

Shoftim **Judges**
Torah: Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9
Haftarah: Isaiah 51:12-52:12
Brit Chadashah: Matthew 3:1-17

There are only three more weeks until the Fall Feasts. The Feasts are good time to invite friends and family, so they can celebrate the beginning of another year in the Messiah. I will leave the study of the Haftarah and the Brit Chadashah portions to your personal study. There is so much content in the Torah portion that I will not be able to cover it all in depth.

Throughout Deuteronomy, Moses is “filling in” details of the material he has already covered with the Exodus Generation. He does not want the New Generation to repeat the mistakes of the Exodus Generation. In this week’s portion, a lot of emphasis is placed on doing the right thing, the right way and not allowing any of vile paganism of the Canaanites to take root in the New Generation.

In a very real sense, the conquest of the Holy Land was a divine purging of a land, which was full of corruption, blood and idolatrous fornication. Most of this evil confederation of peoples will die directly by the hand of YHVH, as Israel mops up the survivors and destroys all traces of their criminal paganism. How thoroughly has your heart and life been purged?

It will take a while before the stipulations of G-d’s Word become a settled second nature for the people, so this portion outlines how various levels of judges are to function. A key concept is that all judgment must be completely impartial, so that everyone’s rights are protected. The judgments are to be prompt and no bribes are to be accepted. Being righteous and abiding by the words of the judges is a necessary prerequisite to dwelling in the land and actually taking possession of it.

Once they destroy all traces of the disgusting Canaanite criminal idolatry, Israel is forbidden to make new statues because any kind of idolatry is strictly forbidden and though we serve a merciful, loving and patient G-d, He will never budge on this stipulation. There is nothing wrong with decorative statues, but there are never to be religious statues before whom people bow and offer prayers to or through.

When it comes to sacrifices, no deformed animal can be offered because we are called to serve the perfect G-d, perfectly, dealing promptly and fully with any errors or deviations from His Word and His Will. Idolaters must be executed, but only on the word of two or three witnesses and these witnesses must throw the first stones.

All difficult or complex problems are to be brought before the Levites, the priests and the judge(s). Their sentence, which is here called a Law, must be followed with no deviation. Not following the decisions of the judges is to be a capital crime.

When Israel is eventually given a king, he must be chosen by G-d from among the children of Israel and cannot be a non Jew. He is forbidden to gather a large number of horses, lest he be tempted to take the people back to Egypt. He is neither to have a great number of wives nor gather large sums of gold and silver for himself. What is gathering in your life?

The King must write a personal copy of these Laws and study them daily so that he always fears the L-RD and puts into practise all the words of all the laws and statutes of YHVH. He must never turn away from the Laws and never consider himself as above his people.

When a Levite buys a home outside of the 48 levitical cities, he should get full price from the sale of this home and as the Levite is likely not the original owner of the home, it does not return to him at the Jubilee.

All forms of witchcraft and sorcery are strictly forbidden, from burning your children to the gods, to trying to contact the dead or predict the future. G-d is not to be treated as a force which can be controlled or manipulated by any means of magic. Spiritual shortcuts through magic rituals is an abomination which is strictly forbidden. It remains forbidden today.

When the portion discusses the coming Prophet, we understand that this is just another name for the Messiah. He will say what has not yet been said and do that which has not yet been done. He is to be Jewish and will resemble Moses. He will not be a member of either the priestly class or any spiritual elite. YHVH will put His words into the prophet's mouth. This is another way of saying that He will be the Word Incarnate.

What He says should be considered the Word of G-d and not listening to Him should carry the same level and kind of punishment as for those who disobey or dismiss the Torah.

When a prophet, who is not an idolater, makes a prediction in the name of the YHVH and the thing does not happen, he must not be respected. This is because he has zero prophetic credibility and is just making things up. Prophecy is not a guessing game.

When it comes to providing protection for the one who causes an accidental death, three special cities must be set up where his case can be heard. Once the boundaries of the land expand, three more cities must be established with in easy access to all the citizens of Israel. If a guilty verdict is given, the murderer is to be handed over to the avenger of blood, who would be a designated relative, charged with carrying out the execution. The portion also has a special ceremony to be performed when a dead body is found outside of any town.

