

Lesson 2:

The Bible as a Primary Source Document for Learning About the Ancient Hebrews¹

By examining passages from the Bible for information about the culture of the ancient Hebrew people, students gain a clear understanding of what “academic” study of religious texts is like.

Prior Knowledge: Students should know who the ancient Hebrews were. They should know that the Bible recounts the ancient history, laws, and beliefs of the Jewish people. They should be familiar with the names of the five books, and the technique of citation – i.e., Book, Chapter, Verse.

Objectives:

- Students will experience one technique for studying religious texts from an academic perspective.
- Students will use selected passages from the Bible to extract and interpret information to draw conclusions about ancient Hebrew life.

Materials:

1. Card sets: Use different colors of paper for card sets A and B. Make enough sets of A for ¼ of your class, and enough of B for ¼ of the class. Combined, there should be 1 card set for every two students in your class, divided equally in two different colors.
2. Enough worksheets for each pair of students, plus each group of four students.
3. One vocabulary sheet for each pair of students.

Procedure:

1. Introduction: Explain to the class that the Bible is a guide to faith for Jews, Christians and Muslims, and is used in devotional study by practitioners of each of those faiths to gain religious insight. When approached from an academic, rather than devotional, perspective, the Bible is also an important source of information about history. Combined with archaeological discoveries, it can be used to learn about ancient Hebrew life and culture.

While we can't use the Bible to *scientifically prove* that the specific people in the stories really lived and did the things told, we can use the Bible to provide information about the way of life of people living in that region at about the same time as when the stories are set.

We are going to search for as many “facts” as we can find about the lifestyle of the ancient Hebrews, using excerpts from the first five books of the Bible (called the Torah by Jewish people.)

2. Have students work in pairs. Give each pair a set of cards, a worksheet and a vocabulary page. Half the class should have cards from A and half from B. The vocabulary words are referenced by number on the cards.

¹ Adapted from a lesson by Margaret Hill based on material from the Skirball Museum at Hebrew Union College. Hill's lesson is available at: http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/score_lessons/torah_tells/index.html

Instructions: You and your partner have a set of cards with quotes from the Torah. The references at the bottom of the cards indicate the name of the book (e.g., Genesis), the chapter and the verse number where you can find the quote. Use the vocabulary page to help you with words you don't understand. Working with your partner, read the text on each of your cards, and use the worksheet to record the information.

3. Create groups of four by combining two pairs that share the same set of cards. Give these groups a new worksheet. Instruct them to compare their answers, discuss and resolve any disagreements, and fill out the new worksheet based on common agreement.
4. As a whole class, go over the worksheets, and record the answers on the board. Since there are two sets of cards with different quotations, the final compilation will be a combination of the information contained in each set. Check student answers against the Teacher Answer Key.
5. Discuss: What have we been able to learn about the lifestyle of the ancient Hebrews from these quotes? Point out that the quotes used do not cover everything we could learn about the lifestyle of the ancient Hebrews from reading the entire Torah. And if we were to examine other books of the Bible (e.g., Kings, the Prophets) we could learn even more.
6. Have each student write one or two paragraphs summarizing what they have learned about life among the ancient Hebrews. If they wish, they may illustrate their writing.

Quotations are drawn from the *Tanakh - New JPS English Translation*.

CARD SET A.

<p>Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ismalites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm¹, and labdanum² to be taken to Egypt.</p> <p>Genesis 37:25</p>	<p>He made all the utensil of the later – the pails, the scrapers, the basins, the flesh hooks, and the fire pans; he made all these utensils with copper...</p> <p>Exodus 38:3</p>
<p>Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick, three <i>seahs</i>³ of choice flour! Knead and make cakes!"</p> <p>Genesis 18:6</p>	<p>You shall not make false measures of length, weight or capacity⁴. You shall have an honest balance.</p> <p>Leviticus 19:35-36</p>
<p>A single witness may not validate⁵ against a person any guilt or blame for any offense that may be committed; a case can be valid only on the testimony of two witnesses or more.... and the magistrates⁶ shall make a thorough investigation.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 19:15; 18</p>	<p>If a fellow Hebrew, man or woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years and in the seventh you shall set him free. When you set him free, do not let him go empty handed. Furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor and vat⁷.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 15:12-14</p>
<p>What food you eat you shall procure from them for money; even the water you drink you shall procure from them with money.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 2:6</p>	<p>The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land... a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 8:7-8</p>
<p>.... he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them. " ...If it please you, do not go on past... bath your feet and recline under the tree..." Then Abraham... took a calf, tender and choice, and gave it to a servant-boy, who hastened to prepare it. He took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them...</p> <p>Genesis 18:4-8</p>	<p>Though you take much seed out to the field, you shall gather in little, for the locust shall consume it. Though you plant vineyards and till them, you shall have no wine to drink or store, for the worm shall devour them... The cricket shall take over all the trees and produce of your land.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 28:38-42</p>

CARD SET B.

