

## Returning To An Objective Morality

### Part 1

Over 30 years ago, in 1992, the renowned syndicated columnist Cal Thomas wrote these opening words to his article entitled "Too many Americans adrift without a moral compass":

***On ABC's "Good Morning America" one-day last week, there was a discussion on "family values". One guest said he thought the definition should include marriage between "people of different sexes" who rear responsible children, and so on. Another guest suggested that no one should make such a list because people disagree about the subject so much, and a hard and fast definition of "family values" would exclude people unfairly. In a microcosm that discussion illustrates what is wrong with America: the abandonment of an OBJECTIVE standard for truth and the process by which it might be discovered.***

The phrase "objective standard" is the core issue of the article. The remainder of it goes on to highlight that our nation, and all the Western world, has adopted a societal philosophy described by the late philosopher Francis Schaeffer as ***"pragmatism, doing what seems to work but without regard to fixed principles of right or wrong."*** I agree with Cal Thomas and would argue that this philosophy has thrived in the West because, unwittingly, it became the core philosophy of the Church... especially the so-called Evangelical Church. Yet, even when such large denominations as Catholicism did have a rather strict code of right and wrong, it was based on its own doctrines, based upon councils of bishops, that left much of its enforcement in the hands of priests.

Following WWII about 75% of Americans identified as Christians; it was closer to 90% in England. Although there are no official polls in the decades leading up to that time, the anecdotal evidence is that at least that many Americans and British identified as Christians and had for many decades. That strong majority of Westerners learned truth and morality from what was spoken from the pulpit. While the size of the majority might not have been as robust, the rest of the Western world in general also learned their foundational principles of truth and morality according to what was spoken to them in Churches or from their governments that largely ran the nation on Christian ideals. It was in Church

where the majority of our Western society learned the process of how to approach truth and morality. Unfortunately, it was also where they learned it in the form that Francis Schaeffer described as **"...doing what seems to work but without regard to fixed principles of right or wrong"**. How so? After all, would not any Christian answer the question of where their source of truth and morality comes from as the Bible? While that indeed was the standard mantra, in reality, the Church had long ago adopted a subjective approach to truth and morality when it overthrew and declared abolished the only **objective** and absolute standard and code for morality that the Bible gives us. So, the question Cal Thomas asks is, from where can we obtain a necessarily **objective** moral code for human society? One that does not evolve or chase after political ideals or popular trends? Or, have we passed the point of no return whereby subjectivity and circumstance rules, and therefore our corporate moral compass is permanently disabled?

What is truth, and what is moral, and how we find the answers to these questions have been hot topics for a very, very long time....centuries. One might think that such questions would be succinctly answered by Christians by pointing to what certain Bible passages have to say about it. And yet, now that we've arrived in 2024, we find that the Church and society in general has come to anything but a consensus on the subjects of truth and morality and their source. Each Church branch and denomination, and each of the several political factions of our society, has taken a different approach and a different stance on what truth and morality ought to amount to, and where the source of that truth and morality ought to come from. So, whose values? Whose truth? Whose moral vision ought to define our family values, and inform us all about how to conduct our individual lives in a moral way? The lack of any firm and fixed answer by Church or State is why Western societies are in the turmoil and polarization we find ourselves, today.

This topic is actually being broached rather quietly in the halls of denominational church governments, and amongst a developing group of Bible scholars around the world, but any thought that this subject ought to be legitimately questioned or debated has yet to filter down to the Seminaries that produce the thousands of pastors and ministers for their denominations. Interestingly, as these heads of denominations and Theological scholars are beginning to realize, it is the sticky matter of the faith practiced by biblical Israel and its juxtaposition with the

thousands of organizations that represent and govern the millions of followers of Jesus that quickly comes into play when debating truth and morality from a biblical perspective. That is, simply saying "my truth comes from the Bible" is far too broad and lacks any actual weight or specificity that can be acted upon in any consistent and practical way.

So, fundamentally the question that I pose, today, comes down to this: assuming that what I have said thus far is accurate, should we as God worshippers entertain the notion of a robust recalibration of the way we view the juxtaposition of the truth and morality practiced by biblical Israel versus that practiced by the modern Church? I am certain that in order to get to a proper answer and solution we must necessarily begin with a better, more refined way to study, understand, and think about the holy biblical texts apart from the long-accepted Christian norms. I am equally certain that this refinement can only come from the restoration of an older way that was eventually set aside; the older way that Yeshua, and Paul, and John, and Luke (etc.) arrived at the meaning of the Scriptures in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Yet, such an approach is seen among most Church governments as an existential threat, because it could very easily overturn some of its most cherished and embedded doctrines and cause them to lose congregation members.

