

KNOW HOW TO ANSWER- A STUDY OF BIBLICAL TEXTS (Hebrew Bible)

That some evangelists use to persuade Jews to convert to Christianity.
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At the basis of the conversion "pitch" of some evangelical extremist groups is the reading of our Bible (which they call the Old Testament) in a special way geared to give the suggestions and answers they wish. It behooves Jews, then, to know what our Bible says in actuality, what it meant when it was written, and what the historical circumstance was when the text was written.

Unfortunately, most Jews are relatively ignorant of their own Bible. This Fact Sheet should be considered as an introduction and a beginning on the road to learning something about the greatest "Book" ever written.

1. THE STARTING POINT- The Bible was originally written in Hebrew. The oldest known translation is in Greek. This is so, because many Jews lived in Alexandria, in hellenized (Greek-dominated) Egypt 2,000 years ago, and they wanted a translation of the Bible in their local language. The Greek version prepared by Jews was later translated into Latin by non-Jews. The Latin version became the authoritative version for the Catholic Church.

In any translation, there are some changes of meaning. For example, the Latin version tells us that when Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, he had two horns on his head (see Michelangelo's great statue of Moses based on the Latin version). The Hebrew word for "horn" is also the word for a "ray", in the sense of a beam of light. The Hebrew text makes it clear that there were beams of light (not horns) coming from the head of Moses, but the Latin translator from the Greeks read the word differently. Similar differences in meaning (errors) can be found in all Bible translations.

We Jews believe that since we wrote the Bible, since it concerns events in the life of our ancestors, since we wrote it in Hebrew, and since our English text is a translation from the Hebrew (not from the Greek or Latin), we are entitled to interpret the meaning of our Bible with confidence.

2. ORIGINAL SIN- Fundamentalist Christians, teach that mankind is plagued by an Original Sin. All babies come into the world with this sin, as an inheritance, they teach. All humans inherit this sin through Adam, the first man. Since he disobeyed God by eating from the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden, therefore, Adam stands eternally condemned, and all of his heirs stand condemned. Specifically, this condemnation earns for all humans the hell-fire when we die- **UNLESS WE CAN BE REDEEMED FROM THIS SIN.**

What does Judaism teach about this? Judaism has no concept of Original Sin. Our Bible nowhere suggests that because Adam ate of the forbidden fruit, all future humans are condemned to hell. It does say that when Adam ate of the fruit, mankind lost the privilege of living in the blissful garden and henceforth would have to work for a living (Gen3:17) and women would have pain at child-birth (3:16). There is no mention made of eternal condemnation or of Hell.

How does Reform Judaism look at this story? We look upon the story as a myth. A myth is a story which is not necessarily historical but which can teach certain vital truths. This myth teaches, in effect, that often human beings "try to bite off more than they can chew!". (We try to be as powerful as God). That is to say, we are often too ambitious for our own good. The story also teaches that all mankind is descended from one set of parents, and, therefore, all men and women are part of a brotherhood. We believe that the details of the story are not as significant as this central hypothesis. We are all Brothers!

Many scholars compared the Eden story to the Greek Prometheus myth where Prometheus unsuccessfully tries to steal the fire of the Gods.

How do Orthodox Jews look at the Eden story? Orthodox Jews believe the Bible to be literally true, but they do not believe in Original Sin. (Since our Bible does not mention it).

What do Jews say of Hell? Orthodox Jews speak of reward and punishment after death. The Talmud, however allows for many different interpretations of what this means. Some Rabbis suggest that reward and punishment are only spiritual in nature, while others say that humans have a chance to change and repent (even after they are dead) so that they too can be rewarded. Reform Jews do not believe in Hell at all, for we could not square such a belief with a God who is good and forgiving. We believe that no person is so evil as to earn eternal damnation, and no person is so good as to be completely acceptable to God. All of us are good and bad. This is the human condition, and God only expects us to do the best we can.

