



The Word of God

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Introduction

Israel is the only people in the Ancient Near East—indeed, the first people—who believed in a God who moved outside of Himself, came down from heaven and spoke to human beings. It is significant that the prayer *Shema Israel*, “Hear Israel!” (Deuteronomy 6:4), is the Jewish “confession of faith” *par excellence* and a vital part of Jewish liturgy. It means that the Jew defines him or herself as a listener to the word of God. But what is the word of God? How did God make Himself understood by humans? And why did God speak to them? Those are the questions we shall answer in this study.

1. What is the first visible and yet imperfect evidence of the invisible God?

“The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims His handiwork” (Psalms 19:1).

“Cursed be the ground because of you.... Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you” (Genesis 3:17).

The first visible manifestation of the invisible God is what we see around us—what is “naturally” given to us every day, and what we enjoy from it. The ancient rabbis made that point, noting that in the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1, the word that describes Creation *bara* preceded the reference to God *Elohim* (literally, “in the beginning, created God”). They interpreted this syntax to say that the infinite grandeur and the mystery of nature, the skies, the sun and the moon and the stars, the tree, the little flower, the human body, beauty, and life—all these things speak to

us about the great God. As Rabbi Akiba used to say: “As a house implies a builder, and a garment a weaver, and a door a carpenter, so does the existence of the Universe imply a Creator” (*Bereshit Rabbah*, 3, 7 and 9, 2). And yet because of the imperfection and the brokenness of nature, we needed a better and more articulate revelation.

2. What means did God use to speak explicitly to humankind?

“The teaching [Torah] of the Lord is perfect, renewing life; the decrees of the Lord are enduring, making the simple wise; the precepts of the Lord are just, rejoicing the heart; the instruction of the Lord is lucid, making the eyes light up” (Psalms 19:8, 9).

It is significant that the same psalm which speaks about God’s revelation through nature further

specifies that we still are in need of a clearer word to enlighten us. As Shalom Paul (University of Tel Aviv) reminds us, “The Bible is the book where God makes Himself visible” (*The Bible and the Civilisation*, p. ix). This is why in ancient rabbinic texts the Torah was compared to “a goad because it serves to guide the students on their ways” (*Hagigah* 3).

3. Why is the Bible called “the word of God,” and what does it mean?

“And the Lord God commanded the man saying...” (Genesis 2:15).

“God spoke all these words, saying...” Exodus 20:1).

“The Lord spoke through His servants the prophets” (2 Kings 21:10).

The Bible presents itself as the testimony of God’s words to human beings. Throughout its pages God is repeatedly referred to as speaking to men and women. God chose to speak the language of humans, often using people to make Himself understood by humans. As the rabbis used to say, “the Torah speaks in the language of humans” (*Arakhin*, 11a). The Bible does not therefore present itself as a mechanic dictation of God’s words. Those words are of divine inspiration, and yet they are expressed within the limits of human language.

4. Where does the word “Bible” come from?

“In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, consulted *the books*” (Daniel 9:2).

The word “Bible” is derived from the Greek word *ta-bib-lia*, a translation of the Hebrew

term *ha-sefarim*, meaning “the books.” It appears for the first time in Daniel 9:2. This is the name of the Holy Scriptures given by the ancient rabbis in the Mishna (*Meg. 1:8; Git. 4:6; Kelim 15:6*). This Hebrew word was then translated into Greek by the Greek-speaking Jews of the first and second century B.C.E. (see *Maccabees I* 12:9; *II* 8:23; *Antiquities* 20:261; *Letter of Aristeas, The Wisdom of Ben Sira*).

5. What external evidence do we have showing that the Bible comes from God?

1. Archaeological digs have confirmed the existence of ancient biblical sites, such as Ai, Megiddo, Jericho, Hazor, Shiloh, and Bethshemesh, as well as the veracity of many stories told in the Bible.

2. Ancient literary and historical traditions from the Middle East have confirmed the truth of many biblical texts.

3. The survival of Israel as guardians and witnesses to those Scriptures.

4. The impact of these Scriptures on human culture and civilizations (ethics, science, medicine, literature, art, philosophy, etc.).

5. The impact of this book on the life of those who have taken its words seriously.

6. The literary and philosophical superiority of the Bible, the most ancient book that survived the ages and is still presently the first best seller.

