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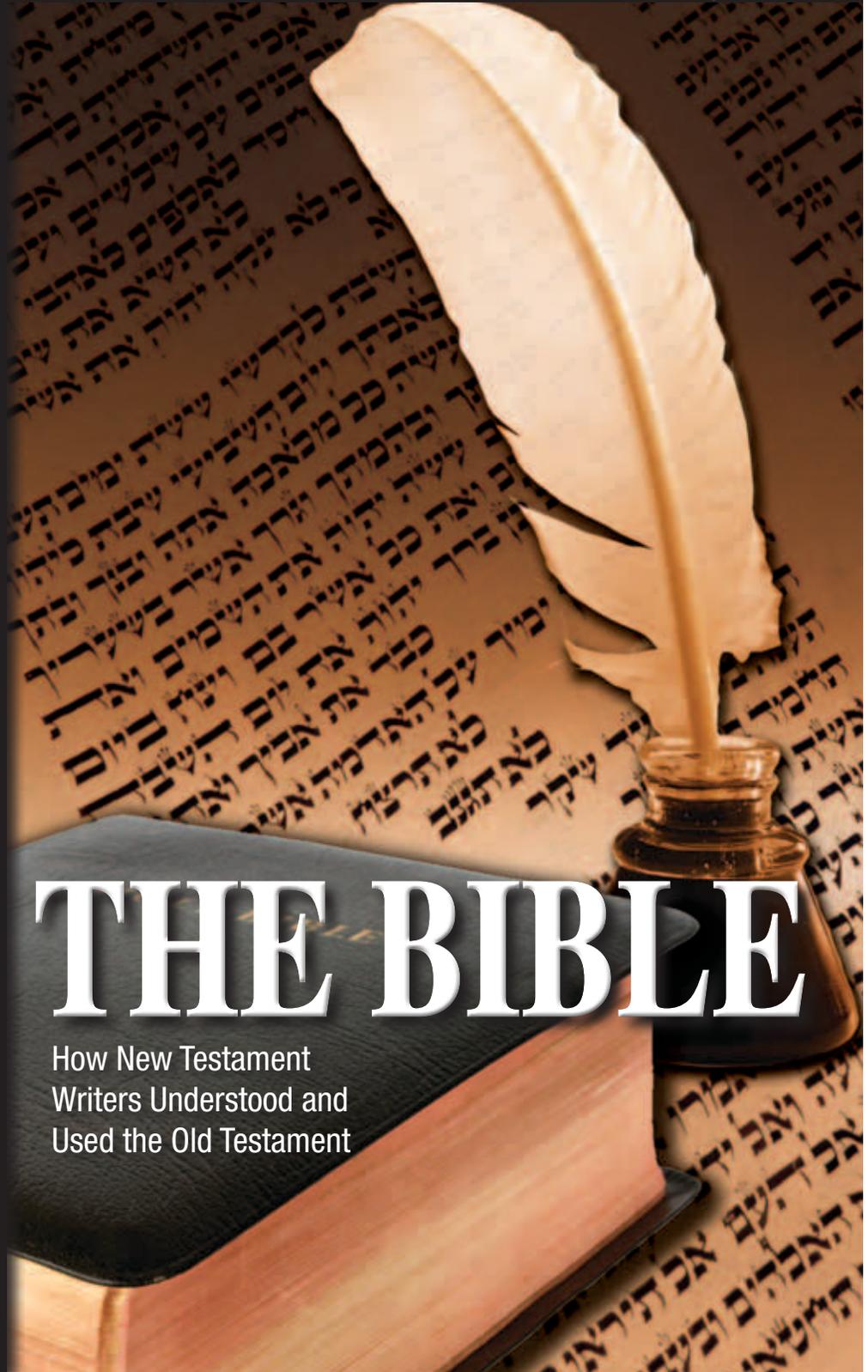
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BRIDGES FOR PEACE

Israel Teaching Letter

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THE BIBLE

How New Testament
Writers Understood and
Used the Old Testament

THE BIBLE

How New Testament Writers Understood and Used the Old Testament



WHAT VALUE IS THERE TO UNDERSTANDING

how New Testament writers understood, interpreted, and applied Old Testament (*Tanach*) texts? In many Christian circles, the Old Testament has been neglected or, worse, caused great harm and error to the Church and contributed to centuries of Christian anti-Semitism and Supersessionism (the teaching that the Church replaced Israel or the new covenant replaced God's covenant with Israel). So, how were the apostles and New Testament writers shaped by the Old Testament, and how did they apply it to their writings? How does this impact our approach and response to the Scriptures?

