

# Listening to the Language of the Bible

Hearing It Through  
Jesus' Ears

Lois Tverberg  
with Bruce Okkema

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# Introduction

## Listening Through Jesus' Ears

Anyone who studies the Bible will notice right from the start that it often speaks in words and phrases that are difficult to understand. We need to remember that the Scriptures come to us from languages and cultures very different from our own. Most of us use translations that have brought the text into modern English so that we barely notice its foreign "accent." We might be perplexed when its message doesn't quite make sense to us, or we may think we understand it, while a deeper idea escapes our grasp.

If we delve further into the minds of the Bible's authors, we often discover that their strange-sounding language actually contains rich insights that are not always apparent in the English translation. These insights are often key to understanding the text and applying it to our lives. We also discover rich poetry, humorous irony, and timeless wisdom when we hear their thoughts more clearly. This is especially true as we read Jesus' Bible, our Old Testament, which reflects an ancient culture very different from our own. Besides making the Bible come into clearer focus, hearing its words as they were originally meant is a tremendously enriching experience, giving us wonderful new insights into God's Word.

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew; and even though the New Testament was recorded in Greek, it was written almost entirely by Jews growing up in a Hebrew/Aramaic-speaking, Semitic-thinking culture. Much study has gone into learning the nuances of the Greek of the New Testament to accurately

understand it as written. But the words of Paul and Jesus are enriched when heard in the light of their original Hebraic context. Interestingly, the Greek text of the Synoptic Gospels flows smoothly until it quotes parables and sayings of Jesus. There, the Greek becomes awkward, revealing underlying Hebraic language patterns and idioms that point towards Jesus' Semitic cultural context. From this, we can see the importance of having a sense of the style of the Hebrew language for understanding *both* the Old and New Testaments.

The Hebrew language lends itself to a richness of expression in several ways:

- Hebrew has a small vocabulary, and each word usually has a greater depth of meaning than the corresponding English word. A Hebrew word often describes many related things. For example, the Hebrew word for house, *bayit*, can be used in connection with a house, temple, family or lineage. It will enrich our understanding if we realize that the English translator had to choose one of several possible meanings for a Hebrew word and that others may add nuances of meaning to the text.
- Hebrew lacks abstractions, so interesting physical images are used to express abstract ideas. Without an abstract word for "stubbornness," the people are described as "stiff-necked"; and without a word for "stingy," people are described as "tight-fisted." We can easily hear the poetry in these expressions.
- Hebrew often uses the same word to describe both a mental activity and its intended physical result. For

example, the word “listen” can mean simply to listen, but it can also mean to *obey* the words one hears – the result of listening. Knowing this helps us discover the fuller meaning of the text.

Along with the differences in the language, cultural differences sometimes make the Bible’s stories difficult to understand. We can be greatly blessed by studying the ancient Jewish cultural context of the Bible – something that many Christians may have neglected in the past. Because the Jews have spoken Hebrew throughout their history and diligently studied their Scriptures, they can offer rich insights into the Bible’s most important ideas, even those from the New Testament. Studying early Jewish history is especially helpful in understanding Jesus’ world. The Jews have preserved teachings from other rabbis throughout the ages, including from the time of Jesus, and their teachings shed light on the conversation that was going on around him. Jesus’ words take on new depth when heard within their original setting.

In this book, we will share some of these key words and ideas in short devotionals, and look at some of the rich Hebrew words that teach us new ways of looking at God and at life. The book, however, is not intended to be a dictionary – rather, the words serve to highlight important Hebraic concepts that deepen our reading of the text. Usually the English spelling of the Hebrew is sufficient for adequate pronunciation, with the knowledge that most Hebrew words are accented on the last syllable. When there might be difficulty, the word is spelled phonetically.

In the following chapters we will find some clever lessons about life, and experience the Bible’s vibrant imagery and word pictures. We will look at the family, which is so formational for



the people of the Bible, and study how prayer was understood in the time of Jesus. Finally, we will examine the language about the coming of Christ, including Jesus' own words, and we will listen to them with new ears to hear his powerful message.

