

What comes first – Commandment Keeping or the Love of God? This is a question I've been contemplating for a number of years as I recall what happened in my life back in the late 1990's - a turbulent time that caused my wife and I to leave the church organization we had been a part of since our teens.

We were part of a church that had taught Torah observance – at least in the way that they understood the Torah - for many years. At one point in their history, they had about 110,000 people who were keeping the Sabbath and the Holy Days. Then one day they got a new leader and on Christmas eve of 1994, that new leader made a statement indicating that all of this 'law keeping' is optional. With those words, roughly 60% of the people stopped observing the Sabbath and Holy Days, returned to eating things that God defined as 'unclean', and for all practical purposes became traditional evangelical Christians.

As a result of that change, the church eventually broke up, and of the four largest groups that came out of that, there's only an estimated 30,000 people that are walking in their former understanding of God's way. To be fair, that doesn't take into account people who have continued to walk in the former way but have not chosen to be under the 'church's' umbrella.

Point is – that's not a good record. When over 60 to 70% of the people stop observing God's laws simply because a leader said they could, then there is something wrong. But they knew there was something wrong long before.

In the 70's and the 80's, the church leadership realized that when children came of age they would leave home and many (probably more than half) would also leave the church – most leaving the 'walk' as well. That would include children who were born in the church.

So they started all kinds of youth activities with the hope of retaining the young people. They called it Y-O-U ... Youth Opportunities United. They had sports activities, youth outings, multi-congregational sports tournaments, and other things aimed at growing relationships between the young people so they would meet others from the various congregations and eventually get married, thus keeping the believing 'couple' in the church and in the walk.

Even with that, young people would continue to abandon the walk.

So my belief is that teaching Torah for the sake of Torah doesn't work. Why not? Because it puts the proverbial 'cart before the horse'. Instead of focusing on God's love for His people and how we should love Him, they taught Torah observance. The church tried to change the people's behavior before teaching them why they should love God; and they failed to teach what loving God actually means. I think it was their way to be found 'worthy' (Luke 21:36) to escape the 'great tribulation' and to eventually gain access to the Kingdom of God.

But when you look in the scripture, God never does teach it that way. Instead, He reminds us of the great things He has done for us, then invites us to be a part of His bride. And only after we accept that invitation, does He give us the 'rules of the house' – the Torah instructions that will help us conform to His likeness. I believe that when we approach the commandments that way, we will begin to practice them 'with joy and gladness' – the way God intends for us to do. The scripture says that we are to -

NKJ **Deut.** 28:47 - "... serve the LORD your God with joy and gladness of heart, for the abundance of everything.



If your Torah observance is not done with joy and gladness, it really doesn't count as anything. And I think this is where we failed. The church's focus on commandment keeping did not inspire the people to love God and therefore love and embrace His commandments. But we can change that, and in so doing, learn to love God's commandments the way David did¹.

So, this is what I want to do. I want to offer a different focus in regards to teaching commandment observance, and that focus is to teach the 'love the God of Israel' first so that those who we reach will naturally want to keep His commandments.

What I want to show is that -

- the phrase 'God is love' is much more than emotion when you think of it in a Hebraic context
- that by using the Exodus story, we can find that our expression of love to God is living within the terms of our covenant with Him. Let's call that 'Covenant Responsibility'.
- that the New Covenant simply restores the relationship God had with Israel.

I believe that these three points are something that Christians can grab hold of. They are core beliefs that are shared within the Bible believing world, and that if you touch on those things with your Christian friends, you can find a common denominator from which you begin to help them see the value of the Torah - not that you're teaching it to them that way, but where they begin to desire to see and learn it for themselves. They will eventually discover the Torah on their own.

Biblical Love

So we're going to start here by defining the word love specifically in regards to what the Apostle John wrote in his first epistle where he says –

NKJ **1 John 4:19** - We love Him because He first loved us.

It is very important to realize that – before we loved God, He first loved us. To better understand that love, we need to find the Hebraic understanding of the word 'love', and to me, there's no better place to start looking for that Hebraic meaning than to turn to Jeff Benner's Ancient Hebrew Resource Center².

