

# How to Study the Torah

By Ariel Berkowitz

Any one who has attempted to read and appreciate the Torah has discovered that sometimes the Torah is not easy to interpret. The purpose of this study is to help the student with some important pointers, which should make the study easier and more rewarding.

There are three kinds of material in this section. The first is a set of principles that will help to interpret more accurately the Torah. Scholars call this field of study *hermeneutics* — the study of how to interpret. The second part of this section deals with practical methods that will help to organize our studies for ourselves. In addition, it will also help to equip us to better communicate our findings to others. In the final section, we will offer some suggestions about which study aids may help us the most.

## Reasons to Study the Torah

When we seek to understand the Torah, we must bear in mind several goals. We will list these randomly because, in reality, each is just as important as the other.

### ***To Be Built Up***

The first goal is to train up the man and woman of God. One of the greatest Torah scholars, Sha'ul of Tarsus, wrote these instructions to a student of his when he was training him for ministry. Sha'ul said in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

When Sha'ul said that "all" Scripture had usefulness in the lives of believers, he would also have included the Torah. Hence, along with the rest of the Scriptures, the Torah also is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correcting, and for training people in righteousness. In the end, the ultimate goal of all of these things is that the people of God would be built up and thoroughly equipped to serve God.

## **To See the Messiah**

The second goal of our Torah study is that we might be able to see the Messiah clearly in its pages. Remember Luke 24. This chapter establishes for us one of the key hermeneutic principles of approaching Torah. Here Yeshua tells us specifically to look in the Torah in order to see Him. "And beginning with Moshe and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27).

When we first started looking for Yeshua in every Torah Portion,<sup>1</sup> we were concerned that we would not be able to find Yeshua anywhere. However, much to our surprise, after beginning the work we found it difficult to stop! We have discovered that the person and work of Messiah are evident in even the most technical sections of the Torah. And the more we see Him, the more we can worship Him.

## **To Teach Others**

The last goal we will mention is, of course, to teach the Torah to others. That means that not only should we learn a method of study for ourselves, but we should also learn a method that will enable us to put all of our Torah discoveries in a nice, neat package in order to teach somebody else.

## **Go by the Rules!**

There are commonly accepted rules for proper interpretation of the Scriptures. These rules also apply to the Torah. For a more detailed explanation on each of these, we can easily purchase several types of books on how to understand the Bible. We highly recommend this.

Before summarizing some of the most important hermeneutical rules, we need to clarify an important point. There are sometimes vast differences of opinion between evangelical and rabbinic rules of interpretation. To be sure, there are also important similarities. For example, look up "Rabbi Ishmael's 13 Rules of Interpretation" in the

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<sup>1</sup>In the traditional Jewish world the rabbis have divided the five books of Moses into shorter, readable, portions that have made it more convenient to read the entire Torah in one year. These sections, read in consecutive order from Genesis to the end of Deuteronomy, are referred to in Hebrew as *parashiyot*. In English we simply call them "Torah Portions."

Siddur<sup>2</sup> (beginning on page 49 of the Ashkenaz Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Kol Yakov), or even look up Rabbi Eleazar's "32 Principles of Interpretation." In both of these lists, there are a multitude of principles of biblical interpretation which are accepted by both Jewish people and believers in Yeshua — and so it ought to be.

But sometimes there are marked differences as well. For example, the rabbis hold to the use of gematria as a valid and important interpretive rule. In short, gematria is the practice of finding meanings in the words and letters of the Torah by calculating their numerical value. Most of the time it is not as simple as this definition makes it sound. In fact, the practice of gematria can be extremely complex and sometimes arbitrary. For this reason we do not recommend that a student of Torah regard the findings of gematria as authoritative interpretations.

In addition to gematria, the rabbis also seek to find the allegorical or "hidden meanings" of the text of the Torah. (This is sometimes called "making a midrash.") Once again, because these "hidden meanings" can also be rather speculative, we do not recommend that the serious Torah student practice the midrashic method of interpretation.