Please come along with us as we open the Scriptures and discover keys that will unlock hidden treasure for our lives.

# I. Hebraic Insights That Deepen Our Thinking

We see our world through the “spectacles” of our language, and every language envisions the world in a different way. When we look at the world through the language of the Scriptures, we find that its simplest words express ideas about God and our relationship to him that can enrich our lives.

# 1. *Shema*

## Listen and Obey

שְׁמַע

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’” **Mark 12:29–30**

Our modern Western culture tends to focus on mental activity. “It’s the thought that counts,” we say. But biblical cultures were very action-oriented, and this is reflected even in the language. Many verbs that we consider mental activities (hearing, knowing, remembering, etc.) are broadened to include their physical outcomes as well. Understanding this is often a great help for Bible study.



An excellent example is the word *shema*, (pronounced “shmah”), that has a primary meaning of “hear” or “listen.” Listening, in our culture, is considered a mental activity, and hearing just means that our ears pick up sounds. But in the Bible, the word *shema* is widely used to describe

hearing and also its outcomes: understanding, taking heed, being obedient, doing what is asked. Any mother who has shouted at her children, “Were you listening?” when they

ignored her request to clean up their rooms, understands that listening should result in action.

In fact, almost every place we see the word “obey” in English in the Bible, it has been translated from the word *shema*. To “hear” is to “obey”! Try reading “obey” when you see the word “hear” or “listen” in the Scriptures, and note how often the meaning is enriched.

The word *shema* is also the name of the prayer that Jesus said and other observant Jews have said every morning and evening up until this very day. It is the first word of the first line, “Hear (*Shema*), O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:4–5, JPS). By saying this, a Jewish person was saying to himself, “Take heed! Listen and obey! Love God with all of your life!” It was a daily recommitment to following God and doing his will. Jesus also quoted this verse as the greatest commandment (Mark 12:29–30), and he began with the word that says we should *shema*.

Knowing the greater meaning of *shema* helps us understand why Jesus says, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” He is calling us to put his words into action, not just listen. He wants us to be doers of the word, and not hearers only (James 1:22). Western thinking stresses the exercise of the intellect and tends to minimize the *doing* of the Word – some even viewing this as “dead works.” But Hebrew thinking emphasizes that we have not truly taken what we have heard into our hearts until it transforms our lives as well.

## 2. *Da'at Elohim* Knowledge of God

דַּעַת אֱלֹהִים

For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. **Hosea 6:6**, NASB

When English speakers use the verb “to know,” we think of our mental grasp of facts. In Hebrew, however, the word for “to know,” *yadah*, is much broader in scope and will enrich our understanding of the Scriptures.



Rather than just knowing information, the Hebrew idea of *yadah* stresses knowing from experience and relationship, and acting on that knowledge. When used in terms of knowing people, it can mean caring for someone, even being intimate sexually. For instance, the very literal King James Version reads:

And Adam knew (*yadah*) Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain. (Genesis 4:1, KJV)

This idea is especially important when we learn about the biblical concept called the “knowledge of God” (*da'at elohim*). We as Westerners may think this means to prove God’s existence and establish a theological model to explain God’s nature. But the Hebrew view is that “knowledge of God” is having a life in relationship with him. We can see this way of thinking when we

compare Christian translations of the Bible with a Jewish translation. The New International Version has:

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the *Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD*. (Isaiah 11:2)

But the Tanakh by the Jewish Publication Society reads:

The spirit of the LORD shall alight upon him: a spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of counsel and valor, a *spirit of devotion and reverence for the LORD*. (Isaiah 11:2, JPS)

Hebraically, knowledge is not just knowing who someone is, it is devotion to them as well. Jews see knowledge of God as intimacy with God, knowing him as a son does his father, and as a wife her husband. We should think of that when we share our faith. Are we trying to fill people's minds with facts, or are we bringing people to know the Lord personally? How well do we know him ourselves?

