

## Some features of Jewish approaches to Scripture

In general, traditional Jewish approaches to the study of Scripture tend to be:

- Ahistorical: the text is viewed as timeless; the meaning is not bound by the historical or cultural circumstances of its writing, but is valid for now.
- Open: the text is not constrained by any one interpretation, but is capable of many different interpretations.
- Associative: any part of scripture can be used to throw light on any other part; there is little sense of the text having a history of development.
- Playful: there is joy, freedom and creativity in the way the text is handled, and in the way the text is expanded through commentary and story.
- Spiritual: the text almost always has something to do with our relationship with God, and to how we are to live our lives.

This does not mean that interpretation is totally free and without limits. Interpretation is controlled by the 'plain meaning' of the text and by the interpretations of the sages.

Some of these features are shared by western historical-critical, literary and other modes of exegesis, but in general modern western approaches tend to be more scientific, rational and intellectual. A return to more traditional Jewish approaches can help to liberate the text and bring it to life in the hands of ordinary people. The approach described in this article is applied to the Torah, but it is applicable also to the rest of the Old Testament, and to the New Testament as well.

This page is an excerpt by Kevin McDonnell, CFC: "Reading the Bible as Jesus Read It: Traditional Jewish Methods of Bible Study for Christians." First published in *Grace and Truth* 22:1(2005): 44-53.

It presents an accessible summary of the method which Light of Torah follows. Article available at: [www.lightoftorah.net](http://www.lightoftorah.net).



Light of Torah  
[www.lightoftorah.net](http://www.lightoftorah.net)

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Through weekly reflections, Light of Torah encourages Catholic parishes and other Christian audiences to be attentive to the gift of Torah and to learn from the interpretative traditions of Judaism. This is in the spirit of Vatican II's commitment to Jewish-Christian relations. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial parish use.

Start-up series: Leaflet #5



## Light of Torah

*"But those who study the Torah give forth light wherever they may be. It is like one standing in the dark with a lamp in his hand"*

(Exodus Rabbah 36.3).

'Archaeology of the Word'  
Ancient methods, new again...

## Traditional Jewish methods of bible study for Christians

*What ought to emerge now is a new respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament... Christians can learn a great deal from a Jewish exegesis practised for more than 2000 years.*

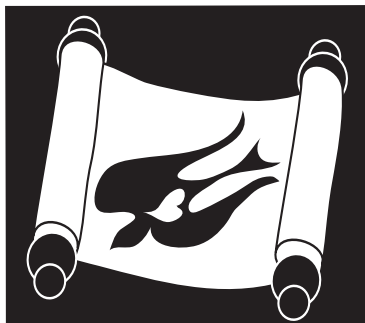
(Cardinal Ratzinger's preface to PBC document, *The Jewish People & their Sacred Scriptures*, 2001)

Traditional Jewish ways of interpreting scripture form a rich source of insight and learning for Christians. This conviction has been affirmed in church statements since the Second Vatican Council.

Jewish approaches to the bible put us in touch with a tradition that was dear to the heart of Jesus, himself a Jew. These methods, honed over time via oral and written traditions, offer interpretative tools which are new to most Christians.

The *Light of Torah* movement promotes a method of biblical reflection based on such approaches. We call it 'Archaeology of the Word' [a term coined by the late Br Jack Driscoll, CFC]. Like an archaeologist patiently digging into layers of soil to uncover hidden treasures, we dig gradually and deeply into God's Word, sifting layer after layer of text, examining this piece and that, and rejoicing when we find precious gems of insight.

Further info and resources: [www.lightoftorah.net](http://www.lightoftorah.net)



### Voices from a Torah group

*“One Saturday afternoon a friend and I sat down with the text of Genesis 1, the first creation account, and began to ‘excavate’ it using the method of Archaeology of the Word. Four hours later(!) we stopped to draw breath, hardly noticing the time so captivated were we by the details of the text... repetitions and rhythms, name-choices and word-plays... we had three different bibles open comparing translations of the Hebrew... and a steadily mounting pile of precious questions and insights to show for our labors. That Saturday afternoon I experienced the creation account like never before. I came away thrilled and changed.”*

## A method of bible reflection

# Archaeology of the Word

Excavation of a biblical text is like the work of an archaeologist digging into the ground. Clues on the ‘surface’ of the text direct the reader to a spot to ‘dig’. As we dig we undertake a work of discovery, finding layers of meaning beneath the plain or literal meaning of the text. What are some of these clues? The examples below are taken from the *Akedah*, the Torah portion that tells the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22:1-19.

### Repetition

The phrase ‘they went on together’ in v.6 is repeated in v.8. To what is the author trying to draw our attention by this repetition?

### Use of numbers in the text

‘On the third day...’ is mentioned in v.4. What might be the significance of this day being mentioned by number?

### Questions

Questions in the text are almost always meant to be answered by the reader. ‘...but where is the lamb for the offering-up?’ In what way do I find myself asking a question like Isaac’s in my own life? I identify with the questioner in the text.

### Times

‘Abraham started-early in the morning’ (v.3). Why the early start? Why might the time of day be noteworthy?

## Ancient, yet new

### Names

Names can hold meanings that affect the interpretation of the text. The word ‘*Akedah*’ is the word for ‘binding’ in Hebrew. When we know that the *binding* of the sacrificial lamb was essential for the ritual to be carried out cleanly and successfully, how does this affect our understanding of the text as a whole?

### Structure

The *Akedah* finishes in v.19, just before the death of Sarah which is mentioned 7 verses later. What significance might we find in the proximity of the two stories?

### Puzzling words, phrases, passages

‘Abraham...saddled his donkey,... he split wood for the offering-up...’ (v.3) These phrases puzzled the sages. Abraham was a man of wealth, with servants. Why would he be doing the manual work himself?

### Rhythm

With the help of Hebrew-sensitive translations, we can find that the poetic rhythm of the text contributes to interpretation. In the *Akedah*, note the steady, almost robotic rhythm of Abraham’s actions as he goes about a terrifying activity. What can we make of this?

### Absence

Absence can also act as a clue. E.g., Abraham is a fearless negotiator in other Genesis texts, yet here his negotiating skills are absent; he is silent and unquestioning. Why?

**Echoes of other passages, cross-references** Compare the triplet in 22:1 with a similar triplet in Gen 12:1.



### Voices from a Torah group

*“Sometimes a Torah text will appear intimidating. Or boring. A long list of names, or a repetitious passage—like the marches of the Israelites recorded in Numbers 33. You know, they set out on their wilderness trek and marched from A to B, from B to C, from C to D, and so on.... for nearly 50 verses! At first I was tempted to skim it and move on to something more interesting. But through Archaeology of the Word I have learned to ‘stay with’ a text, reading it slowly, aloud. And sure enough something mysterious happened in my reading of the marches of the Israelites. I became aware of a rhythm in the text, a drum-beat, a meditative power. By the end of the march I found myself moved by God’s Word. Tears even. In some deep place I recognized that drum-beat in the journey of my own life.”*