The issue of truth and morality...and its source... must be revisited due to the constant and undeniable creeping in over the centuries of manmade doctrines and traditions into both Judaism and Christianity (and at a historically recent accelerating pace due to the popularity of allegorical teaching that hopes to make Christians and Christianity more in tune with societal changes and more tolerant of progressive philosophies). However, because of the demands of Western societies that Christians find a way to make peace with the new gender norms that have become entrenched, biblically mandated morality that is very clear about gender norms is under attack and deemed as "hate". Many branches of Christianity have succumbed to this demand for societal conformity and by means of the moral subjectivity that is a core guiding principle within it, have indeed found ways to yield and accommodate. This reality is leading us, blinded by the pleasures of subjective doctrines, dangerously close to an unseen precipice that hovers over an unfathomable depth: a bottomless pit in which the

Church remakes God and His Word in our image in order to suit our own evolving preferences, cultural trends, political positions, and material comforts.

To begin to address this matter we're going to have to build up a body of knowledge, which is what this part 1 of our study will do. This will prepare us for part 2, that speaks of solutions. So, we must first understand the history of the Church and how even the definition of what it is has changed. It is a history that forces us to face a most uncomfortable fact. It is that the historical Church as we know it today, and in the form that has existed for many centuries, bears little resemblance to the faith that Jesus and the Apostles taught and the movement that they led. From the 1<sup>st</sup> through the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, the faith that most of the Christian world today calls New Testament Christianity was non-existent. What was believed and practiced was actually a Hebrew-based faith that relied mostly on the Old Testament. Only in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century had even the notion of the need for the creation of a so-called New Testament been agreed to by a scattered few local faith groups. Yet each group tended to have their own list of which of the existing letters and gospels of various religious leaders and commentators (out of the scores of them that had been written) ought to be considered as inspired of God or adopted as authoritative enough to follow. None of these groups (other, perhaps, than some who adopted gnostic philosophies) thought that their list ought to override or replace the Hebrew Bible...the Old Testament. Rather, they viewed these newer written works as a continuation of the existing Bible...or, as merely a revelation of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies....but with the Old Testament as the context for understanding these various newer letters and gospels. It would not be until very late in the 4<sup>th</sup> century that the Council of Rome would determine a list of new writings to canonize and authorize as an official Christian Bible for the Church...the New Testament as we know it today.

This canonization of an official New Testament occurred on the heels of, and on account of, the creation of what I term the Constantinian Church. Earlier in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, at the Council of Nicaea, the Church as we know it today was formed. At this council, and a few subsequent ones over the next decades, the Church was officially formed, by doctrine and decree, as a brand-new gentiles-only, distinctly anti-Jewish faith organization that brought along with it belief in Christ as divine Lord and Savior. At the same time, it disposed of almost all other

elements of the Hebrew faith that the early followers in Christ had believed and practiced for 2 centuries. And, in a shrewd political move, the Church also molded into it many practices of the Sun Worshipper religion that was the most popular religion in the Roman Empire in that era. It also disposed of Yeshua's identity as a Jew who operated within His cultural history, and most impactfully this new faith organization also disposed of the relevance of the foundational principles, prophecies, and commandments of the Old Testament.

Therefore, it is important that as 21<sup>st</sup>-century Believers we understand that in no way does what the Church looks like today, or has looked like for 1600 years, reflect what it was prior to the Roman Emperor Constantine leading certain gentile bishops of his empire to borrow Jesus from the Jews and then create a new religion that excluded them. It was to be a totally separate and fundamentally different faith than had ever before existed. Thus, intellectual honesty demands that when we use the nearly universal term "Church" in our vocabulary, we must refrain from mentally picturing it as what Christ brought about, and what the Apostles and their predominately Jewish successors taught and practiced prior to the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. So, from here forward when I refer to the Church it is only to the Constantinian Church created in the 4<sup>th</sup> century...out of which grew Catholicism, Protestantism, and the several Orthodox and other Church branches...and not to anything mentioned in the Bible, Old or New Testaments. Yet, it must also be said that the effort to abandon the God-ordained biblical faith as given to Moses in favor of something that more pleased human leadership and their agendas is nothing new; we find this problem dealt with in some of the earliest books of the Bible.

