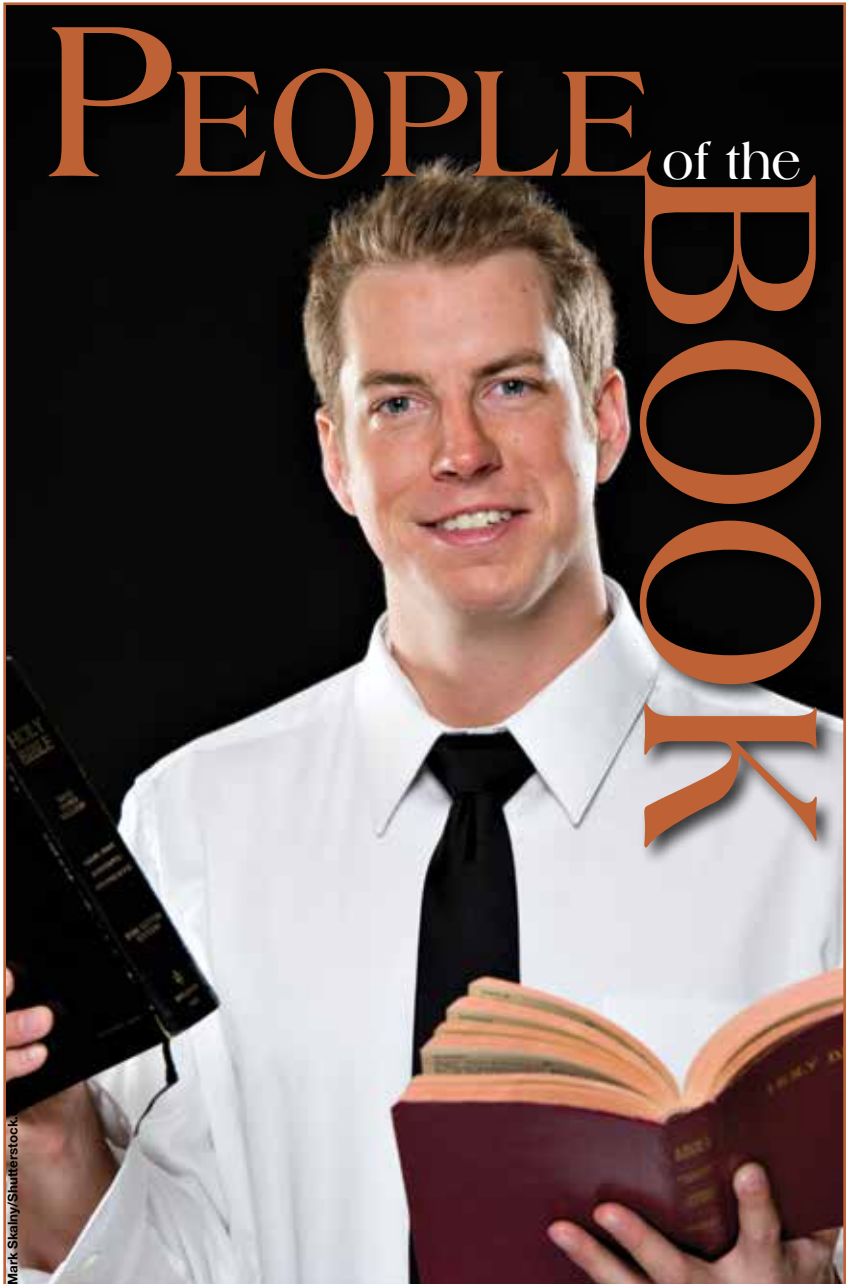


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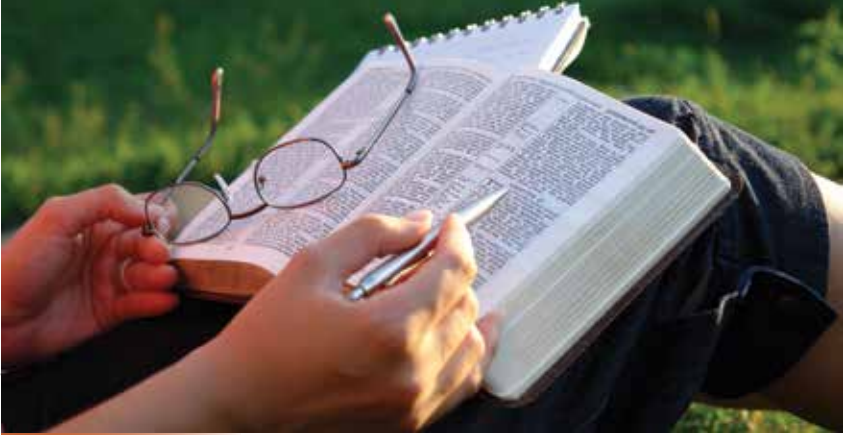


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Why is the Best-selling Book of All Times Seldom Read?

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Rev. Rebecca Brimmer



Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

RECENTLY I WAS INVITED TO SPEAK

with Rabbi Shlomo Riskin at the Bible Lands Museum on the topic of Bible illiteracy. The evening was titled, “Why the Best-selling Book of All Times is Seldom Read.” For more than an hour, we talked about the importance of reading the Bible. Jews and Christians are called the People of the Book. How sad that many don’t even read it! However, in our opening statements, both Rabbi Riskin and I questioned the assertion that the Bible is seldom read. Certainly, in the Orthodox Jewish world, the *Torah* (Gen.–Mal.) is read each year in synagogues and in homes, as well as the Psalms, and portions of the prophets and history books (writings).

A 2013 Barna Group Report on the Status of the Bible (commissioned by the American Bible Society), shows that 13% of Americans read the Bible daily and another 13% read it more than four times a week. If that statistic is accurate, then 26% read the Bible very regularly! That is exciting! Imagine more than 80,000,000 Americans are reading God’s Word regularly. Many in the Evangelical and Protestant worlds read through the Bible on an annual basis. Our Chairman, Rev. Jess Gibson, is an example of a pastor who encourages his congregants to read the Book in its entirety every year. He publishes a beautiful Bible-reading calendar and distributes it to the entire congregation each January.

Yet, in spite of all this good news, the Barna Report also shows a decline in Bible reading in the United States. Let's look at a few questions.

1. Does it matter what version of the Bible we read?
2. Does it matter *how* we read the Bible?
3. Why don't more people read the Bible?