To be sure, the findings of both gematria and midrash can be, at times, extremely fascinating. For the most part, those who practice such methods usually intend them to contribute to the fuller meaning of a text. However, for the reasons suggested above, we suggest that the study of the Torah does not require the student to use them. The Torah is full of deep and beautiful meanings even without the use of such methods.

All of these cautions aside, here is a list of some of the most important hermeneutical rules which the Torah student should practice.

- 1. Rely on the Spirit of God to be our teacher.**

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<sup>2</sup> A *Siddur* is the Hebrew way of referring to a Jewish prayer book. The term "*siddur*" is from a Hebrew root that means "order." By applying this term to the prayer book, the sages are suggesting that the prayer book makes order and sense out of daily prayer. Hence, the common everyday prayer book instructs an observant Jewish person on when to pray, how to pray, what to say in prayer, and where to pray. It is well organized and easy to follow. Hence, the term "*Siddur!*"

One of our favourite prayers for beginning a study of the Torah is a quote from Psalm 119:18, which says, "Open my eyes, that I might behold wonderful things from Your Torah." We need to remember that since it is God's words we are studying, only God, through His Spirit, can cause us to understand them.

## **2. Determine which kind of literature it is that we are studying.**

The five books of the Torah contain just about every type of literature imaginable, including historical narrative, legal material, poems, and songs. As Torah students, we need to be aware of which kind of literature we are studying. For example, the way we would interpret the story of Abraham in Genesis 12 would differ slightly from how we would interpret the rules on cleanliness in Leviticus 11 and 12. Thus, the type of literature studied will determine how we study it.

## **3. We must become experts in the text.**

This means several things. First and foremost, it means we need to become thoroughly familiar with the contents of the text. We know it may sound like a boring exercise, but before we do any kind of interpreting of the text we must read it repeatedly to be sure we have not missed any important details of the passage. One of the mistakes people make in interpreting Scripture, especially Torah, is doing it too quickly. In our haste, we simply miss too many important details of the passage. In short, we need to practice the fine art of careful observation.

Once upon a time, in a biology class taught by one legendary Professor Aziz, sat a student who was interested in becoming a great scientist. To begin his training, the professor slapped a fish down before him and said, "Here is a fish. Observe it!" After about half an hour the student, having jotted down a few observations about the fish, gave his one-page list to the professor. Upon reading it, the wise teacher muttered, "Nice job, but you've barely begun. Go back to the fish and observe some more." Several hours passed as the young student recorded more and more details. He took his findings a second time to the professor, who responded by saying, "That's great, but you've only scratched the surface! Now, how about taking a real look at that fish?"

The hours turned into a day, the day into many days, until the student returned to the professor one more time. This time he brought almost a book full of details concerning every single facet of the fish. He described the way each of the fish's fins curled, the various shades of colour in its scales, the texture of its tail, and many more features he had painstakingly noted. The professor, looking more pleased by now, told the student that because he was finally learning the art of careful observation, his desired career of being a scientist had just begun!

The point of the story is obvious. We, too, are science students. Our "field" of study is the Scriptures. If a professor can require his students to be diligent in their observations of fish, surely the wise Teacher Himself would desire that we make even more careful observations concerning what He wrote in the Torah — as well as in the rest of the Word of God — about Himself.

There are six key words that will help us to improve our observation skills. We need to ask: **who, what, where, when, why, and how** about everything we encounter in a given text of the Torah. These questions will help us dig out the details of the passage. Those who teach inductive Bible study methods (which are essentially what we are espousing here) call this the observation stage of our study. Before we begin to decide what a passage means, we must first know what it says.

#### **4. Context**

Observing the context is one of the most fundamental rules of interpreting any piece of literature. This is especially true of interpreting the Torah. Even the so-called "teaching sections" have some kind of important context. Watch out for it, and try to determine what the context is for any and every given passage you are studying.

There are several kinds of contexts. There is, first of all, the context of the whole book. If we are studying Genesis, for example, and we come upon an instructional section, we need to remember that Genesis is basically a historical narrative. We must understand these instructions, then, in light of the history being unfolded in the context of the whole book. Furthermore, when studying an instructional section like Leviticus, which has little historical

narration, it is necessary to consider the possibility that God is giving these instructions because of some historical event in Israel's life that prompted either correction or further instruction.