"In our modern Western culture, love is an abstract thought of emotion, how one feels toward another, but the Hebrew word - 'ahav' (אהב - 157) goes much deeper than simple emotion.

The parent root of this word is hav (הב). While this root is not found in the Biblical text, a couple of other derivatives are the words 'havhav' (הבהב - 1890), a noun meaning "gift" and 'yahav' (יאהב - 3051), a verb meaning "to provide," help to supply the fuller Hebraic understanding of 'ahav'.

Basically, what he's saying here is that love is a gift as well as a verb which implies 'providing for someone that you love'. Let's continue -

"We do not choose our parents or siblings, but they are instead given to us as a gift from above, a privileged gift. Even in the Ancient Hebrew culture, one's wife was chosen for him. It is our responsibility to provide and protect those privileged gifts.

As a verb, the Hebrew word 'ahav' means "to provide (*for*) and protect what is given as a privileged gift. We are to love God, neighbors, and family, not in an emotional sense, but in the sense of our actions."

So in the Hebraic concept – love is not an emotion, it is a responsibility. Thus when God says that He loves us, it means that it is His role to provide for and protect the one that He loves. The same applies to

¹ Psalm 119:97

² <https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/living-words/the-living-words-love.htm>



us. The neat thing about this is that we can understand 'love' from that perspective – and most Christians can too. Why? Because that's a part of our culture.

Our culture is basically a patriarchal culture, and in a patriarchal culture, the father is usually the one who provides for the family. This is easy for us to understand, and it's not something that you have to be a part of Hebrew roots to figure out. This is something that Christians know - something they live. It's a common denominator we have with them.

As Christians, we know that caring and providing for a man's bride is natural – for the most part, we never doubt it. We just think of it that way. Generally, before a young man marries a young woman, he thinks about how he is going to provide for her and the children that might come from their union.

In our Judeo-Christian way of life, this is what a man does. And why? Because God created us this way. We find that in the beginning shortly after Adam ate from the forbidden tree. We find that in Genesis 3 –

NKJ **Gen. 3:17-19** - Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, `You shall not eat of it': "Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life ... ¹⁹ In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread ..."

What God is telling the man is that if you're going to eat, you're going to have to work for your food. Note that He doesn't say that about the woman – He only said it about the man. So, it's clearly implied that the husband's role is to provide bread and food for his wife. But the wife has responsibilities as well. She is to honor the husband as he attempts to govern the home. Though I'm not going to quote it, the passage (Genesis 3:16) that seems to indicate that the husband will 'rule' over the wife would be better translated that he will 'govern' the home – and that's the way it is in most 'Christian' homes. The husband basically says "this is the way we're going to do things" and generally, the woman says, OK, because she just trusts that he is going to do the right thing.

That is 'ahav' – 'love'. When men and women get married, they love (in the Hebraic concept) each other because they're in a joint union - a covenant relationship, where each has a God-given role to play. Life is good; everyone is happy, and the marriage is a success. This is precisely what God has been doing for His people as well.

Covenant Responsibility

We know that God took care of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob while they were sojourning in the land of Canaan. But he also took care of his people, Israel. And the best way to understand that is to go back to the Exodus story. So let's have a quick history lesson -

- the Hebrews had become slaves to the Egyptians, and were being mistreated by them.
- God sent Moses to free them, and plagues to show His power over the gods of the Egyptians
- Then there's the Passover followed by crossing the sea on dry ground.
- After crossing the sea, Yahweh began to show them that He would take care of their needs.
 - He provided water when they got thirsty
 - He provided light for them at night and shade for them by the day
 - He provided food when they were hungry
- He also began to govern His people to some degree in Exodus 16 when He said "I'm going to feed you six days of the week, but on the seventh day, I'm not going to provide any food because I want you to gather double the day before.
- He also fought their battles, which we see in chapter 17.



- In chapter 18 we see him setting up judges, which is another level of governance for the people. It basically helped the siblings get along with each other.

God basically took a very broken people and made them His bride; and to understand how Yahweh looked at Israel at the time that He did so, let's look at a passage in the book of Ezekiel that illustrates what Israel was to Him.