<p>And they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they encamped there beside the water.</p> <p>Exodus 15:27</p>	<p>You shall appoint magistrates⁸ and officials for your tribes... and they shall govern the people with due justice.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 16:8</p>
<p>Now Abram was very rich in cattle, silver and gold.</p> <p>Genesis 13:2</p>	<p>You shall not judge unfairly... you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning⁹ and upset the plea of the just.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 16:8</p>
<p>Jacob arrived safe in the city... and he encamped before the city. The parcel of land where he pitched his tent he purchased from the children of Hamor, Schechem's father, for a hundred <i>kesitahs</i>¹⁰.</p> <p>Genesis 33:18-19</p>	<p>Let there be sworn treaty between our two parties, between you and us. Let us make a pact with you that you will do us no harm, just as we have not molested you but have always dealt kindly with you and sent you away in peace.</p> <p>Genesis 26:28-29</p>
<p>.... he selected from what was at hand these presents for his brother Esau: 200 she-goats and 20 he-goats; 200 ewes and 20 rams; 30 milch¹¹ camels and their colts; 40 cows and 10 bulls; 20 she-asses and 10 he-asses.</p> <p>Genesis 32:15</p>	<p>When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field... you shall not pick your vineyard bare or gather the fallen fruit in your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger.</p> <p>Leviticus 19:9-10</p>
<p>When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let him go free on account of the eye.</p> <p>Exodus 21:26</p>	<p>You shall make a screen for the entrance to the tent, of blue, purple, and red yarns, and fine twisted linen, done in embroidery.</p> <p>Exodus 26:36</p>

Clues to the Life of the Ancient Hebrews

The Torah (the first five books of the Bible) gives us clues about how the ancient Hebrews lived before they settled in Palestine. Working with your partner(s), use the quotations on the cards to answer the following questions. Write down the source (citation at bottom of the card) for your answers.

Note: You may not be able to answer all of the questions using the clues you have. Record the *facts* that are actually provided in your quotes. If you *think* that something might be true based on what you read, write it on the *back* of the sheet under the heading: Maybe, and say why you think this might be true.

1. What can you say about the economy of the ancient Hebrews?
 - How did they make a living?
 - What kinds of foods did the ancient Hebrews eat? How did they get their food?
 - What kinds of animals did they have? What did they use them for?
 - What kinds of things did they make, and what did they use to make them?
 - Did they buy, sell or trade things? What? Were there any rules about selling things?
 - Were there differences in wealth (how much people had)? How do you know?
2. Where did people live? What did they live in?
3. Can you say anything about the geography of the land? What kinds of natural resources were important? What aspects of nature might make life difficult?
4. What can you say about courts of law? How did someone get to be a judge? Were there any rules that judges had to follow?
5. Did the ancient Hebrews own slaves? Could they do whatever they wanted with their slaves? How do you know?
6. What was one way the ancient Hebrews gave *Tzedakah* (help to the poor)?
7. Is there anything else you can say about how the ancient Hebrews related to one another or to people from other groups?

Clues to the Life of the Ancient Hebrews

1. What can you say about the economy of the ancient Hebrews?

- How did they make a living? *farming; herding; maybe: as craftsmen (e.g., working copper); as merchants*
- What kinds of foods did the ancient Hebrews eat? *meat; milk; wheat, barley, figs, pomegranates, olive oil, honey, wine, cakes made from flour*

How did they get their food? *they raised livestock, farmed, bought food with money*

- What kinds of animals did they have? What did they use them for? *goats, sheep (ewes and rams), camels, cows, asses (donkeys); they used cows and camels for milk; cows to eat; camels for transportation and carrying things maybe: goats for meat and milk; sheep for wool and meat; asses for transportation.*
- What kinds of things did they make, and what did they use to make them? *cooking utensils from copper; wine; cakes from flour; yarns; linen cloth; screens*
- Did they buy, sell or trade things? What? *food, water, land, slaves, gum, balm, labdanum*

Were there any rules about selling things? *you couldn't cheat people with false measures (weights, rulers, etc.); you had to let slaves go free after six years.*

- Were there differences in wealth (how much people had)? How do you know? *Yes. Abraham was rich with cattle, gold and silver; the rule that you had to leave some of the harvest for the poor; there were slaves and slave-owners.*

2. Where did people live? What did they live in? *some people lived in cities; tents maybe: houses because some lived in cities.*

3. Can you say anything about the geography of the land? What kinds of natural resources were important? *it was a mild climate (palm trees); water was important (people would sometimes pay for it); there was good farm land*

What aspects of nature might make life difficult? *farmers could have a hard time with insects*

4. What can we tell about the courts of law? How did someone get to be a judge? *judges were appointed*

Were there any rules that judges had to follow? *they couldn't take bribes; there had to be at least two witnesses to judge someone guilty*

5. Did the ancient Hebrews own slaves? Yes.

Could they do whatever they wanted with their slaves? How do you know? *No. If they seriously hurt a slave (e.g., blinded him) they had to let him go free; they had to let slaves go free after six years.*

6. What were some ways the ancient Hebrews gave *Tzedakah* (help to the poor)? *they left fruit and grain in their fields for the poor; when they set slaves free they gave them animals, flour and wine*

7. Is there anything else you can say about how the ancient Hebrews related to one another or to people from other groups? *groups would make peace treaties to avoid conflict*
maybe: they were nice to strangers (left food in the fields for them); they were generous (gave gifts, served food to visitors); men gave the orders;

VOCABULARY

- ¹ balm – fragrant resin or leaves from evergreen trees
- ² labdanum – a resin made from rock roses used in making perfumes
- ³ seahs – a unit of measure or weight
- ⁴ capacity - volume
- ⁵ validate - be enough to back up a claim
- ⁶ magistrates - judges
- ⁷ vat – for wine storage
- ⁸ magistrates - judges
- ⁹ discerning - perceptive
- ¹⁰ kesitahs – a unit of money
- ¹¹ milch – milk