Second, there is the paragraph or section in which our text is located. For example, part of the reason Leviticus 16 was written was to explain about the blood and the sacrifices for Yom Kippur. But another purpose was to remind Israel of who could approach God, and in what manner He could be approached. This instruction was necessary in order to ensure that the incident involving Nadav and Avihu (Nadab and Abihu) would not happen again.

Finally, there is the immediate context. This is the material that immediately precedes or follows the section we are studying. The whole meaning of a text can be lost because of the failure of a student to observe its immediate context. In short, it behoves us to pay close attention to all contexts of any passage we choose to study.

One more point. Remember that both chapter and verse divisions and the weekly parasha divisions are man-made! This means that these divisions may throw us off in attempting to determine a context. Be on the lookout for this. We must not let man-made divisions in the Torah text rule our understanding of a passage.

## **5. Understand the text at face value. Avoid the temptation to allegorize.**

Taking the text at face value means letting the text speak for itself, understanding the plain meaning of the text. For example, if the text says, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt and you are My people Israel and I am taking you to the land of the Canaanites," we are not to understand it as a charge to conquer the world or to move on to greater and higher adventures for God! On the contrary, the passage is talking about a literal God, telling a literal group of people called Israelites, that He is taking them to a literal piece of real estate, which in that day was called the land of Canaan.

This also applies to what appear to be legal sections. If God said to put a fence around the top of our houses, for example, He does not mean to build fences to protect the Torah! Literally, what is being

referred to is a protective enclosure being placed around the top of a house to prevent people from falling off. (In that part of the world, most dwellings had flat roofs, which facilitated people congregating on them.) We have no permission at this point to go beyond the literal face value of the text.

On the other hand, we need to interpret poetry in a figurative manner because that is the nature of poetry. In like manner, plain speech also involves the common use of similes and metaphors, and idioms — all of which abound in the Torah. These, of course are also figurative ways of speaking. Thus, apart from these common figures of speech, the text is meant to be understood quite literally

Also associated with this principle is the necessity of determining the intended meaning of the passage. Since Moshe was the writer of the Torah, we must try to put ourselves in his shoes as he wrote it, even as we attempt to discern the Lord's intent in giving each teaching. Moreover, we also need to put ourselves into the shoes of the people who first received the Scriptures and seek to know how they understood the text.

Perhaps we can clarify something important here. There is a big difference between saying "this passage means such and such" and saying "this passage can serve as an illustration of such and such." The former statement assigns a specifically intended meaning to the passage. The latter is merely saying that the passage might help us to understand another passage or concept. We may only say that a given passage means something if we have thoroughly determined, through careful observation and application of the context, its original, God-intended meaning. However, we may use almost any passage to illustrate a spiritual principle without declaring it to be the original purpose for the passage.

For example, let us look at the passage describing the garments of the high priest and the different colours he wore. The text does not state the symbolic meaning of these colours, nor that the colours even had a symbolic meaning. To state that these colours mean X, Y, and Z is to practice spiritualization. It is legitimate, however, to say that each colour can be seen as an illustration of something concerning our life in the Messiah (the blue reminds us of royalty, the white suggests purity, and so forth). Now, rather than definitively stating that the high priest's garments carried the

symbolic meanings we have assigned them, we are merely observing that they can aptly illustrate certain spiritual truths. Do you see the difference?

Often we spiritualize or allegorize when attempting to apply a passage of Scripture to our lives. Practical application should be the last step in our study of the passage. When the time comes to personally apply the passage to our lives, we often make a dishonest mistake in handling it. We can best explain this mistake by giving an illustration. Let us look at Joshua, for instance. In typical applications, many people would say something like this: "We are all Joshuas. We are in the days of Joshua. We can all conquer the land for the Lord."