The Bible We Choose Is Important

One of the topics we discussed was translation. Rabbi Riskin strongly advocates reading the Bible in Hebrew, its original language! Of course we recognize that is not entirely practical for everyone. It takes years to learn a language and not everyone has the ability to do so. But, according to Rav Riskin, reading a translation is actually reading an interpretation. Colorfully he said, "Reading a translation is like kissing a woman through a veil." This, of course, is not entirely satisfying!

In 1991, my husband Tom and I decided to read the entire Bible together out loud. We alternated reading from two different translations. Tom was reading the New International Version (NIV) and I was reading the New American Standard Bible (NASB). We were shocked at how different these translations were. Every time we noticed a significant disparity, we looked it up in the original language. To our amazement the NASB was always closer to the original. That was my first understanding of the contrast between a literal or essentially literal translation and a functional (dynamic) translation.

Anyone who has learned another language comes to realize that until you think in the new language you cannot be fluent. You discover that no translation is sufficient to full understanding. There are words, ways of thinking, and idioms that are difficult to translate. Once I started learning modern Hebrew, I



The book of Joel in Hebrew

found many such phrases and words that could not be easily translated to English. This observation has given me a greater understanding of the difficulties of conveying the actual meaning of the Scripture as understood by the original hearers. They spoke the same language, understood the idioms, culture and examples in the Scripture. Today’s audience consists of people who don’t speak the biblical languages, are living at least 2,000 years after Scripture was written and in locations far removed from those described in the Bible.