^{NKJ} **Ezek. 16:6-15** - "And when I passed by you and saw you struggling in your own blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' Yes, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' ⁷ "I made you thrive like a plant in the field; and you grew, matured, and became very beautiful. *Your* breasts were formed, your hair grew, but you *were* naked and bare. ⁸ **"When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness.** Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine," says the Lord GOD.

In this passage, we see that God had kept His eye on Israel from the time of her youth. This would likely be the time when Jacob and his sons came to Egypt because of the famine. You will recall that God had already turned the Egyptian people's heart toward Joseph because he had led them through the famine. The second time YHVH took notice of her is after she had become a slave to Pharaoh. This is when He spread His garment over her and took her as His bride. In that process, He made the covenant with her.

This is a very good illustration of God's love and compassion for His people – including us. Many of us were broken when He found us. Many of us were down and out when He made contact with us.

The story sort of reminds us of Ruth and Boaz. Ruth laid down at the feet of Boaz and slipped her feet underneath his garment, which was a way of stating "I want to be your bride", and as we know – she and Boaz were eventually married.

With that image presented by Ezekiel's prophecy in mind, let's look back at some of the things that God spoke to Israel about on Shavuot (Pentecost), the day of her betrothal.

In Exodus 19, he says –

^{NKJ} **Exodus 19:3-6** - And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: ⁴ 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and *how* I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. ⁵ 'Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice **and keep My covenant**, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth *is* Mine. ⁶ 'And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These *are* the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel."

In other words, this downtrodden woman who was covered with blood and had basically nothing to wear, God carried to Mount Sinai where He proposed to her. He said that if she (Israel) would hear His voice and obey His rules – which is the foundation of a patriarchal family – something that the majority of Christians agree on – and 'guard' the covenant they would both be entering into, He would make them a special people – a people who would rise above all other peoples. They would in fact become His 'set-apart people'.

This is what God promised this beaten and bloodied woman He found thrown into a bar ditch. He picked her up and took her to His mountain – His home, and said "I'd like to marry you", and as we know, she accepted His proposal.

What I want you to see is that – up to this point (other than the mention of the Sabbath in regards to the manna) God had not defined His Law. He only mentioned the covenant which He had yet to describe to



them. What's more – they agreed to do what He said – to guard His covenant – even before they knew what that would entail.

In other words, they entered into this covenant relationship 'blindly' other than:

- seeing that this 'guy' who was proposing to them had just recently performed all sorts of great miracles – miracles which had caused Egypt's pharaoh to send them out of Egypt,
- seeing that when that pharaoh changed his mind and wanted them back – this 'guy' destroyed the pharaoh and his army.
- Knowing that He could cause water to come from a rock and food to fall out of the sky
- Could destroy the armies that would attack her

In essence – all they knew about Him was that He loved them – which again meant that He would provide them with a home and security – something they had already witnessed with their own eyes. Because they knew that, they were willing to enter into a covenant with Him, even though they did not know what exactly that would entail – they just knew it would be good.

Only after they said "I do" did God deliver the terms of the covenant. We find this beginning in Exodus 20 thru 23. Though we're not going to read through the commandments He gave them, I would dare say that any serious Bible believing Christian would have no problem with them. After all, what Christian is opposed to a law that states that you must not mistreat your servants; or a law that states that if your ox is left unrestrained and hurts someone, the owner of the ox should make reparations to the one who was hurt; or that a person must put a guardrail on the second story of a building? I really doubt they would be opposed to any of it – not even the Sabbath since most Christians believe the Sabbath was changed to Sunday and thus 'keep' it by going to church that day.

What many Christians do not realize is that the covenant God spoke of on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19-23) included only what was ratified in Exodus 24. All the other commandments were given after that and came about as a result of the golden calf incident. That's not to say they are invalid, it just means that God's original covenant did not include them.

Before moving on, there is another point I need to make in regards to the covenant, and that has to do with its ratification, and again, I believe that if Christians were to consider this point, they would see that it fits (somewhat) into their theology.

Let's look at the passage –

NKJ **Exodus 24:3-8** - So Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the judgments. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words which the LORD has said we will do." ... ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient." ⁸ And Moses took the blood, sprinkled *it* on the people, and said, "This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words."