Not long ago I undertook a lengthy research and teaching project on the Book of Hosea to demonstrate that this fundamental issue I am raising with you is ever before us, and it is what was behind God preparing Israel to be severely punished and then exiled from their land in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Such a path of remaking God and His morality into our image may be called progressive, enlightened, or even reformed by the Church; but the Bible clearly labels all such attempts as idolatry. Idolatry is among the worst of the worst possible offenses against God. God (through His prophets) called Israel out for it (using the life-drama of Hosea and Gomer to demonstrate it). The religious leadership of Israel (of course) denied their idolatry, and eventually, God reacted against them catastrophically.

So, this issue has the potential to substantially alter our current faith paradigms and practices, as well as affect our personal relationship with the Lord.

What I'm going to talk to you about then is necessarily packed with information and no doubt will elicit a certain amount of discomfort. Facing the truth often results in discomfort. Maybe the best place for us to begin is to briefly tell you my own story. More than 3 decades ago, never remembering a time in my life that I didn't know who Jesus was, and after attending a number of different denominational churches from childhood to middle adulthood, with those churches all preaching essentially the same fundamental doctrines with only minor differences, I had this unsettling feeling that there had to be something more to my faith, and to my life, that comes from such an important decision as to trust Christ as my Savior. Even more troubling was that all too often what I was hearing from the pulpit didn't involve the Bible very much. Preaching about social issues was the norm, and what was said often didn't match well with the Bible I was reading. Around that same time, I was made remotely aware of something called Jewish Roots that was emerging and I was urged (very quietly) by a few Church friends to check it out. It turned out that this thing called Jewish Roots was already known by a goodly number of people in my local Christian community... just not to me.

A wonderful and kind Methodist pastor, who was a former missionary, took me under his wing to teach me more about what was behind this small but passionate Jewish Roots movement that he fully supported. I think it is fair to say that at that time the primary reason for the movement's existence was to acknowledge something rather simple: God isn't done with Israel. He has not rejected the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Or in more common and practical terms: God has NOT rejected Israel and replaced them with the 4<sup>th</sup> century gentiles-only Church. Sometimes when I say this people will respond that they've not heard this sort of negative view about Israel (or Jews) in their Church or about the Church replacing the Jews. To this, I reply that indeed that might be true. However, as a generality, this is usually because such a view is implicit in that particular denomination's doctrines without the congregation necessarily being consciously aware of it. While there are always exceptions, this centuries-old theological viewpoint about the relationship with (or, really, the intended separation between) Israel and the Church is so deeply embedded in

Christian institutions that long ago it was assigned one of those great and lofty-sounding theological names: Supersessionism. It is better known among laymen by its common nickname: Replacement Theology. This doctrine states that the Church has replaced Israel in God's plan of redemption. It also means that whatever divine blessings and purpose Israel may have had in times past, God has taken it from them and transferred it to the gentile Church.

On the surface, this subject may sound like an arcane academic topic that is better discussed among highly trained theologians or perhaps among the eminent heads of entire denominations. Yet, when one drills down into the enormous effect this Replacement Theology doctrine has had on our faith, it turns out that accepting it or denying it has much to do with the fundamental nature and substance of our personal faith, and especially on the source and substance of our morality. For pastors and Bible teachers, it forms the criteria for determining what matters, and how to read and interpret the instructions of the Bible... even which parts of it to read or to ignore...and ultimately it dictates what they believe and will go on to teach their congregations and students.

Perhaps the earliest objective of the early Jewish Roots movement was to foster closer relations between Jews and Christians. In time it evolved to expose this false Replacement Theology doctrine that essentially seeks to un-graft the Church from our Hebrew faith roots (this grafting-in is expressed in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's Book of Romans, when he speaks of gentiles being grafted into Israel's covenants with God). There was a growing realization in the Jewish Roots (aka Hebrew Roots) movement of the incalculable damage this doctrine has caused to a proper understanding of our faith, and it has also obscured the fact that God says that far from His intent that gentiles create a new religion that separates them from the biblical Hebrew faith, gentiles owe a debt to the Hebrew people as the sole carriers and caretakers for so many centuries of the true God-ordained faith.