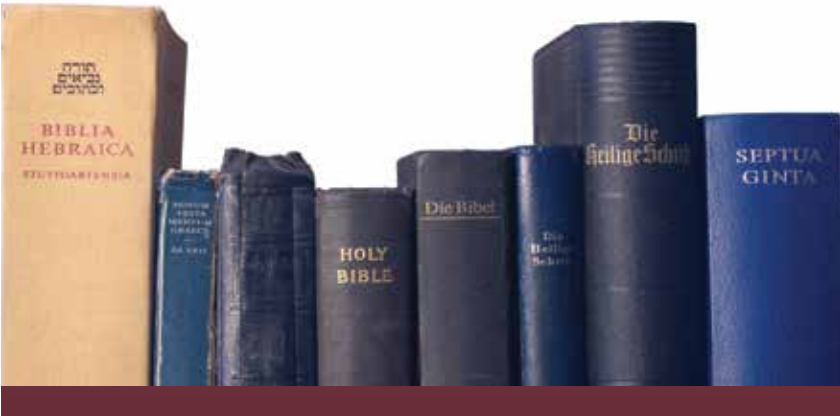
Basically, there are two streams of thought when it comes to Bible translation. An essentially literal translation attempts to translate word for word, while a dynamic equivalent translates thought for thought.

So, how should a Bible translator deal with the fact that a “word for word” literal translation may be difficult for those in the receptor language to understand? This is the very reason why many translation committees have used a dynamic “thought for thought” translation process. And why others have gone to a paraphrase.

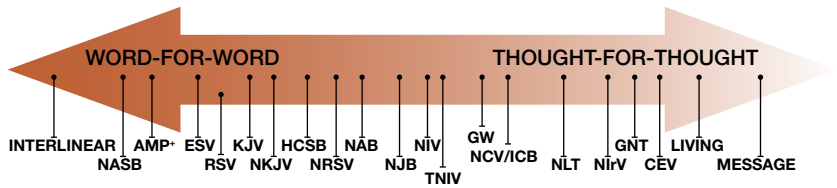
Superiority of a Direct (Literal) Translation

In my opinion, even though direct or literal translations may at times be difficult to understand, they are preferable. It is almost impossible for the committees who attempt to translate “thought for thought” to avoid adding commentary to the Scripture. As Leland Ryken in his book, *The Word of God in English* says, “The root problem here is that the translators have blurred the line between translation and interpretation.”

Fidelity to the original text is often adhered to loosely in the dynamic translations. As the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* states, “Excessive zeal for modernizing the language of the Bible may lead to a low degree of fidelity to the original. Such a zeal may lead translators to take liberties which they should not with statements of the original.” Theological bias may also have a bearing on how a translation committee renders a given text.



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Furthermore, in a direct translation the voice of the biblical author, including his specific style, is retained. Because the translators endeavor to keep the literary style, the end result is a Bible that is reflective of the inspired original. The belief that the Bible is God-breathed as He inspired men to write the words, not the thoughts, is honored in the direct translation and may be disregarded by those who use the “thought for thought” method.

Literal or essentially literal translations endeavor to conserve the actual words of the original as much as possible in the receptor language, which results in a relatively stable text. Ryken points out an example from Psalm 139:5a, which is nearly identical in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), English Standard Version (ESV), NIV, and very similar in the King James Version (KJV), NASB and New King James Version (NKJV):

“You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.”

In contrast those translators who want to communicate the thought of the original result in far different texts:

“You are all around me on every side; you protect me with your power.”
(Good News Bible)

“You keep close guard behind and before me and place your hand upon me.”
(Revised English Bible)

“You both precede and follow me. You place your hand of blessing upon me.”
(New Living Translation)

“... with your powerful arm you protect me from every side.”
(Contemporary English Version)

Ryken comments, “Within the logic of dynamic equivalence they are all commendable for doing exactly what the ‘thought-for-thought’ philosophy prescribes: The translators decided what they thought the imagery of God’s hemming in and placing his hand over the speaker means, and they then dispensed with the actual words of what the original says, choosing their own words to express the thought... this simply points up the problem of dynamic equivalent translations—namely, that there are no linguistic controls on the translation...dynamic equivalence is based on an elementary confusion of translation with interpretation.”