A brief look at the terms “Old” and “New” Testament is in order. Concerning the Old Testament, Christian author Marvin Wilson notes: “...the Church would have been far better off if it had decided from the outset to use a name such as the ‘First’ or the ‘Original’ Testament.” Others use “Older” and “Newer” Testament to emphasize that God has revealed Himself and His Word in one written Scripture—understanding the New(er) Testament is impossible without the foundation of the Old(er), God's initial revelation. For the sake of familiarity, we will use New Testament and Old Testament in this study.

New Testament writers understood and applied Old Testament texts in unique and insightful ways. Their theology, guided by the Holy Spirit, developed out of a perceived coming together of the Old Testament Scriptures with the person of Yeshua (Jesus) and the Kingdom of God He inaugurated. The result was the collection of inspired, authoritative writings now known as the Christian Scriptures! Christians see this process as God's revelation to mankind demonstrated through His oral and written Word—spoken and recorded as the Law of Moses (*Torah*, Gen.–Deut.), the Prophets, and the Writings—and fulfilled or completed in Yeshua Messiah (Jesus Christ).

Until AD 363–397, when the New Testament canon was formally recognized, the Old Testament was the only written Word of God. Translated into Greek around 250–100 BC in Alexandria, the Septuagint (including Apocrypha) was the Scriptures for first-century Jewish (and Gentile) readers outside Israel and was well known and used by Yeshua and the early Church.



Archeologists study the Dead Sea Scrolls.

A Word on Interpretation

Church history has produced plenty of confusion and controversy over our approach to the Scriptures. Interpretive methods have been a blessing and a curse. Scripture has come alive through excellent historical and cultural research, archaeology, and exegetical approaches. On the other hand, Scripture has been torn to shreds by other “experts.” The error of Replacement Theology in its various manifestations has spread like cancer through the Church and contributed to centuries of Christian anti-Semitism to this day. Critical biblical disciplines appear on shaky ground in some quarters. So, how do we safeguard ourselves in this turbulent environment?

One anchor point is to grasp how the apostles and New Testament writers understood and applied the Old Testament. We cannot absolutely replicate their methods today, but, since they represent some of history’s most accurate “interpreters” of Scripture, we may be able to align with their spiritual and exegetical compass. If we can limit ourselves by their insights, presuppositions, and understanding (as much as can be identified), we may be in the best possible position to discern a biblical Hebraic approach to finding and applying Scripture’s meaning and truth.

New Testament scholar Richard Longenecker notes, “Jewish exegesis of the first century can generally be classified under four headings: literalist, midrashic, peshet, and allegorical [see side bar for further explanation]...The Jewish roots of Christianity make it *a priori* likely [a strong likelihood] that the exegetical procedures of the New Testament would resemble to some extent those of then contemporary Judaism...Thus the interplay of Jewish presuppositions and exegetical procedures on the one hand, with Christian commitments and perspectives on the other, has produced on the pages of our New Testament a distinctive interpretation of the Old Testament.”

It matters how we interpret Scripture. The Bible warns against false prophets, teachers, and shepherds (Jer. 23; Ezek 13; Matt. 7:15; 24; 2 Pet. 2:1, 3:16; Rev. 22:18, 19). Unless Scripture itself indicates otherwise, we should seek to interpret the Bible in the literal, plain sense, in context—what the text actually says, not what we think it says. God intended His revealed truth to be understood and obeyed by His people. He did not cloak it in special hidden code accessible only by selected sages.