Unfortunately, such teaching is dishonest to the text. We are not all named Joshua. Moreover, who says we are in the days of Joshua? Do we ride chariots? Are there Canaanites living around us? Furthermore, did God give us all a mandate to take up swords, form an army, and conquer the land of Germany, South Africa, or the United States — or wherever else we may be living? However, we can say, "Just as in the days of Joshua, so also in our days...." The key phrases we want to use here are "Just as" and "so also...." We can draw many examples of what God did in Joshua's days to illustrate what He might be doing today.

We know this sounds like a complicated point, but it is important. We want to be fair and true to the text of Scripture because it is God's Word. We should not arbitrarily assign meanings to the Bible which are not warranted.

## **6. Know the historical, geographical, cultural, and religious backgrounds of the passage.**

We cannot say too much on this point. The Torah was written in a historical, cultural, social, religious, and geographical context far removed from ours. We cannot even think of understanding it properly unless we are sufficiently familiar with these factors.

For example, it makes a difference to our understanding of the Torah if we know that each of the ten plagues was brought against one of the gods of Egypt. It changes our perception of the book of Deuteronomy if we are aware that its format virtually follows that of



other middle to late Bronze Age suzerainty treaties and covenants. Moreover, are we aware that our knowledge of ancient Mesopotamian clay tablets can help us understand the structure of Genesis, as well as why Rachel stole the family idols from Laban? Finally, what is meant by the designations “Way of the Philistines” and “King’s Highway?”

A knowledge of the ancient Near East can open up the meaning of the Torah in ways that most people would never imagine. We would even suggest that a student who ignores this area of knowledge risks grossly misinterpreting the Torah, as he will never be able to fully appreciate the depth of the revelation found therein. This principle of Torah study is that important.

Closely connected with this rule is the principle of studying the Torah in Hebrew, its original language. There are sometimes words, thoughts, or concepts in the Hebrew of the Torah that are almost impossible to express in a translation. For example, it is helpful to know that the Hebrew word sometimes translated into English as “sacrifice” is the word *korban* (כֹּרְבָן), which has the same root as the word meaning “to draw close.” Hence, a sacrifice is that which helps us draw close to God. In addition, there are virtually no English equivalents for the Hebrew words *tahor* (טָהוֹר) and *tamei* (טָמֵא) (often rendered pure and impure, or clean and unclean, respectively).

While it is difficult for most people to learn biblical Hebrew or to know the background of the Torah, there are many study aids that can assist the novice in these pursuits. Nothing, however, can substitute for a working knowledge of both biblical Hebrew and ancient Near Eastern history.

Here, then, are the six basic hermeneutical rules that need to govern our study of the Torah. It is important to remember that we can apply these rules to our study of any part of the Scriptures.

1. Rely on the Spirit of God to be our teacher.
2. Determine which kind of literature we are studying.
3. Become an expert in the text.
4. Consider the context.

5. Understand the text at face value. Avoid the temptation to allegorize.
6. Know the historical, geographical, cultural, and religious backgrounds of the passage.

## **Specifically the Torah**

The Torah contains some unique material which we will call teaching sections. (These are the sections that many call, "law.") Most of the Tanakh<sup>3</sup> does not contain this type of content. Therefore, in addition to the above rules, we also need to know the following specific suggestions for studying these unique types of passages in the Torah. We will repeat at least two of the above principles because of their special application to the study of the teaching sections of the Torah.

### **1. Context**

There is a definite context to most, if not all, of the long passages of teaching and instruction which so characterize the Torah. To be sure, it is sometimes rather difficult to determine the specific historical or literary context. But remember that the Torah was not given out of a vacuum. To understand it properly, we need to discern a context for each section. Take the concept of blood, for example. The instructions about blood, whether human or animal, are a major feature of the book of Leviticus. When we look at the teaching passages, therefore, we need to ask why God is teaching about blood in this particular passage, as well as what these specific teachings add to the context of the whole book of Leviticus.