Undoubtedly dynamic equivalent translations have made it more difficult for English readers to know what the Bible actually says in the original languages. To determine whether your favorite Bible is a literal or dynamic translation, go to: <http://www.mardel.com/bible-translation-guide.aspx>

Inerrancy

Inerrancy is the theological term for the concept that the Bible is without error. A related theological term is infallibility, which is the idea that Scripture is trustworthy and that God's truth is contained within. Harold O.J. Brown, a contributor in the book, *The Origin of the Bible*, says:

The concept of infallibility addresses itself to one's personal knowledge of God and assurance of salvation. Inerrancy is concerned more specifically with the accurate transmission of the details of revelation...Those who believe in an inerrant Bible believe in an infallible Bible. The converse is not true. Although much depends on how "error" is defined, some scholars argue that the Bible can be infallible (in accomplishing God's purpose) without having to be free of error. They propose a more "dynamic" doctrine of infallibility that would continue to operate even if biblical errors were discovered.



A set of scrolls comprising the entire *Tanakh*

The translation committee who is not convinced of the inerrancy of the Scripture will more likely make choices that deviate from the original.

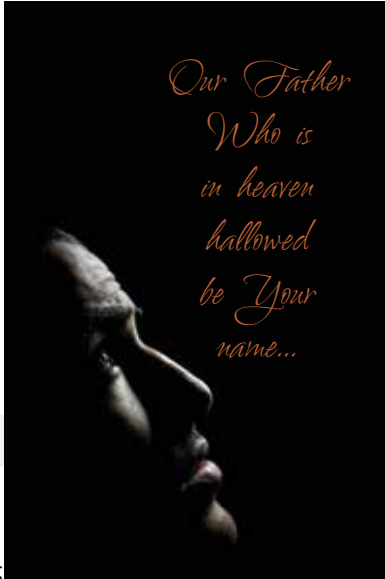
The *Tanakh* (Gen.–Mal.) is a remarkable document that has been carefully preserved by Jewish scribes, through many centuries. You can visit the Shrine of the Book Museum in Jerusalem and see a 2,000-year-old book of Isaiah. When compared to the modern-day Hebrew book of Isaiah, it is virtually the same! Scribes give careful attention so that even small extensions on letters of the script are retained. Yeshua (Jesus) referred to this custom when He said, "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matt. 5:18).

How We Read and Interpret the Bible is Important

Let's look at Yeshua's view of the Scriptures: "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets [summation of the *Tanakh*]. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least

of these commandments, and teaches men to do so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:17–19). What great respect Yeshua had for the Word (words) of God presented to us in Scripture. It seems clear from His reference to the jot and tittle (the smallest elements of the Hebrew letters) that Yeshua was a literalist.

During Rabbi Riskin’s opening remarks he said that prayer is our speaking to God and the Bible is God speaking to us. How much we need to hear the words of the Lord in this day—the actual words!



In early Christian history, there arose a significant number of Church fathers who interpreted the Bible in an allegorical fashion. According to Paul

Lee Tan in his book, *Literal Interpretation of the Bible*, “They regarded the literal words as a vehicle only for arriving at the hidden, more spiritual, and more profound sense of Scripture.” Tan explains further, “The allegorists not only affirmed the concept of multiple sense in Scripture, but also decreed that the hidden, deeper sense is the *real* one. To cite a few examples: The journey of Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran is interpreted as the imaginary trip of a Stoic philosopher who leaves the sensual understanding and arrives finally at the senses. The two pence given by the Good Samaritan to the innkeeper has the hidden meanings of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. [And] the River Euphrates means the outflow of manners and is not an actual literal river in Mesopotamia.”

Dr Amos Millard, in his book *Literal Interpretation of the Christian and Jewish Scriptures*, wrote about this and the resulting tragic outcome for the Jewish people. “The point in church history where the Church departed from literal interpretation of the Scriptures was the point at which heresy began to develop in certain segments of the Christian Church.