Judaism speaks of a life after death, but this is another matter. The point here is that Reform Jews have faith in the goodness and forgiveness of God for all human beings, whether they are Jews or not and whether they accept a particular faith or not and whether they accept certain dogmas or not.

What do the Prophets say of responsibility for someone else's sin? The Prophet Jeremiah who lived about 600 BCE taught that the child could not be held responsible for the sins of his parents. Each person was to be judged for his own actions (see Jeremiah 31:29 ff). The Prophet Ezekiel confirmed this view. The new generation was not to suffer for the sins of the fathers. The doctrine of Original Sin is thus against the developed of the Hebrew Bible.

3. SALVATION BY FAITH Fundamentalist Christians teach that since all of us are born in sin and are condemned to hell by the cosmic sin of Adam, we can only be "saved" from Hell by another cosmic miracle. What is this miracle? The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, they answer. If you believe that Jesus gave his blood to redeem mankind from the consequences of Original Sin, you will be spared the tortures of Hell. You will be "saved". Please note, you are not saved by being a good person, by living a life of good deeds, you are saved by your faith alone.

What does Judaism teach? The Hebrew Bible is the evolving religious faith of the Jewish People in its interaction with God. As we read it, we can see how earlier Jews believed things later outgrown by more sophisticated Jews. We can see from the Bible that the Jews of those days lived lives substantially better than their contemporaries. We ought to use those Jews as a model and try to live better than our contemporaries. Further, the ethical ideas developed by our ancestors, through many suffering experiences, have yet to be improved upon. The Bible is a history of one people's attempt to live a life of high meaning. This people is our people. Their teachings are the foundation of all ethically oriented societies. We ought to renew ourselves in their reservoir and try to extend their teachings into modern times.

The Scapegoat Some of the things taught in our Bible, Jews have chosen to put aside. For example, we are told in one place that the priest sacrificed a "scapegoat". All the sins of the people were "invested" in this animal, and he was sacrificed on the altar. By the shedding of blood, according to the ancient view, the people were rid of their sins. Fundamentalist Christians say that the sacrifice of Jesus is a substitute for the sacrifice of this goat (or lamb).

Even Biblical Jews outgrew this ancient practice of animal sacrifice, however. The Prophets criticized the practice in the most angry language. The Prophet Micah declared (Micah 6:6 ff), "...Will the Lord be pleased with the sacrifice of thousands of rams...It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God". (These are not abstract concepts- they refer to specific performance of the ethical laws in the Bible).

Human Sacrifice Before the Jewish religion, the sacrifice of human beings was thought to have a saving grace. Jeremiah declares against the people who sacrifice their children to the pagan God, Moloch. Fundamentalist Christians teach that Jesus is "the first born Son of God" who was

sacrificed to redeem men from their sins. Jews rejected the idea of the saving grace of human sacrifice long before the Prophet Micah (8th century BC) who said as part of the prophecy above (6:6 ff), "...Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Then comes the answer described above, "It hath been told thee, O man, what is good (that is, what God requires)...Only to do justly, etc."

4. GOD'S FORGIVENESS - Fundamentalist Christians in seeking to convert a Jew, tell us that unless we believe that Jesus died for our sins, God will not forgive us (and we will go to Hell).

This is not what the Hebrew Bible says.

We have shown:

1) The Hebrew Bible does not say that all humans are condemned to Hell because of Adam's sin.

2) Nor does it say that humans are saved from Hell by the death of any one person.

3) "Saving" from "Hell" is not a concern in the time of the Hebrew Bible. This concern develops in the Greek and Roman Societies, and in the Persian Society. Religions from these societies taught their concerns to people like Paul who then attached these concerns to post-biblical happenings. The authors of the New Testament are overwhelmed with this concern.

For Jews, trained in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible, God's forgiveness was assured. Biblical Jews did not function with a doctrine of "The Fall" and "Grace", Condemnation and Salvation. The Prophet Isaiah tells us "Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow". Even those who are extreme sinners, may be assured of God's forgiveness.