As the years pass in the land, ancestral boundaries are not to be violated or altered.

More than one witness is needed whenever an accusation is made and when the accusation is false, the one accusing shall be treated in the way the accuser wanted the accused to be treated. However, the punishment must fit the crime and neither be excessive or lenient.

Four exemptions to military service are given: having built a new home, having planted a new vineyard, being newly married and even lacking in courage. However, a military exemption does not justify disobedience in any other part of your life.

Two more stipulations. When Israel attacks a city that is not part of Canaan, they are to offer the city terms of surrender and if these are accepted, the city becomes tributary to Israel. If they do not surrender, than all males of military age are to be executed and the entire plunder becomes the people's property. No such terms are to be offered to any Canaanite cities. It is also forbidden to cut down fruit trees when you are laying siege to a city. Trees that produce food are exempt from being used to build siege materials.

Sermon: Preserving a Biblical Approach to the Bible, 2 Timothy 2:15

Over the years, I have always promoted a high view of both the authority of the Scriptures and of its contents. We must obey what it says, without either adding to or subtracting from this sacred content. Our passage in Timothy says we must do our best to be a workman who is approved of G-d and who rightly teaches the Word, as he or she integrates it into their lives.

Sadly, there are some believers who handle the Word poorly and use it to teach doctrines not intended by the words of the text. I want to discuss this issue and encourage you not to wander down this deceptive, false path.

When I was teaching college English, I encountered a strange school of thought which taught that any piece of literature can have an infinite number of interpretations, depending on how the reader chooses to understand it. This is not true because the meaning of any piece of writing, is always limited to the writing purpose intended by the writer.

There are also any number of religious groups who feel that the Bible is filled with any number of hidden meanings. While the Bible does not always explain itself to our satisfaction, there are no special interpretive formulas we can use to get at any supposed deeper, hidden extra meaning. These are carnal inventions which are not really found in the text.

Among many groups of orthodox Jews, there are some who wrongly believe that each letter of the Torah has up to 70 different potential meanings. These can be gotten by reducing words to their mathematical equivalent and juggling these words and phrases to get at supposedly new and wonderful secret, mystical meanings. This line of mysticism originated with the renowned rabbi Akiva, who was opposed by one of my favourite Talmudic scholars, Rabbi Elisha Ben Ishmael. Rabbi Elisha Ben Ishmael taught that the Torah was conveyed in the ordinary language of men. In other words it says what it means and means what it says. Sadly, this is not the position of most Talmudic Jews today.

There is an equivalent error among Bible believers as a way of finding G-d's will for their lives. It is called: "Lucky Dipping". You just flip open your Bible and randomly point at a verse which will tell you the will of G-d for your life. One believer who tried this, asked G-d what to do with his life and when he flipped his Bible it said: "And Judas went out and hung himself". He prayed and asked G-d if this what he was supposed to do and his next lucky dip said: "Go thou and do likewise." In a panic, he tried a third time and got: "and that which thou doest, do quickly." This is superstitious behaviour which will not communicate the will of G-d to you and psychologists would call this: "magic behaviour", which this week's Torah portion also forbids. We should never try to make the Bible say what we want it to say.

One of the worst examples of twisting the meaning of the Bible and adding to it, is found among many evangelicals and is called dispensationalism. It takes 2 Peter 3:8, which says that a day is like a thousand years and says that human history has only been around for slightly under 6,000 years. While they wait for the millennium, or the seventh dispensation, they have named the sixth other supposed thousand year periods. The thousand year dispensation of innocence occurred during the days of Adam and Eve. The next thousand year dispensation occurred during the days of Noah and is called conscience. The aftermath of the Tower of Babel is called the dispensation of human government, while the days of Abraham are called the days of promise.

The days of Moses are called the dispensation of the Law and we are supposedly coming to the end of the dispensation of grace. At the end of this dispensation, a seven year tribulation is supposed to happen before a millennium of peace. There is a similar system called covenant theology which only has three covenant time periods. Neither system has any solid biblical foundation, but the system is still followed, in part or in whole, by most evangelicals.