“These heresies became the foundations for replacement theology, which in turn, created a mind-set that contributed to such horrendous miscarriages of justice in history as the inquisitions, the pogroms, and even Hitler’s Holocaust. These were carried out against the Jewish people because of a warped theology, which in turn was based on a warped hermeneutical system that twisted the Scriptures

The Word of God is powerful.

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”

2 Timothy 3:16



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beyond recognition. Hence, behind the twisted cross of Nazism was in some measure a twisted theology, and behind the twisted theology was a twisted hermeneutical system—a system which denies the literal interpretation of the Bible.”

Tan points out in his book, *Literal Interpretation of the Bible*, that “because of the excesses of allegorization produced in Church history, most conservative interpreters today have rejected it. While this is commendable, the same interpreters usually continue to allegorize the prophetic portions of the Bible. The basic technique and approach of allegorists of general Scripture and spiritualizers of prophetic Scripture are similar. Thus, allegorists see Abraham as a Stoic philosopher while spiritualizers see Israel as the Church. Both use the same approach to God’s Word and assume the existence of senses other than the literal.”

I believe that the Bible is God’s message to us and should be understood literally wherever possible. He didn’t hand us a cryptic puzzle that few can understand. As an 8-year-old child I read the Bible through for the first time.

While I can’t say I understood it all, I certainly understood much of what God was saying. Let’s assume that God knew what He was saying, and He wasn’t trying to hide it from His followers. Even when the text is obviously symbolic, if we read on we will usually find that the Bible gives us the interpretation.

The Word of God is powerful and according to Paul’s letter to Timothy, “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*” (2 Tim. 3:16). We need to allow the Lord to use His Word (words) to change our lives. Sadly, many look at the Word of God through the lens of their lives and philosophies rather than the other way around. When our philosophy doesn’t match the Bible—guess who is wrong!

Recently, we see some of these issues playing out in Israel. Some Palestinian Christians are claiming that Jesus wasn’t a Jew—He was a Palestinian. They are allowing their worldview to determine how they interpret the Bible. They also teach that God has no interest in the Jewish people; only those who accept Jesus as the Messiah. They don’t recognize the fulfillment of biblical prophecies concerning the return of the Jewish people to the Land, even though virtually every

biblical prophet talked about it. In their view, Jesus the Palestinian is much more interested in the suffering of the Palestinian people than in the blessing of the Jewish people. It is a slippery slope. One such Palestinian Christian teacher, when confronted with the inconsistencies between his theology and the Bible, told one of our leaders, "We have a problem with the Bible."

At Bridges for Peace, we choose to bless the Jewish people and stand with the nation of Israel because we understand from the plain and literal interpretation of the Bible that God is fulfilling His ancient promises in our lifetime. As Yeshua said, "till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matt. 5:18). The last time I checked, heaven and earth are still in place and God is still in the process of fulfilling His promises to Israel. Does that mean that the Arab residents of this land should be treated unjustly? Absolutely not! We encourage the people of Israel to reach out with justice to the non-Jewish people in the Land.



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Have We Lost the Fear of the Lord?

Why do fewer people read their Bibles today than in the past? Is it because they find it hard to understand? Those who write paraphrases of the Bible (like *The Message*) seem to think so. Is it because modern educators teach that the Bible is full of errors? Certainly this higher criticism has played a part. I believe that there are many factors. We are in a time of history where truth (or absolute truth) is under attack. The mantra of the age seems to be tolerance, and the god of tolerance demands that we give up our ideas of absolute truth. The Bible, however, is not a book of tolerance. It is a book of truth. In our modern societies we seem to be inclined to sacrifice that truth on the altar of tolerance. The Bible says that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Prov. 9:10).