### **2 Historical background**

This is highly critical when we study the teaching sections of the Torah. God had definite reasons for giving each of His teachings, some of which arose out of certain situations taking place outside of

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<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word "Tanakh" is an acronym. The "T" stands for Torah, the first five books of the Bible. The "N" refers to the second main division of the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets. The "K" stands for the Writings, the third main division of the Hebrew Scriptures. This traditional three-fold division of the Hebrew Bible was known in Yeshua's day (See Luke 24), although the acronym Tanakh is a later invention by the rabbis.

its pages. We need to become aware of these background circumstances in order to understand these sections completely.

Here is an excellent example. The text says, "and you shall not shave the corners of your head." To understand this passage properly, we must first determine from the Hebrew what the text means. Second, we must ask ourselves a question: "Why would God have given that instruction?" Is He telling us how to get haircuts? What was happening historically at that time that would necessitate special instructions from the Holy One about our hairdos?

If we examine the culture of the Canaanites, we would find that the Canaanites were literally cutting designs in their hair, much as some do today. Moreover, they were doing so for religious purposes. Thus, we discover that, most likely, God's instructions concerning our hair were intended to prevent us from acting like the Canaanites or practicing their religion. Hence, in the course of our research, we discovered that this teaching actually has very little to do with the *peyot*, or side curls, worn by many religious Jewish men.

### **3. Is this passage quoted in the Newer Covenant Scriptures?**

This is very important. If the passage under question is mentioned in the Newer Covenant Scriptures, we may be able to learn at least two possible things from its usage there. Firstly, we may be able to see how this passage was understood by others who lived closer than we do to the time it was written. Secondly, we may be able to learn how that teaching was practiced by those who were part of that same essential culture. One of the best examples we can think of is the passage in Deuteronomy, "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." This verse is quoted in Matthew 4. Here we are afforded an opportunity to see how the Messiah Himself understood and applied this verse from the Torah.

### **4. How was this teaching practiced in ancient Israel?**

Determining how the ancient Israelites understood a teaching in the Torah can help us in our understanding of that passage. For example, it is beneficial to know that the orthodox Jewish practice of "laying *tefillin*" (binding a box containing portions of Torah to one's forehead and arm during prayer, as Deuteronomy 6 apparently

teaches) was practiced by those who lived in the Second Temple period. We have ample evidence of this from both archaeological and literary sources. If Israel has been following an instruction of the Torah for centuries, perhaps we too might benefit from practicing it as they do, so long as we do not contradict the written Word.

### **5. How do Jewish people practice this teaching today?**

Jewish practice and interpretation of the Torah began centuries ago — in many cases even before the time of Yeshua. Although we do not believe in the authority of the oral law, it nevertheless contains much that is useful for us today (such as an incredibly insightful periodic interpretation of the Torah). It is helpful for us, therefore, to read some of the best of the modern Jewish commentators (at least those of both the Rishonim and Akharonim), because in them we may find accurate interpretations of the most difficult passages of the Torah. Moreover, it can also be helpful to examine some of the rabbinic applications of the Torah, as some of these halachic teachings might shed some light for us on a given passage.

### **6. What Torah picture is painted by the passage?**

At first glance, the concept of “Torah pictures” may seem similar to that of “types” so often employed by Bible teachers. But we’re talking about something a little different. A Torah picture answers the question, “What does this instruction teach us about the person and work of Yeshua?” In addition, we can also ask, “What does this Torah teaching illustrate concerning our identity in Messiah?”

For example, we find a wonderful Torah picture in the teaching concerning purity and impurity, *tamei* and *tahor*. Why did God declare some things *tamei* and others *tahor*? These words are often translated “unclean” or “clean,” respectively. Are such objects or people really “dirty” or “clean”? Is this the intended meaning?

The more we study the matter, the more a whole new universe of pictures opens up for us. Bearing in mind our prior warnings against spiritualization, we nevertheless can see that the concepts of *tamei* and *tahor* aptly illustrate our transformation from a state of uncleanness to one of being able to approach God’s throne of grace. Yeshua has made us new creations — saints instead of sinners, no

longer tahor but tamei. Torah pictures can illustrate these truths and more.