The original passage only says that the coming of the Messianic kingdom will take its own time coming, even if it appears to be taking a long time. Hence, a day may seem like a thousand years, and as we move closer to the coming kingdom, a thousand years may seem like a day. The passage does not say that a day is a thousand years or that the seven days of creation can be transformed into seven, thousand year periods (dispensations), starting with the beginning of creation.

The Jewish year was formulated from the genealogies and is close to a dispensational counting of time. It fails to take into account that the genealogies are not always strictly sequential, not always going from father to son. The age of the earth, as calculated by evolutionists, gives it a ridiculously old age, but the calculations of the dispensationalists and the rabbis, gives it a very young age. Moving away from solid biblical evidence or solid scientific evidence, will lead you into some pretty strange myths. We should not follow cunning myths, even though they present themselves as neat little packages.

When it comes to understanding the texts of the Bible, there are two bizarre, false systems of interpretation: gnosticism and the kabbalah. Gnosticism should not be confused with being an agnostic. An agnostic is unsure about religious truth, while a gnostic claims to have discovered hidden religious truths from the true spirit realm.

Gnostics claim that the physical world is merely an evil illusion and that the hidden spiritual realm is real and holy. The only way of bridging the gap between these two worlds or realms, is through special knowledge given to you from the spirit realm. The god of the hidden realm is supposedly the true god, while the lesser, creator god of the physical realm is the YHVH of the Bible. In this false system, the only way to get true knowledge is through a mystical encounter with the spirit realm and not from studying the meaning of any written texts.

I have always taught that the Bible is our only source of spiritual authority and truth and that these truths are taught either literally or literarily (symbolically). There is no special hidden knowledge, either leaking in from the supposed spirit realm, or hidden under or over and above, the words of the written text. When the Bible speaks literarily or symbolically, it refers to a specific limited meaning and symbolic language functions like a building a word picture. In the Bible, symbolic language is never a portal to any supposed hidden meaning which a particular text is supposed to contain. Meaning is always limited to the writing purpose of the author and never contains an infinite number of potential new meanings.

Our passage says that we should be sharing and teaching what the text means and not dividing it into thousand year dispensations or assigning it meaning from the secret spiritual realm where the true, invisible god is supposed to reside.

Kabbalism comes from the Hebrew word to receive and it is a system of special interpretive formulas which apparently dig below the written text to expose what G-d is supposedly really saying. Three of Kabbalism's strangest teachings are so foreign to what the Bible says, that I find it hard to believe that those who follow it, do not recognize it as rank paganism.

Orthodox Jews teach the transmigration of souls, where the spirit of a dead person returns to earth to live one or more subsequent lives and it is similar to the Hindu teaching about reincarnation. The Chabad Lubavitchers also teach that the shechinah glory of G-d has somehow been broken into seven pieces or shards and one of them is hiding in the Western Wall. G-d is not a cosmic Humpty Dumpty who somehow fell off a wall and broke into pieces.

Related to this, they teach that Rabbi Menachem Schneerson and four other powerful Jews did not actually die, but somehow went into the spiritual realm in order to obtain more power. One day, they will return to earth, put the shechinah glory back together and inaugurate the Messianic Kingdom. Many of them believe that the Rebbe is the Messiah and his teachings fill over 300 volumes. Before he died, I heard him preach on TV when I lived in Montreal and I was not impressed.

Dispensationalism, Kabbalism and gnosticism impose a non biblical worldview on how we understand the Scriptures and do not contribute to what the Bible actually teaches. The Bible should be understood for what it says and according to the way it says what it says (Deut. 4:2 & 5:22). And even though at times it may be tempting, we need to learn not to go beyond that which is written (I Corin. 4:6). We should never take our words and try to say they are G-d's.

When the Bible does not give us details we would want to learn, these are never going to be discovered by adding details to any text of the Bible. Sometimes the meaning of a text may be enhanced by a study of biblical Jewish culture or from historical sources, but we should never make things up and claim that they have come from G-d. This is a habit which the Talmud frequently indulges in and you end up with weird, invented details like Adam and Eve supposedly being several hundred feet tall. They were not.