The *Talmud* (rabbinic commentary on Jewish tradition and the Hebrew Scriptures) says, "a man who possesses learning without Fear of the Lord is like

The Bible:

- is not a book about man defining his own cultural mores
- is not a book of tolerance
- is not a book written to match our personal philosophy
- is not a book that is a cryptic puzzle few can understand
- is a book of God's message to us
- is a book of power, for instruction in righteousness
- is a book of truth
- is a book about the beginning of wisdom, the fear of God
- is a lamp unto our feet and a light to our path.

the man who has been entrusted with the keys of an inner court but not with the keys of the outer court; how is he to enter?"

Charles Spurgeon spoke of the fear of the Lord as the centrality of the Christian experience. In their May 2009 Teaching Letter titled, "The Fear of the Lord," Peter Robertson and Cheryl Hauer wrote, "As Christians, our understanding of this concept comes to us through the Hebraic foundations of our faith.

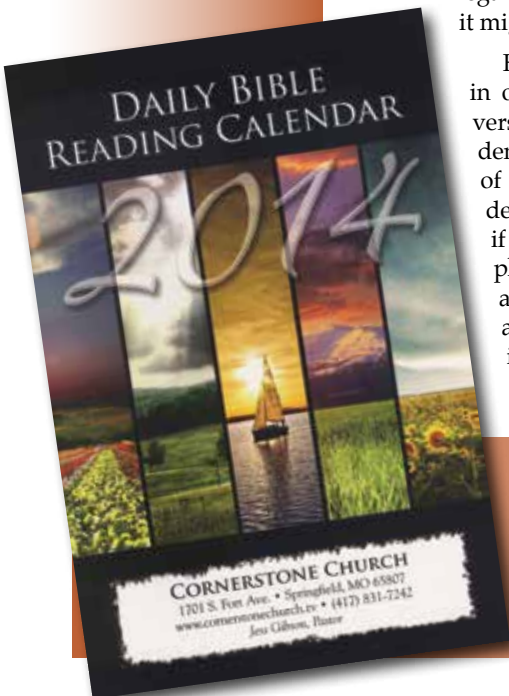
"The Fear of the Lord is such a critical concept that the Jewish sages have dedicated much teaching and writing to the topic. They tell us that when a person leaves this world, God asks him questions including:

1. Were you honest in business?
2. Did you study *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)?
3. Did you wait for the Messiah?

"If a person has spent his life in faithful devotion to the Lord and can answer 'Yes' to all of His questions, he will then be asked, 'Did you live in the Fear of the Lord?' If the answer is 'No,' he will be told that all of his previous answers are worthless. Without the Fear of the Lord, there is no accomplishment, regardless of how righteous or significant it might have seemed."

Have we lost the fear of the Lord in our modern world? In a recent conversation with Dr. Dennis Frey, President of Master's International School of Divinity, I commented on the moral decay of American society. I asked him if the moral climate was rooted in the philosophy of the sixties when free love, and drug use proliferated. His answer at first surprised me. Dr. Frey said that it went back to Darwin's theory of evolution. When a seemingly viable

Rev. Jess Gibson is an example of a pastor who encourages his congregants to read the Book in its entirety every year. He publishes a beautiful Bible reading calendar and distributes it to the entire congregation each January.



theory of the existence of life was conceived which did not require a creator, man no longer needed to acknowledge God. If God is not the creator, the next question logically concerns His existence. Many in modern society have asked these questions and come to the conclusion that they don't need to live according to archaic rules written in an old book. If there is no fear of the Lord, then man begins to define his own cultural mores. We see the results around us.

Prayer for the future

It is my prayer that the people of God will sincerely look at these issues. I am convinced that, more than ever, we need to walk in the fear of the Lord. We need to pick up His Word (words) and ask Him to help us walk in His ways. I pray that we will not interpret the world through our own ideas, but will change our world-views to align with the Word of God. He is calling for a moral, holy people who will follow His Word. As the Psalmist said, *"Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path. I have sworn and confirmed that I will keep your righteous judgments."* (Ps. 119:105–106). Yeshua said, *"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven"* (Matt. 5:16). May the world see a difference in the people that follow the Lord.

Blessings from Israel,
Rev. Rebecca J. Brimmer
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the FEAR of the LORD is the beginning of WISDOM

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Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

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