You might notice that I skipped verses 4-6 since they basically speak of the sacrifice that accompanied the establishment of the covenant. The important point is in verse eight where it says "... the LORD has **made** with you ...". That word 'made' is translated from the Hebrew word 'karath' (כָּרַת – 3772) which means 'to cut'. What the phrase means is that YHVH 'cut a covenant' with them.

In the culture of the day, when a covenant was made, an animal was typically cut in half from head to tail. Each 'part' was laid opposite each other on the ground, and each party to the covenant would 'walk



between the parts'³, signifying that if a party did not fulfill his part in the covenant, that what happened to that animal would happen to him. In other words, the person would die.

One of the most important covenants God made was the one He made with Abraham, which is found in Genesis 15. It is where God gave a number of promises to Abraham, expecting nothing from him. That's why Abraham was asleep when the covenant was 'cut'. Therefore, God is 100% responsible for making His promises come to pass.

By God later 'cutting a covenant' with Israel, He and Israel bound themselves to the covenant, and if either party failed to fulfill his or her purpose in the covenant, one of them would die. We find that clearly illustrated in Jeremiah's message to Judah regarding their enslavement of their own people -

^{NKJ} **Jer. 34:12-13** - Therefore the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, ¹³
"Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: 'I made (Heb.-'karath') a covenant with your fathers in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, saying ..."

If you continue with Jeremiah's words, YHVH showed that the people would die who failed to live up to the covenant.

So, covenants are serious things! They have implications. By making a covenant, you put your life on the line, and in the case of ancient Israel – they understood that is what they were doing. Because we have the advantage of hindsight - in other words, we have the entire book - we know who failed to live up to their part of the covenant, but we also know who died as a result of it. It was Messiah Yeshua (Jesus).

Therefore, it's not hard to understand why John followed up his earlier statement in John 4 where he said "We love him because He first loved us." with this statement –

^{NKJ} **1 John 5:2-3** - By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. ³ For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.

We can look at that statement in a number of ways, but I would dare say that the audience that John was talking to was people who were thankful that they – as a people – did not cease to be a people when their forefathers failed to keep the covenant. Their forefathers were – of course – Israelites.

Restoring God's People to the Covenant

Christians believe in covenant. After all, most Christians believe they are a party in the 'New Covenant'. But only by understanding the ramifications of being part of the 'old' covenant can a person understand the role God had to play in order to bring about the 'new' covenant. Therefore, by showing God's love for His people by His willingness to join in covenant with them, we can make a connection to the commandments by showing that every household has rules designed to keep all the family members at peace with one another.

So let's look at a 'covenant home'.

We are all made in the image of Adam, and Adam was made in the image of God. Therefore, if we have masculine / feminine feelings, we know God must have them as well.

It is widely understood that in the marriage, a man desires respect from his wife and children to carry on his name. Women desire from her husband love, security, a nest, and family. Thus, when God took Israel as His bride, there were certain things she should expect from Him, and He delivered! He gave them an inheritance in the land including homes that were already constructed. He gave them children, He went before them in battle, and He provided rain in due season so they would have an abundance of food.

³ This is typically called a 'covenant of the parts'. The process is called 'cutting a covenant'.



Basically, God gave them everything, but unfortunately the bride did not reciprocate. She refused to respect him. She refused to follow his governance. And what's more, she began to sleep around. Most importantly, she did not remember what God had done for her. Most Christian men would in the least be 'hurt' – and more than likely would be quite angry if this were to happen to them!

In effect, she broke the covenant, and as prescribed by the covenant - should have died. But God had a plan. He would let her depart (as was the case of Gomer and Hosea⁴), and would then buy her back by paying the penalty of her violations to the covenant with His own life. He could then restore the covenant relationship.

We see this all in a prophecy of Isaiah -

^{NKJ} **Isaiah 52:1-5** – Awake! Awake! Put on your strength, O Zion; Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city! For the uncircumcised and the unclean Shall no longer come to you. ² Shake yourself from the dust, arise; Sit down, O Jerusalem! Loose yourself from the bonds of your neck, O captive daughter of Zion! ³ For thus says the LORD: "You have sold yourselves for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money." ⁴ For thus says the Lord GOD: "My people went down at first Into Egypt to dwell there; Then the Assyrian oppressed them without cause. ⁵ Now therefore, what have I here," says the LORD, "That My people are taken away for nothing? Those who rule over them Make them wail," says the LORD, "And My name *is* blasphemed continually every day.