## **How to Teach the Torah**

Having briefly laid out the standard hermeneutical rules for understanding the Torah, we can now introduce a method which should be useful both for organizing your our own study and also in presenting it to others. The key word above is organize. What we are about to unfold for you is nothing new. We learned this method from fine Bible teachers years ago, and have taught it to many others since then.

### **A. *Continually apply all the rules of interpretation***

Make sure that your interpretation of the Torah passage is as accurate as possible at each step along the way. We can do this by continually applying all of the hermeneutical rules which we have outlined above, no matter where we are in our process of preparing a Torah lesson.

Here is a short and simple outline to use when completing your study of a Torah section.

First ask, "What does the passage say?"

Next ask, "What does it mean?"

Finally, ask, "What does it mean to me?"

As stated above, the first part of this three-point outline deals with the observation stage. Accurate observation of the details and grammar of a passage should always be in progress, in order to ensure that we know exactly what the text is really saying. After we are satisfied with our knowledge of the facts of the passage, we can begin to determine what they mean. Technically, this is the interpretation stage. The facts determine the meaning, not the other way around! Finally, when we feel we understand the intent of the passage, based on a careful observation of the facts, then, and only then, may we begin to query, "What does this passage have for me?" This is the application stage.

## **B. Determine the organization of the passage.**

Yes, you read that statement correctly! Every passage of the Bible, including the Torah, has some kind of an organization. Our job is to ascertain as best as we can the author's main point and how he developed it. (Of course, this cannot be accomplished without going through the above three-point plan.) As we begin to figure out the organization or logical development of the passage, we can begin to reflect that organization in our own outline, proceeding as follows:

### **1. Give the passage a title.**

The title of the passage must be derived from its contents, and must reflect our understanding of the author's intent. In other words, we should not force our own ideas onto the passage. Deal only with the true contents of the section of Torah we are studying. The title we choose for the section may be derived from the actual words of the text, or may be put into our own words — as long as our words constitute an accurate paraphrase of the contents of that section. Remember that the title is really the topic statement of the passage. It is a short, crisp summary of the contents of the section we are studying.

Let us work with an actual example, Exodus 6:2–9. The literary context seems to indicate that this is a somewhat self-defined unit of Torah. The main contents indicate that God is speaking to Moshe concerning His plans for Israel. We can even determine an outline from this passage based on the verbs used. In fact, in verse 7, the fourth verb in the first person singular is a verb that is often used in the Hebrew Bible to describe a man's desire to take a woman for his wife. Based on that fact which we observed, we can therefore give this section a title something like this: "God's Wedding Plans." This title reflects God's intent as revealed in these verses.

### **2. Outline the passage.**

After our section of Scripture is given a title, determine how it develops this theme. Let the passage generate its own outline. Do not force an outline onto it. Let the text speak for itself, no matter what it appears to be saying. There are various ways of creating an outline. You can summarize the main points of logical development

in your own words; choose key words from the passage; or choose key sentences from the passage. Let us return to our example.

Title: Exodus 6:2–9, “God’s Wedding Plans”

- I. **God Promises to Separate His Bride — “I will bring you out.”**
- II. **God Promises to Deliver His Bride — “I will deliver you.”**
- III. **God Promises to Redeem His Bride — “I will redeem you.”**
- IV. **God Promises to Marry His Bride — “I will take you.”**
- V. **God Promises a Home for His Bride — “I will bring you.”**

We can see how the passage determined both title and outline for this study. In this case we used the main verbs to form the outline. You may want to use the same method, or a different one, depending on your text.

### **3. Develop the outline.**

The main body of our study will be developed around our outline. Show how each part of the passage is connected to the outline. Bring in any appropriate Hebrew word studies which will clarify the meaning of the passage. Share any vital historical, cultural, geographical, or religious background information that sheds light on the passage. But work around the basic outline. After studying awhile, we may find that the outline needs to be altered. This is fine if the change is based on our study, and not on our desire to manipulate the passage or to make the passage say something it doesn’t.

### **4. Teach the passage from the outline.**

The title and outline become the main tools by which we can communicate the passage to others. Teaching from an outline usually helps people follow us more easily. In addition, using the outline will force us to stick to the passage and not wander off on a tangent.