In *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, we read, “...the Bible is at the same time both human and divine. The Bible...is the Word of God given in human words in history. It is this dual nature of the Bible that demands of us the task of interpretation.” Old Testament context is imperative. To ignore historical, cultural, grammatical, and religious realities increases the likelihood for Christians today to “read into” Scriptures a myriad of erroneous “truths” or interpret Scripture out of context, “believing” something never intended by the writers or the Holy Spirit who inspired them. It is instructive to try to put ourselves in the position of the original hearers and readers, and diligent study with the Holy Spirit’s guidance will assist us in this.

Excessive, unrestrained allegorical methods of interpretation have led the Church through centuries of misinterpretation, fueling Replacement Theology, Supersessionism, and a host of other errors. Christian–Jewish relations and dialogue have suffered immeasurably, largely through the arrogance and pride of countless misled Christian leaders. How different it could have been if the Apostle Paul’s words and insights to Gentile believers had been taken

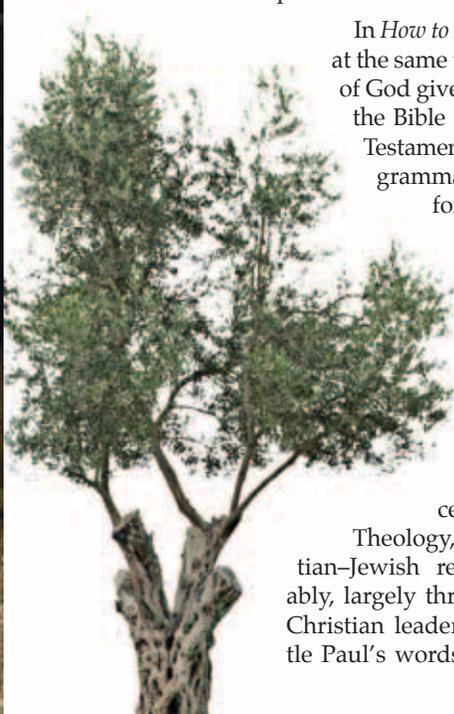
FIRST-CENTURY JEWISH EXEGESIS

LITERALIST interpretation focuses on an author’s explicit intent and views: Scriptures are true exactly as they were written.

MIDRASHIC (Hebrew, “to investigate”) interprets the Scriptures in light of oral tradition, using stories, parables, and legends to arrive at the deepest ethical teaching beyond the literal meaning.

PESHER (Hebrew, “interpretation”) is found in Ecclesiastes 8:1 and several times in the book of Daniel. It refers to a deeper understanding of biblical texts given by divine revelation.

ALLEGORICAL interpretation regards biblical texts as having hidden spiritual meaning that transcends the literal and can only be understood through symbolic, fictional narratives.





seriously: “But if some of the branches were broken off, and you being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the [original] branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you that supports the root, but the root supports you... Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either (Rom. 11:17–21).”

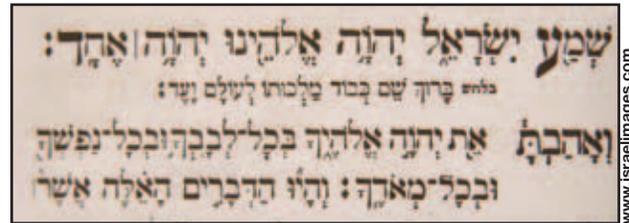
Leviticus 19:18 and the Shema

The most oft cited Old Testament text in the New Testament is part of Leviticus 19:18, “...you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” When combined with Deuteronomy 6:5, which commands complete love for God, we have the narrative of the Gospels that “on these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:40). If Yeshua, the apostles, and New Testament writers considered these texts vital to their teaching, we need to learn all we can from their example.

The context of the book of Leviticus is its place in the *Torah*. It covers a brief interval in the life of Israel immediately following their miraculous deliverance from Egypt. Leviticus bridges between where Exodus leaves off at Mount Sinai with God’s *shekinah* glory filling the newly completed tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–35), and the years of wilderness wandering recorded in Numbers. According to *Young’s Bible Dictionary*, “Leviticus contains a manual of special instruction for the priests and Levites in their spiritual service to the nation, as well as for all the Israelites.”