As can happen in movements of this sort, such unbridled enthusiasm for a newfound understanding can lead to unintentional consequences. The movement's efforts tended to focus mostly on adopting Judahistic Traditions and customs. Over the last decade and a half or more, I have had numerous talks with like-minded Jewish scholars and Rabbis (in the USA and in Israel) who are

Believers in Yeshua (that is, Messianic Jews), and they too were concerned that this once promising movement had wandered off track and thus had already fractured into many disparate groups who typically fought with one another over which Jewish Traditions and customs to follow. Our thought was that while the relationship between the Church and Israel had to be redefined, the movement also had to involve something more substantial than these outward displays of customs or even of mutual respect. Rather, the means to reconnect the Church to Israel, and thus regain a proper view of our faith as God laid it out, had to come from a refined and honest biblical perspective that set aside manmade agendas. Therefore, for Believers to see the truth, it is essential that we learn how to properly read, interpret, and understand the Bible as opposed to merely accepting manmade Church doctrines that masquerade as biblical truth. That is, we need to allow the Bible to speak for itself. Our common goal, then, became less about introducing Jewish Traditions to Christians and more about teaching the Bible from the same perspective as those who wrote it and the audience it was originally intended for. The first principle that must be taught, then, is that the Bible is a thoroughly Hebrew document. Old Testament and New, all the writers of the Bible were Hebrews (except for Luke), and they all lived in a Hebrew culture. Why is this Hebrew nature of the Bible so important for us to accept as the lens through which we see the words of the Bible? The short answer is: intellectual honesty. A true faith **must** go beyond mere personal belief, opinion, and tradition. If a faith is a true faith it demands concrete evidence.

Most of you are probably not old enough to know that several decades ago it was still a fairly standard requirement in university Literature courses to read at least one of the Greek classics, almost always meaning one or both of those created by the poet, Homer: the "Odyssey" and the "Iliad". However, we were always advised that we also needed to do some research into ancient Greek history beforehand because, clearly, any and all of the Greek Classics were 1) originally written in Greek, by a Greek, about Greeks, and for an audience of Greeks, and 2) these works inherently reflected Greek culture, traditions, literary style, history and thought, and therefore the meaning was organically and exclusively connected to a Greek worldview. While readers from different cultures and later times could get something from these works without having any knowledge of ancient Greek culture and history, it would necessarily be minimal; and likely the intended meaning and sense of these writings would fly right over our heads. All



of this certainly proved to be true, and it made the intended impression on me and my fellow students.

Probably no one here would disagree with such an approach to reading the Greek classics, because with but a little thought what I just said is self-evident. But what about reading the Bible? What is the Bible, actually? The Bible is a series of Hebrew documents each separately written by a variety of authors over a timespan of around 1500 years. Each document is said to have been written under the inspiration of God. Some of the books internally claim divine inspiration; others (mostly the New Testament) do not. Rather, (as concerns the New Testament) Church leadership that came during the canonization process in the 4<sup>th</sup> century ascribed divine inspiration to those writings, retroactively. But for the exception of Luke, all the writers of the Bible were Hebrews who thought in Hebrew, spoke in Hebrew, lived in a Hebrew culture, held a Hebrew worldview, and intended their words to be read and heard by other Hebrews who, themselves, were immersed in a similar Hebrew culture and mindset because they all shared a common history. This brings us to the rather large moment of truth about which pastor and author Don Finto so ably wrote in his book: **Your People Shall Be My People**. A truth that led to my founding of a Bible-teaching ministry called Seed of Abraham Ministries that was first known as Torah Class. The goal was to re-imagine how to read the Bible in the same way we were taught to read the Greek Classics and all other literature: in the light and understanding of the culture and mindset in which they were written.

I realize that such a thought as this, if taken seriously, may sound presumptuous or it can even shake one up a bit. Considering an entirely new approach to Scripture study and how to understand what we're reading is not a trivial matter. To advocate such an undertaking implies a couple of things: first, it is that it challenges whether we have been reading the Bible properly and therefore if some of what we currently believe might not be accurate. And second, is that a new view of the Holy Scriptures will inevitably lead to a different (and I think better and deeper) understanding of God, of His Son, and therefore of our faith.

I think the overriding fear of reinstating the Old Testament and this Hebraic Heritage way of faith and Bible study is not only that we could become pariahs in the eyes of the institutional Church and lose many friends and family members

over it. Along with that is the concern that we might be faced with the unwelcome possibility that so much of what we thought we knew about God, the Bible, and other important parts of our faith might lead us away from salvation in Yeshua. In reality, however, this refined way of reading the Holy Scriptures brings us closer to God's truth and morality, and strengthens our faith in the Messiah. As Mark Twain once eloquently said: **"It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."** So, I'll approach these quite real concerns by asking you something rather personal: do you actually want to know and live the truth and to live morally? Or would you rather choose to believe and live something that is neither the truth nor moral because everyone else does? Before you answer that question, consider this:

The noted Christian Philosopher Douglas Groothuis made this simple but profound observation about truth and human nature:

***"Truth is a daunting, difficult thing; it is also the greatest thing in the world. Yet we are chronically ambivalent toward it. We seek it...and we fear it. Our better side wants to pursue truth wherever it leads; our darker side balks when the truth begins to lead us anywhere we do not want to go."***

This new approach to studying the Bible and to practicing our faith that I advocate is nothing more nor less than the search for divine truth and morality, which by its nature involves a brave willingness to go wherever that might lead us. This is something that Yeshua of Nazareth (Jesus) taught and gave an example in the story of the rich young man who came to Him asking about how to obtain eternal life. However, few have the courage and commitment to undertake it.

NAS **Matthew 19: 16-22** ***16 And behold, one came to Him and said, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?" 17 And He said to him, "Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." 18 He said to Him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not commit murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; 19 Honor your father and mother; and You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 20 The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?" 21 Jesus***

***said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." <sup>22</sup> But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieved; for he was one who owned much property.***

This story is usually framed as being about counting the cost of walking with Christ; or, alternatively, about the extraordinary difficulty of being rich and wanting to follow Him. But at its core, the message is much more fundamental. This wealthy person came to Christ supposedly seeking the truth. So, Jesus responded with the truth. But upon hearing the truth, this young man found out it led to somewhere he didn't want to go. He didn't deny the truth, he just couldn't bring himself to live out that truth because of the effect it would have on his life. He preferred to continue the status quo...allowing him to enjoy his wealth any way he chose.

This refined Hebraic Heritage approach to Bible study I'm advocating to you is not, therefore, an attempt to turn gentiles into Jews nor Jews into gentiles (because the Bible never proposes such a conversion). Nor is it an attempt to disavow our Messiah Yeshua in order to place our faith in something else. Rather, this is all about committed Believers having a desire to seek the truth, and returning to an objective morality, by taking the time and effort to study God's Word. The entire point of knowing the truth ought to be to live it out. Believing to the point of doing is the harder part, however. To get there it begins with restoring the natural and (as far as it is possible) original Hebrew foundations of our faith into our lives and our understanding, because the faith Jesus lived and taught and said that we are to follow was a Hebrew faith and not the one begun by Constantine and his bishops.

Let's continue with another fundamental biblical fact that seems so often to have become obscured: Our Savior was a Jew. Not a kind-of Jew; not a magical generic every-man in Jewish disguise; but rather a full-fledged Jew. Yeshua (which is Hebrew) is the name He was born with and the name He went by His entire life because as a Jew, He was raised in a Jewish family in the Jewish town of Nazareth. The name Jesus is English and it wouldn't appear in the world until around 1300 years later when the English language was first invented. There is nothing wrong with using either name; it's only that Yeshua is authentic and

using it keeps Him firmly entrenched in the reality of His own culture and who He really was. Yeshua was actually the 2<sup>nd</sup> most common name in His era for a male Jewish child, so there were literally thousands of males running around named Yeshua.

Another fundamental: there was no New Testament during Yeshua's, Paul's, or John's era. Let that sink in for a second. The Bible that all of them learned from, spoke about, and quoted was only what the Hebrews call the Tanach; the Old Testament. For them, there existed no other Scripture that was inspired of God other than the Old Testament. Any and all reference made in the New Testament to Scripture was **only** to the Old Testament because that's all that existed.

Here's another important fundamental principle: God is not through with Israel; they remain His chosen people and the apple of His eye. This is not a doctrine; it is a biblical promise of a special position that the Hebrews would permanently hold before God, and this promise was first made to Abraham, as recorded in the Book of Genesis,

***CJB Genesis 12:1-3 Now ADONAI said to Avram, "Get yourself out of your country, away from your kinsmen and away from your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make your name great; and you are to be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, but I will curse anyone who curses you; and by you all the families of the earth will be blessed."***

So, unless the Lord went back on His promise to Abraham at some point in history, then it is necessary that every Believer and every Church look to Abraham and the Hebrews that came from him if we expect to receive God's blessing and to know God's moral code. Remember Paul's admonition about gentiles being grafted-in? Genesis 12 explains the beginning point of the rich root system of that cultivated olive tree that would in time be called Israel. That is the source of God's blessing, and there is no other means or source of that blessing. But there is also the opposite side of the coin. This promise contains a warning that should we attempt to marginalize or even exclude these same Hebrew people from worshipping alongside of us (as has the Constantinian

Church), or say they must leave their Hebrew-ness behind and become as gentiles, then we can expect God's curse.