As we come to the Fall Feasts, we want to renew our determination never to add to the text of the Scriptures. We should also never delete from what the Scriptures actually teach or twist its teachings to support a personal position which is not actually found in the text. We need to avoid this kind of negative spiritual behaviour, if we truly want to walk with our Messiah according to what His Word actually teaches.

I do not use Deut. 29:29 as a cop out to avoid explaining what I do not understand in the Bible. I use it as a safety valve to keep me honest by admitting that there are some things which the Bible does not reveal and which can never be discovered by mysticism or gnosticism. There are secret things which will always belong to G-d and there are enough things which He has revealed, to keep us more than busy on our pilgrimage from conception to our Father's House in Glory.

When we encounter believers who teach these kinds of nonsense, we should not treat them like enemies. We should exhort them like brethren (2 Thess. 3:15). We also need to be extremely careful not to get sucked into strange and exotic teachings which are not found in the Scriptures. Our calling is to rightly dispense (share, teach) the Word, so that we have no reason to be ashamed (or blush). Dispensationalists have a lot to blush about.

Things do change when honest, sincere believers, study the Scriptures outside some of the foolish, arbitrary interpretative systems which blind them to what the Bible is actually saying. There are no holes or gaps in the Bible that need to be filled, just walls and limits which we need to learn not to violate. As we come to the Fall Feasts, we don't just need to take a personal inventory of our habits and behaviours, so that we can get back on track.

We also need to examine the way we are handling the Scriptures and the doctrines which derive from the Scriptures, so that we do not wander far from the truths of G-d's Word.

Many cults started out inside the circle of faith and only drifted into error when they messed with the ordinary, usual meaning of the Bible, either by adding to it or deleting from it. Some of these are pretty large, influential groups, like Islam, which distorts what the Bible teaches and tries to say that Ishmael was the child of promise. Isaac was the child of promise.

This would also include the Jehovah's Witnesses who do not accept the trinity and spend their time setting countless dates for the end of the world. They are dispensationalists who believe that their organization will be the earth's government during the supposed thousand year reign.

Mormons teach that G-d was once a man and that one day, men will become gods. They believe that native Americans were Jewish refugees from Babylon whom G-d cursed by darkening their skins because of their disobedience. They believe that the garden of Eden was actually in America and that the millennial temple has already been built and is located in Independence, Missouri. They also falsely claim that their newer Scriptures correct errors in the older ones and that their elected president is actually the true head of the church on earth.

Another group follows the strange teachings of William Branham, who was a dispensational faith healer who taught that he was the final prophet who got his strange teachings from a dark angel who followed him around. Some of his followers believed that he was G-d. Even though the movement has lost much of its credibility, there are still Branhamite churches which believe that his teachings are on the same level as the Scriptures. They are not.

I consider that the Name It and Claim It, Word of Faith movement falls into the category of those who add to and delete from the Scriptures. They wrongly teach that if a sick person is not healed, that they do not have enough faith and are letting the devil into their lives.

Many of the traditions of both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, violate the teachings of the Bible. Probably the worst departure from biblical teaching is claiming that the communion bread actually turns into the physical body of the Messiah and that the wine or juice actually transforms into the physical blood of the Messiah.

Before you get too discouraged and want to burn down all the false churches and synagogues in our fair city, let me encourage you. I have taught you about the circle of faith which has five beliefs (The Bible is the Word of G-d. Yeshua is G-d the Son. He was born of a virgin. He died on the cross for the sins of the world. He arose, ascended into heaven and will one day return). Even within this circle some people teach some pretty goofy things without crossing outside into radical heresy.

Our enduring task is to firmly grip the central truths of the Bible and deliberately teach them to our darkening world. Adding to or deleting from the Bible is a serious spiritual offence which we should never tolerate in our midst. It is just silly to believe that the earth is flat and not round because some people misunderstand the difference between what the Bible says literally and what it says literarily. We need to avoid these kinds of teachings and hold firm to the Word of our Messiah, for this is the whole duty of man.

Shabbat shalom and Shavua Tov.