The context of Leviticus 19 is the giving of the Holiness Code (chapters 17–25) as part of God’s covenant relationship with Israel. Concerning verse 18, Jewish commentary in *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* notes: “The world at large is unaware of the fact that this comprehensive maxim of morality—the golden rule of human conduct—was first taught by Judaism... long before the rise of Christianity, Israel’s religious teachers quoted Leviticus 19:18, either verbally or in paraphrase, as expressing the essence of moral life.”

Also in *Torah*, Deuteronomy restates the covenant with blessings and curses for obedience or disobedience prior to the conquest of the Promised Land. “Hear [*Shema*], O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” (Deut. 6:4) is the beginning and core of the *Shema*. Bible scholar David Bivin defines the *Shema* as referring “to the recitation of three passages: Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:13–21 and Numbers 15:37–41. The *Shema* is regarded by Jews as the supreme affirmation of God’s oneness and uniqueness.”



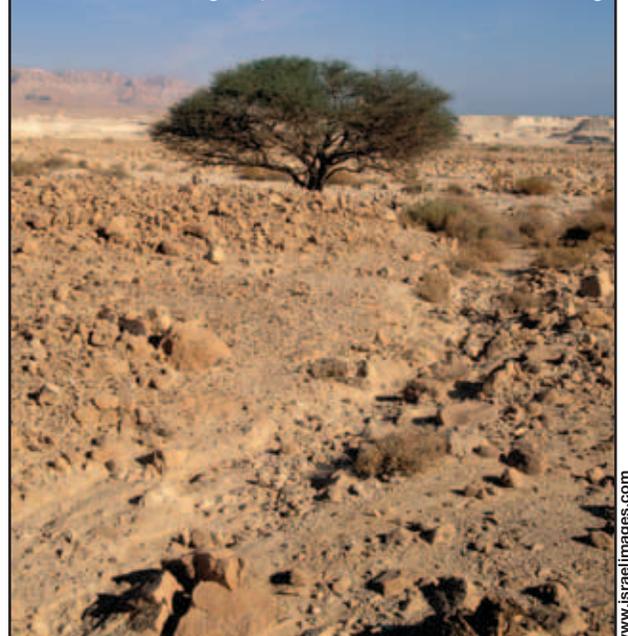
Above: The first line of the Shema is in enlarged text.

“Hear O Israel!

The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!”

Deut. 6:4

The Negev, place of wilderness wandering



The Jewish commentary cited above describes the *Shema* as a declaration of “the oneness of God and Israel’s undivided loyalty to Him,” and it “sounds the keynote of all Judaism, and has been its watchword and confession of faith throughout the ages...It is followed in v. 5–9 by the fundamental Duty founded upon that Truth; viz. the devotion to Him of the Israelite’s whole being...The love of God is the distinctive mark of His true worshipers.” Twenty-first century Bible readers need to realize that *Torah* was foundational to the New Testament writers’ thinking and theology.

Examples from Paul and James

Among Paul’s theological priorities was his fervent defense of the Hebrew roots of Christianity. The break between the early Church and the Synagogue generated factions and falsehoods which needed addressing and correcting. Paul, on more than one occasion, reminds his largely Gentile Christian audiences of their roots by drawing on symbols, covenants, promises, and truth from the Old Testament.

He described the Ephesians as formerly “*excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise*” (2:12) and in Christ (Messiah), they are now “*no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household... built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets...*” (2:19–20). To the church in Rome, he identifies himself with his Jewish brethren as “*my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises...*” (Rom. 9:3–4).

He explains in vivid horticultural detail how Gentile believers are wild olive branches grafted in among the natural branches to share in the rich nourishment from the root of the olive tree. We have seen that he exhorts them against arrogance toward the Jewish people since the root supports them, not the reverse. In three chapters alone (Rom. 9–11), Paul alludes to or cites from Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, 1 Kings, Malachi, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, Joel, Psalms, and Job!