In the ministry of En-Gedi, we have struggled with how to communicate that our ministry is educational, but devotional in nature; that we want to bring people closer to the Lord by understanding the Bible in its context. A verse we felt we had been given was: "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9 NIV; also Habakkuk 2:14). When we read it in a Jewish translation, we finally grasped the greater meaning of the verse. It says that the earth "shall be filled with *devotion to the LORD* as water covers the sea" (Isaiah 11:9, JPS).

### 3. *Yir'ah*

## Fear, Awe, and Reverence

יִרְאָה

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. **Proverbs 9:10**

Understanding the broader meanings of Hebrew words often explains things in the Bible that may seem not to make sense. Sometimes it can even change our attitude toward God! This is what happens when we grasp the broader meaning of the word “fear” (*yir'ah*, pronounced “YEER-ah”), and especially in the context of the “fear of the Lord,” a common expression throughout the Bible.



This phrase has caused some people to feel that God just wants us to be afraid of him. But Paul even speaks of the “fear of Christ” in Ephesians 5:21. This is because “fear” was a rich expression that could be very positive. We hear it in the following verses, the first one spoken about the Messiah:

And he will delight in the fear of the Lord,... (Isaiah 11:2-3, NASB)

Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life. (Proverbs 22:4)

The key is that, like many Hebrew words, “fear” has a broader meaning, encompassing very positive feelings such as honor, respect, reverence, and worshipful awe. In fact, almost every time we read the word “reverence” in the Old Testament, it is from the Hebrew word *yir’ah*. The “fear of the Lord” is a reverence for God that allows us to grow in intimate knowledge of him. It reassures us of his power and control over the world. And, it gives us a respect for his law that keeps us from sins that destroy our relationships and lives.

One beautiful concept that *yir’ah* describes is the sense of spine-tingling awe we have when we feel God’s powerful presence. When we are awed by thunder, and sense God’s overwhelming vastness, we are filled with worshipful wonder – also *yir’ah*. Or, when someone shares a story of God’s miraculous intervention in their lives, we are awed by God’s power and personal care. In this sense, having “fear” of God is one of the most profound spiritual experiences of our lives.

To fear the Lord is the ultimate expression of knowing that we stand in the presence of a holy God. It means to always be reminded that God is watching, and to be reassured of his awesome power over this world. It does mean to dread his disapproval of our sin, but the emphasis is on a positive, reverential relationship with God, not on being terrified by him. If having an awe of the Lord causes us to live with integrity and obedience to him, it will ultimately transform us.

He who fears the LORD has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge. The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death. (Proverbs 14:26–27)



## 4. *Torah* Law and Instruction

# תּוֹרָה

The teaching 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, JPS**

Many of us as Christians have grown up with a negative attitude about the word “law,” feeling that it refers to oppressive and arbitrary regulations. But the word *torah* that we translate as “law” has a very different emphasis and connotation in Hebrew.



The Hebrew word *torah* is derived from the root word *yarah*, which means “to point out, teach, instruct, or give direction.” *Torah* could best be defined in English as “instruction,” that is, God’s instruction to man. If God teaches us something, we are, in a sense, obligated to obey. Therefore, the word “law” is within the bounds of the definition of *torah*, but not really its main emphasis. Our Bible translations tend to reinforce our thinking by translating *torah* as “law” most of the time. The Jewish Tanakh instead translates *torah* as “teaching” most of the time. For example, the New International Version reads:

But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:2)

... while the Jewish Tanakh says:

Rather, the teaching of the LORD is his delight, and he studies that teaching day and night. (Psalms 1:2, JPS)

What a difference it makes to think of the primary emphasis of God's word to us as loving guidance, rather than as burdensome law! Certainly there are many laws within the Bible, but even those are given to form us into the people God wants us to be.