6. What internal evidence do we have showing that the Bible comes from God?

“Thus said the Lord: stand by the roads and consider, inquire about

ancient paths” (Jeremiah 6:16).

“*Truth is the essence of Your word; Your just rules are eternal*” (Psalms 119:160).

The unity of the Bible, in spite of the great diversity of its writers (education, place, time, culture), testifies to the same supernatural inspiration.

The accuracy of the biblical text: In spite of the many attempts to destroy it and to question its authenticity, the Bible has been preserved with amazing accuracy. The Jewish scribes have faithfully transmitted the text of the Bible, as it has been demonstrated through a comparison with the biblical version preserved at Qumran in the Dead Sea scrolls (second century B.C.E.).

The honesty of the biblical report: Contrary to the historiographers of long ago, the Bible does not exalt or beautify the exploits of its heroes. The unrighteous as well as the righteous are depicted. And even the failures and the sins of the righteous are mentioned and are condemned as such. Adam the first man sins, Abraham lies, Jacob deceives, and the great king David commits adultery and murders his rival. The Bible tells it like it is, without any revision; this speaks to the veracity of its report.

7. What historical evidence do we have showing that the biblical prophets were inspired by God?

“*But what if a prophet says ‘peace will come’? Only if it comes true, will he be recognized as one who has been truly sent by God*” (Jeremiah 28:9).

“*The Lord and King never does anything without telling His ser-*

vants the prophets about it” (Amos 3:7).

Indeed, the biblical prophecies always came true. The prediction of the fall of Tyre (Ezekiel 26:3-5), of Babylon (Isaiah 14:4), and even of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 9:11); the prediction of the exile of Israel to Babylon and of their return to the promised land (Daniel 9:2; cf. 2 Chronicles 36:21); and the prediction of the forthcoming kingdoms—Babylon, the Medes and Persians, Greece, and Rome (Daniel 2 and 7)—are just a few examples of these predictions fulfilled in history.

8. How did the ancient rabbis differentiate between the Holy Scriptures and any other document?

First, they qualified the Bible as “Holy Writings” in contrast to other writings (*Shab.* 16:1; *Yad* 3:2).

Second, they used the technical

“Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances inherited by their fathers, which are not written in the law of Moses” (*Antiquities* XIII, 10:6).

A working tool: The danger of Jewish tradition or “oral law” (*Torah be-’al pē*) is that it may compete with the revealed word of God and eventually replace it. We need therefore to remember that the original intention for this tradition was merely “to build a fence around the Torah” (*Abot* 1:1). Oral tradition, with its body of rabbinic commentaries, expositions, and parables, is therefore designed to help understand, remember, and apply the word of God to the changing conditions of life and history (*Sefer ha-’Iqqarim* 3,23). But it is not the word of God. The metaphor used in that connection is very suggestive: oral tradition is to the sacred Scriptures what the fence is to the land. The fence is not the

“The Bible is the book where God makes Himself visible”

phrase “make the hands unclean” (*metame et ha-Yadayim*) to specifically refer to the Bible as canonical (*Eduy.* 5,3; *Yad* 3:3-5). Note that this expression was never used to designate extra-biblical documents including the writings of Jewish Tradition, also called “oral Torah” (*Torah be-’al pē*), such as the Mishnah and the Talmud.

9. What is the authority of those Scriptures as compared to Jewish tradition?

“For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men” (Mark 7:8).

land. Oral tradition is therefore to be understood as a working tool to be consulted—a means and not an end.

Transitory and relative: The word “oral” that qualifies this tradition also reflects its transitory and relative character in comparison to the eternal and absolute character of the written text of the Bible. This is the very reason given by the ancient rabbis against the writing down of this oral tradition. Referring to the text of Exodus 34:27, where God orders Moses to “write down these commandments,” the ancient rab-

bis conclude: “Write these words’ means that these words have to be written down, and not the words of tradition” (*Git.* 60b).