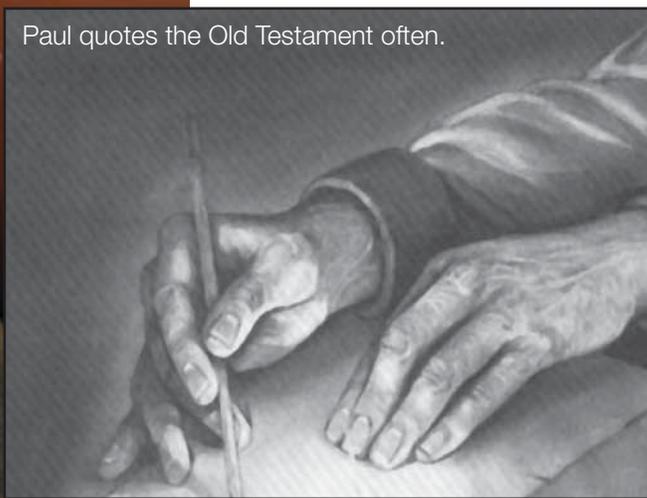
In Galatians 5:14, Paul argues that Leviticus 19:18 is the fulfillment, the sum total, of the law: “*For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’*” (also see Rom. 13:8–10). In Galatians 3:10–14, he quotes Deuteronomy 21:23, 27:26, Habakkuk 2:4, and Le-

viticus 18:5, instructing Gentile believers about their justification by faith in Yeshua without keeping the letter of the Law. His entire context was *Torah*, the Writings and the Prophets (or Genesis to Malachi) though he would also have been exposed to oral (if not written) teaching from Yeshua’s followers (e.g. Mark 12:31).

Leviticus 19:18 again appears in James 2:8–9, where James teaches against showing partiality: “*If however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.*” Here, James upholds the *Torah* as God’s Law.



Paul teaching



Paul quotes the Old Testament often.

“...You shall love your neighbor as yourself...” Matt. 22:39

Examples from the Gospels

Matthew, the most “Jewish” of the Gospel accounts, emphasizes the theme of fulfillment. The literate, former tax collector and one of Yeshua’s twelve wrote likely from Syrian Antioch during the early period of the split between the new church and the synagogue. It was AD 50–70, and Nero was the Roman emperor. Paul and Peter were in Rome, and persecution of Christians was well underway.

Matthew reinforces the point that Yeshua was the fulfillment (completion) of the Law and the Prophets. Fifty-five times he quotes the Old Testament—compared to 65 for Mark, Luke and John combined—and has over a dozen references to fulfillment. All indication is that Matthew was steeped in the Scriptures, in both Hebrew and Greek.

In Yeshua’s Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7, Matthew quotes from the *Torah* six times and the Psalms twice. In 5:43–44, He uses Leviticus 19:18 to teach about loving one’s enemies and gives a higher interpretation of it than normally understood in that day: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*” In 7:12, He reaffirms this truth, restated as “*treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets*”—in other words, a summation of Old Testament teaching!

In Matthew 19, a young rich man asks Yeshua, “*Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?*” Yeshua answers by citing Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy: “*...if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments... You shall not commit murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself*” (vv. 18–19).