The mechanism for placing oneself before God to obtain his forgiveness was simple- one had to "Return" to following the laws of the covenant. The returnee was considered to have repented. What God wanted was hesed-faithfulness to the law. God waited eagerly for the repentant sinner- all the Prophets tell us.

Faithfulness (hesed) is different from faith. Faithfulness is measured by deeds- not belief.

Even today, Jews teach that "prayer, repentance, and righteousness" earn God's forgiveness. (Repentance= T'shuvah= Return to the Law).

5. SUMMARY Our Bible is the story of a developing religion, which is still growing and changing today, although it is based on certain unchanging central principles. At one time, Jews believed, like all the peoples around them, that the sacrifice of animals, and the communion meal, which accompanied the sacrifice, was a way to worship God. The Prophets led us past this sacrificial type of practice. They emphasized justice, love, mercy as deeds of worship. They taught that the succeeding generations were not responsible for the sins of the fathers, that each person has his own unique relationship to God.

Even in Orthodox Judaism, there is no dogma about Hell. Reform Jews do not believe in Hell. We teach, as Job did, that one should do good, for its own sake, not because of a reward in the after-life. We teach that God is good and forgiving, even to those who have sinned, for all of us sin, and no-one is completely good.

How then are we to be saved? Judaism teaches that mankind must save itself through developing the Good Society on earth. This society can be attained, if we all act as the Bible teaches us to act. As we work towards the Good Society, we will need dedicated individuals and dedicated groups. Moses and the Prophets asked us to be such a dedicated group, to be the leaders in the search for this better world. A people which chooses to dedicate itself is a chosen group. The Prophet Amos taught that "chosenness" does not bring special rewards, but it does bring special responsibility and extra duties. Jews are asked to accept these responsibilities. Will we be a "light to the nations" as Isaiah asks? Will we "feed the hungry and clothe the naked", "release the imprisoned"? The answer lies with you.

WHAT DO JEWS BELIEVE ABOUT THE AFTER-LIFE?

At one time, the Pharisees, the moderate party in Judaism of 2,000 years ago, believed in the resurrection of the body in God's chosen time for the righteous.* In this sense, the early Christians were following a teaching of the Pharisees. They thought that if one righteous Jew (Jesus) was resurrected, then there would be hope for all righteous Jews (later extended to include all peoples). Pharisaic Jews defined righteousness in terms of following the laws of the Torah and the Talmud. If you followed these laws, especially the laws of justice (mishpat) and righteousness (tzedakah) you would be worthy of the resurrection (note that this doctrine is not in the Hebrew Bible but in the Talmud). Some Christians, beginning with the Jew, Paul, taught that if you believed in Jesus, you did not have to follow the laws of the Torah. They taught that Jesus was a substitute for the law. Some Christian leaders then said that it was faith in Jesus rather than right-living which earned for the individual the resurrection.

Orthodox Jews today still pray for the resurrection of the righteous. They tend increasingly to define this in spiritual terms. Reform Jews do not believe in the resurrection of the body. We believe, generally speaking, in some kind of spiritual continuity after death. For the Pharisees, 2,000 years ago, the belief in the resurrection was a dogma that is, central to their faith. They believed in reward and punishment after death but they did not develop authoritative details about these things. Many teachers openly disagreed on the nature of the reward and punishment.

Reform Jews do not conceive of physical places called "heaven" or "hell". (or "gehera" and "ganeden"). We believe that when we die we return to the God who made us. We do not concern ourselves with the "how". This is God's problem, we say. Our emphasis is on how we conduct ourselves in this world. It is here that we have the opportunity to influence events critically. This is why it is said that Judaism is more this-worldly oriented, and Christianity is more other-worldly oriented. To the extent that Christianity conforms to the Jewish emphasis on righteousness in this world, it leans more heavily on its Jewish origins. To the extent that Christianity places more emphasis on the next world, it deviates from basic Judaism.

* There is the influence of Persian thought here.