Because Israel did not walk with God, the kingdom was split and eventually, both Israel and Judah were taken captive. When Israel is in a state of captivity, Gods says the His name is blasphemed. In other words, when Israel is split, the nations claim it is because GOD FAILED! - He could not keep his 'wife' under control! God therefore had to do something to clear his name ... to show that He was still in control. What He did is described in the very next chapter –

^{NKJ} **Isaiah 53:1-5** - Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ² For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, And as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, *There is* no beauty that we should desire Him. ³ He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, *our* faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. ⁴ Surely, He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But He *was* wounded for our transgressions, *He was* bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace *was* upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.

We all recognize this as a prophecy about the coming of Messiah Yeshua and His subsequent crucifixion.

These prophecies are connected. Isaiah 52 and 53 are a story of Israel's demise and how He planned to restore her back to the covenant. Yeshua died so that the covenant could be renewed and Israel could be restored.

Though many Christians would not agree with that statement, they would agree that somehow, they are 'grafted in' to the 'root' of the Olive Tree of Israel, and because they are grafted in, they are now allowed to be a part of the covenant God had made with Israel.

There again – the connection we can use to help Christians understand the purpose of the commandments is the Covenant. The covenant is the key! It is something we all agree on. But still, there are a couple of hurdles we have to cross in order for them to see it, and that's the New Covenant itself. How can Christians feel secure in the New Covenant when the text shows that the New Covenant is for Israel?

⁴ Hosea 2 & 3



^{ESV} **Jer. 31:1-3** - "At that time, declares the LORD, I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they shall be my people." ² Thus says the LORD: "The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, ³ the LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have continued my faithfulness to you.

There is only one way to understand this scripture. God is the God of Israel. He is not the God of the Gentiles. Because He loves Israel, He has remained faithful to her. In other words, He did not forsake Israel and take on a new bride. He did not replace Israel with 'the church'.

The other hurdle begins in verse 31 -

^{ESV} **Jer. 31:31-34** - "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband*, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Again – the covenant is with Israel and Judah, but what's more, and what's even more challenging is the fact that the Law that Christians are running away from, is the central focus of the New Covenant. It's the same law! How are they going to be able to embrace the Covenant, without embracing the Law that is the central focus of the covenant?

That's our challenge, and I believe the only way we are going to be successful is to help them to see that they are not Gentiles, but are instead, a part of God's Hebrew people, specifically part of Ephraim – the northern tribes that were scattered to the nations and for all practical purposes – lost. Not lost in God's sight, but to man's sight.

The covenant being in place and Christians beginning to understand the Hebrew-ness of the scriptures is where I believe doors will begin to open. Why? Because the story is all about what God is willing to do for the people He loves, and once Christians understand that love, they will begin to reciprocate that love by grabbing hold of the commandments.

So how do we reach Christians? We have to be able to show that God loved Israel so much that He was willing to bind Himself to her by a covenant, knowing all along the He might have to die because of her infidelity. We have to be able to show that Israel was estranged from the covenant because of lawlessness, and will remain that way until she embraces His laws.

Finally, we must be able to show that Christians must attach themselves to Israel thus attaching themselves to the covenant, which includes embracing His laws which are an integral part of the covenant.

In conclusion - trying to win converts by pushing Torah observance is just not working. We have to first learn to truly love the God of Israel. It's got to be more than an infatuation; it has to be true love based on the knowledge of what God has done for us – how God has invited us into His covenantal home. Then we must teach it. Once Christians grab hold of it, the Torah will follow – not the other way around. Let's stop putting the cart before the horse!

Before closing, let's note one last passage. It's a psalm of David that clearly illustrates what I'm trying to show -



^{ESV} **Psalm** 105:42-45 For (YHVH) remembered his holy promise, and Abraham, his servant. ⁴³ So he brought His people out with joy, His chosen ones with singing. ⁴⁴ And He gave them the lands of the nations, and they took possession of the fruit of the peoples' toil, ⁴⁵ **that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws.** Praise the LORD!

Shalom Aleichem