Another way of seeing that *torah* really means "teaching" rather than "law" is to notice that the first five books of the Bible are called the Torah, but they contain much more than laws or commandments. The Torah contains the story of creation and the Fall, God's choosing the family of Abraham, and his deliverance of Israel from slavery, their formation as a nation, and God's revelation of himself as their God. All of the Torah teaches us about God's ways, but only part of it is actually law. The reason for the name "Torah" is that it was understood to be God's teaching given through Moses, but the word *torah* is sometimes even used in a larger sense to describe all of Scripture.

This emphasis helps us see God in a more positive light. Now the word *torah* reminds us that rather than being primarily a lawgiver, or a judge ready to punish us, God is a loving father teaching his children how to live. Jesus, who instructed his disciples and the crowds, was simply imitating his father in teaching us how to have life, and have it more abundantly.

## 5. *Shofet*

### A Judge as a Savior?

# שׁוֹפֵט

For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us. **Isaiah 33:22**

Another Hebraic concept that gives us a better understanding of God is the idea of the judge, *shofet* or *din* in Hebrew. We think of a judge as a fearsome figure to whom we answer for our sins. But the meaning of *shofet* is much broader



than that, encompassing heroes and defenders as well. It may seem strange to us that the words “judgment” and “salvation” can be used synonymously, as in the following verse:

From heaven you pronounced judgment, and the land feared and was quiet – when you, O God, rose up to judge, to save all the afflicted of the land. (Psalm 76:8–9)

So how can a judge be a savior? It helps to know that the Hebrew word for “judgment” (*mishpat*) is also the word for “justice.” Imagine that a woman is abused by her husband, and that he is arrested and put in prison. This judgment of him is salvation for her from her abuser. When God saves the ones

being wronged from those who are wronging them, he is both judging and saving at the same time – bad news for one side, good news for the other.

This has made me revise my picture of God. I used to think of God as unloving when he judged sin, and loving when he was merciful. I imagined that any kind of anger at sin was wrong, meaning that Jesus would have just smiled a forgiving smile when someone had swindled a widow out of her last dime. That is perverse! Because God loves the people who have been victimized by sin, he is angry and will bring the guilty to judgment. But it is out of his love for the guilty that he is merciful and desires to forgive. God shows his great love and goodness *as much* through his justice as he does through his mercy.

So how does this fit with what Jesus said, “I came not to judge the world, but to save it”? (John 12:47) Here we see that God has found an amazing answer to the problem of sin that even exceeds the good he would do by being perfectly just. The key is atonement and repentance. Through Jesus’ atonement, he made it possible for all sinners to be saved by repentance rather than being condemned in God’s righteous judgment. Jesus says that he himself will stand as judge at the end of time (Matthew 25:32), but he has come to atone for the sins of any who will repent and follow him.

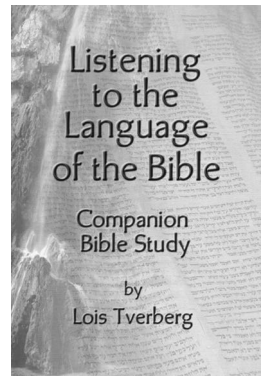
God would rather have an abusive husband become a loving husband than sit in jail. He would rather have a thief find Christ than just be punished, even if the punishment is utterly fair. In this way God can both stop the damage of sin and bring redemption to the life of the sinner.

Have you enjoyed this sample of *Listening to the Language of the Bible*? You can order the book for **\$11.99** from the En-Gedi Resource Center (EnGediResourceCenter.com).

*Listening* also has a *Companion Bible Study* available which allows readers to explore the Bible from a Hebraic perspective. Each chapter's questions examine other relevant passages and share applications for living. At the end, the author shares her thoughts on many questions. See EnGediResourceCenter.com to download a sample of the *Companion Bible Study*.

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En-Gedi Resource Center  
P.O. Box 1971  
Holland, MI 49422-1971  
[EnGediResourceCenter.com](http://EnGediResourceCenter.com)