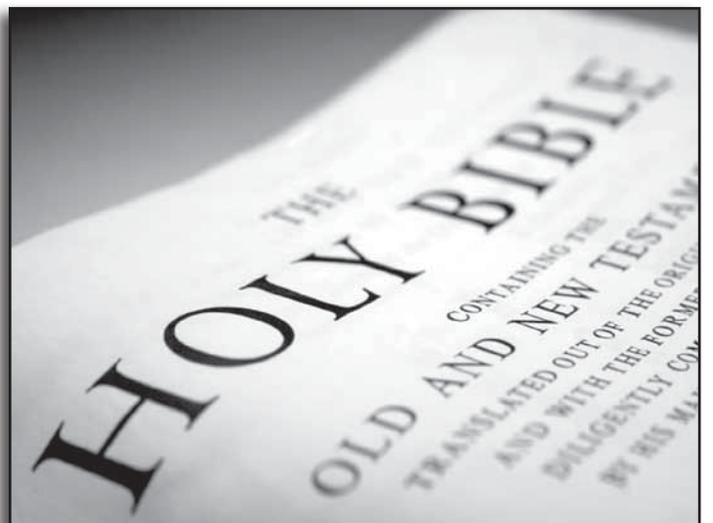
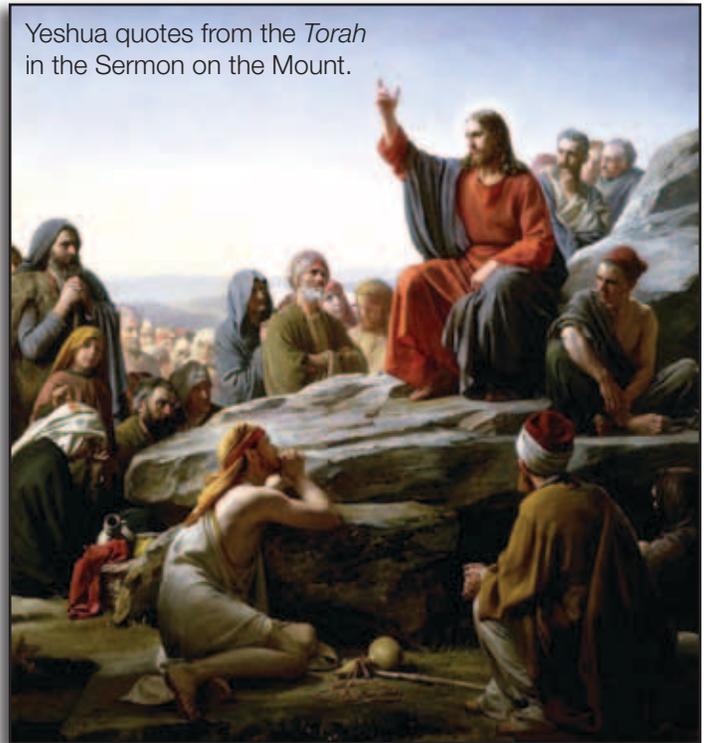
In Matthew 22:36, when asked, “*Which is the great commandment in the Law?*”, Yeshua answered by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18: “*‘You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets*” (vv. 37–40). He wisely answered that loving His Father completely must result in loving one’s neighbor. This is significant for all time and is vividly illustrated in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37).

Craig Keener comments, “Following Jewish interpretive techniques, Jesus links the two commandments (Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18) by a common key word: ‘Love.’ Jewish ethics repeatedly stressed love of God and of others.” The *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* expands: “These vertical (Godward) and horizontal (humanward) relationships sum up not just the Torah, or five books of Moses, but the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures (“the law and the prophets”).” Looking back to our introduction, here is an example of how God ensured the continuum of His truth to His people throughout biblical history—and to us in 2011. Now we need to correctly apply it today.

Matthew, a tax collector, wrote for Jewish readers.



Yeshua quotes from the *Torah* in the Sermon on the Mount.



What Have We Learned?

In our opening paragraph we asked, What value is there to understanding how New Testament writers understood, interpreted, and applied Old Testament texts? How does this impact our approach and response to the Scriptures? Several considerations come to mind:

- Yeshua, the apostles, and New Testament writers were steeped in the Scriptures to the point where it flowed naturally in all their thinking and theology. So must it be with us.
- Theological knowledge for knowledge sake is pointless. As 21st-century disciples, we must faithfully live out the Scriptures as expressed in the *Shema* and Leviticus 19:18.
- A life characterized by careful study of the Bible, guided by the Spirit of Truth, in unity with mature, trusted believers, is the only defense against false prophecy and teaching.

Bridges for Peace is blessed to provide biblical Hebraic roots teaching and practical expressions of these truths to the Jewish people and nation of Israel in these prophetic days. A tangible response to the debt we owe God's chosen ones and to what we have learned would be to:

- **show the Jewish people love and mercy...** *"You will arise and have compassion on Zion; for it is time to be gracious to her, for the appointed time has come"* (Ps. 102:13)
- **care for their needs** for *"Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me"* (from Matt. 25:31–46)
- **give of our material gifts...** *"For if the Gentiles have shared in their [Jewish] spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things"* (Rom. 15:27)
- **pray for the peace of Jerusalem...** *"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: 'May they prosper who love you'"* (Ps. 122:6).

By Eric Malloy
Canada Deputy National Director

Bridges for Peace, through our two food banks, provides food to 27,000 needy Israelis each month.



Photo by D'Arcy Leck

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