A human process: The real values of the tradition should not lead us to forget that tradition is essentially a human process. However great may be the authority and the wisdom of the human agent, tradition cannot and must not claim the same inspiration as the sacred Scriptures. It is significant that prophetic inspiration is never invoked by the rabbis of Jewish tradition. The rabbis do the work of commentators, and not of prophets. They transmit an opinion—that of the masters, of the ancestors, or even of themselves, sometimes even against other rabbis—but never an unqualified message from God. Indeed, the rabbis’ consistent reference to the verses of Scripture to establish their argument shows how much they recognized the authority of Scripture above human opinion. Another rabbinic metaphor referring to the “waters” of the Creation story in Genesis 1:7 uses this motif of “waters” to emphasize the authority and the superiority of Scripture versus tradition: “The upper waters are the Torah of the Scripture; the lower waters are the Torah of Tradition” (*Tikkune Zohar* 60b).

Subject to Scripture: Even the fact that we owe to tradition the determination of the canonical Scriptures does not elevate tradition above the Scriptures. By recognizing the sacred Scriptures as the ultimate word of God, tradition recognizes its own judge and places itself under the authority of those Scriptures. The fact that a servant would recognize his

master would not place him above his master. On the contrary, this recognition would make his submission all the more perfect. The fact that tradition determined the canon is a further reason for it to be subjected to the canonical Scripture. Oral tradition should therefore be placed under the control of the Scripture, and never replace the revealed word of God.

10. What is the historical reason for this emphasis of oral law in Jewish tradition?

“The Holy Blessed be He gave the oral law to Israel to distinguish Israel from other nations. It was not written down, so the Ishmaelite might not produce a copy, as they did for the written Torah, and then claim that they are the people of Israel” (Numbers R. 14:10).

By *Ishmaelite*, the medieval rabbis meant the *Christians*; they used this cryptic word to avoid the trouble of censure. The reason given in this passage is then related to the Jewish-Christian problem. The rabbis suggest that “oral law” was produced in reaction to the Christian claim to be Israel—that is, in reaction to the Christian theology of replacement. As Christians referred to the tradition of the Church, in addition to the Hebrew Scriptures, in order to justify the superiority of their election and their interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, Jews insisted on the value of their own oral tradition. This “apologetic” argument betrays the real nature of “oral law.” Tradition, whether Christian or Jewish, has nothing to do with God’s revelation. It is primarily a human phenomenon, and the defense promoting the superior-

ity of one’s tradition over another pertains to a human dispute.

11. What is the relation between the TaNaKh* (also called the “Old Testament” by Christians) and the “New Testament”?

*The word TaNaKh is the acronym formed from the first letters of the three divisions of the Bible: *Torah* (“the law,” five books of Moses or the Pentateuch), *Neviim* (“the prophets,” from Joshua to Malachi), and *Ketuvim* (“the writings,” from the Psalms to the Chronicles).

“Jesus explained to them what was said about Himself in all the Scriptures. He began with Moses and all the Prophets” (Luke 24:27; cf. John 5:39; 1 Corinthians 15:3).

“Do not think that I have come to get rid of what is written in the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to do that. Instead, I have come to give full meaning to what is written” (Matthew 5:17).

It is already significant that the early Christians never used the expressions “New Testament” and “Old Testament” to refer to the Bible. The first person to use the expression “Old Testament” was Church father Eusebius of Caesarea (4th century C.E.) with the deliberate “anti-Semitic” intention to de-value the “Old Testament.”

The first generation of Christians used rather the Greek word *graphe* (“writings”) to refer to what later Christians would call “Old Testament” (John 2:22; Acts 8:32). This expression was translated from the Hebrew word *Ha-Katub* (“the Scriptures”), which was a common title in Jewish circles (*Peah*. 8:9; *Taan*.

3:8; *Avot* 3:7).

The New Testament and the TaNaKh, both from the people of Israel, contain God’s revelation, with the same degree of value and of authority, complementing and enlightening each other.

12. What is the purpose of the Scriptures?

“Your word is like a lamp that shows me the way. It is like a light that guides me” (Psalm 119:105).

“Every scripture inspired by God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

“I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day” (Deuteronomy 29:13-14).

Conclusion for meditation

After studying this lesson, you have seen the truthfulness of God’s word, as well as its divine inspiration over any tradition. You have also understood that this word of God is still relevant today and concerns you personally, as it concerned people of the past and will concern people of the future. Are you then willing to allow the Bible to illumine your path and guide your steps as you continue to study His word?

“Make not a fence more important than the thing that is fenced”
Bereshit Rabbah, 19,3