## **5. Teach by asking questions.**

One of the best ways to teach a Torah passage, especially if we are teaching a small group, is to use study questions. The best are those which utilize the six discovery words mentioned earlier in this section: **who, what, where, when, how, and why**. Our teaching can turn into a great “educated discussion” if we simply turn the points we discovered into questions for the whole group.

For example, we may want our study group to begin by answering the question, “What is the main point of this passage — in our own words?” We have simply turned our title from a statement into a question. Next we might say, “Let us see how this theme is developed in our Torah section. What is the first promise that God makes concerning Israel in Exodus 6:6?” Here we have communicated to the group our discovery that God makes promises to Israel in the study passage. Now they can discover for themselves what these promises are by looking for the promises instead of relying on us to tell them. Finally, practice the art of asking good questions to help the group in developing the passage.

We will need to keep several key points in mind when doing this type of teaching from the Torah. First, we cannot succeed unless we ourselves have thoroughly studied the passage. Second, it is important for the individual personal growth of our students that they learn to ask questions from the Torah (or any biblical passage) and find the answers for themselves. They will learn to ask the best questions as we show them how, and their retention rate will be higher than if we simply lectured to them. Finally, never ask the group a question for which a “yes” or “no” may be given as the answer.

## **6. A word about commentaries and other books**

Some people simply will not use commentaries or study aids when studying the Bible. They say they want God to teach them, not man. The problem with this statement is that God has specifically blessed certain people in the body of Messiah with the gift of teaching. We are not disputing the fact that people can discover wonderful things in the Torah by themselves. But God’s usual method is to gift certain people who can, in turn, teach others the truths of His Word. Hence,



we all need to rely on the God-gifted Torah teachers whom the Holy One places in our path.

Furthermore, we must also realize that most commentaries were originally sermons or verbal teachings before they appeared in print. If we are willing to ask another person his or her opinion about a given passage in the Bible, we should be willing to consult a commentary. There is no difference, other than the fact that one is a verbal opinion about the Torah and the other is written.

We are not islands unto ourselves. We are members of the body of Messiah, each equipped with certain areas of understanding which, when combined, help bring to all of us a more complete understanding of the Bible. Thus, we should not throw away all the books and say “we will just study the Bible.” God never meant for His people to function like that. In the resources section of this Web site we provide a continually growing list of Bible study aids, such as commentaries, that we recommend. There will undoubtedly be others, especially in other languages. But this is a good beginning for those who are new at Torah study.

### **C. *Do what the Torah says.***

Studying the Torah was not meant to be an end in itself; the Book was designed to be practiced, lived out. The Torah teacher who does not encourage his students to practice what the Torah says is not accurately teaching the Torah! Moreover, the teacher who does not attempt to live it out himself is setting the wrong kind of example for his students.

Perhaps the best illustration of this comes from Acts 21. Sha’ul of Tarsus had acquired a reputation for being a fine teacher of the Torah. When the leadership of the Messianic community heard rumours that he was teaching others not to follow the Torah, they required him to **do** something commanded in the Torah — not merely to say something — in order to prove those rumours false. Of course, being the great Torah teacher that he was, he graciously complied with their request.

We need to make a few clarifying comments at this point. Firstly, we do not think it is the place of any Bible teacher to tell his/her students what to do at any given point of their lives. Rather, the

teacher merely needs to encourage his students to follow the Scriptures in a general way, not by giving specific directives. Secondly, part of the Torah study can include a time when the group itself discusses various applications of the passages, instead of the teacher commanding the students what to do. This is a much healthier way of dealing with applications. It is also a much safer way because it helps to rob the teacher of any temptation to assume the role of spiritual "dictator" and sways the students from thinking of the instructor with a "holy man" mentality. The spirit of God is well capable of guiding His people in how to apply the Bible to their lives. Let us let Him do so and not attempt to take His place.

We trust these few hints will go a long way to helping you to become a more accurate student of God's Word and a more effective teacher of His Torah.