Another fundamental principle: it is impossible to properly understand the New Testament without first understanding the Old. The Old is the foundation and reference point for the New; the New is not a replacement of the Old nor can it be fathomed without the Old. I've often used the analogy of the Bible as a 3-act play and, just due to volume alone, the Old Testament represents the first 2 acts. Should one arrive late to a play and view only the 3<sup>rd</sup> act, then whatever the basis was for the play reaching the conclusion and climax it does will be missed. The 3<sup>rd</sup> act may well be enjoyable, even impart some information; but all continuity, context, and the basis for meaning are obscured.

Let's conjure up another illustration. I imagine we have many here who enjoy reading a good novel. When you sit down to read it do you open it about two-thirds of the way through and begin your reading there? Or do you begin at the beginning? Do you really want to understand the Bible in an intellectually honest way? Then begin at the beginning and read every page in the sequence they are presented. Do you view a novel as an encyclopedia, and so you go to the listing of chapters to explore a subject? The Bible is also not an encyclopedia separated into subjects; it is one continuing story about God's love for His creation and His creatures. We need to adopt the mindset that we have one Bible, and not two. The New Testament is but the continuation of what came before it, just as are all the books of the Old Testament laid out chronologically; each one dependent on the ones before it.

Let's pivot yet again. You all no doubt know at least the basics of the New Testament. It contains 4 Gospels, various letters (many of whom were written by Paul) that are called Epistles, and then it ends with the Apocalypse... the Book of Revelation. The Tanach (the Old Testament) is also divided into 3 main sections: the Torah, the Ketuvim, and the Nevi'im. The Torah consists of the first 5 books of the Bible. The Ketuvim means "the writings", which consist of books like the Song of Solomon, Ruth, Esther, and several more. The Nevi'im means "the prophets" and that is pretty self-explanatory. So, the Torah represents the beginning books of the Bible and the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls proves that it was no different for the Hebrews than what you carry around under your arm,

today. Same books; same words. So how is it that there are literally scores and scores of different Bible versions each vying for your buying dollar? Let's explore that since reading the Bible is the key to understanding our faith.

Nearly all Bible versions are accomplished by teams of Bible translators who are supported by one denomination or another or by one book publisher or another. As such each version has a different goal and approach; but always the end result must fall within the boundaries of the doctrines of the supporting denomination or the worldview and purpose of the publisher. Each version must set up some style rules around what it hopes to present, and this centers around how the translation will be structured and certain hermeneutical rules are applied. Thus, if one was to draw a line and use it as a scale, at the one extreme would be word-for-word Bible versions, at the opposite end it would be paraphrased Bible versions, and in the middle would be thought-for-thought Bible versions (also sometimes called dynamic translations). Here's what Bible translators and various organizations are wrestling with: any form of translating from one language to another is by its nature a form of editing. So, the only true word-for-word version of the Bible is its original language. Hebrew and Aramaic for the Old Testament and Greek for the New. The issues are these, then, especially when it comes to translating Hebrew to another language. First, Hebrew is an all-consonant alphabet; it has no vowels. That is, there are no a,e,i, or u alphabet characters in Hebrew. So how, without vowels, can you even pronounce a Hebrew word? You can't. Ancient Hebrew writing operated such that the reader would mentally add in the vowels when the written word was spoken. Further, Hebrew is sometimes called a root-word language. The set of letters used for one word can mean something different using exactly the same set of letters for another word; it all depends on how it is vocalized. However, all the words coming from that same set of letters tend to have a common connection in meaning, unlike English. Let me give you a simple illustration of this. In the English language, we have the word spelled "t-e-a-r". If we used the Hebrew alphabet the word would only consist of 2 letters, both consonants: tav and raysh (somewhat equivalent to our t and r). But even in English t-e-a-r can be pronounced in 2 different ways with 2 different and disconnected meanings. One way it means to rip something. The other way it means the water that dribbles from our eyes when we cry. So, when reading that word, how do we know which of the two completely unrelated meanings is intended? Cultural context. In that

regard, it works the same in Hebrew. But what happens if you don't know the historical **ancient** Hebrew cultural context and instead simply operate on assumptions that more mirror our current Western society worldviews?

Here's a principle that isn't spoken of enough in our world, but which, when we think about it, seems obvious: a culture and its language are organically connected. A language reflects its culture. Empire builders have known for thousands of years that when you conquer the people of another culture you have a choice to make: do you allow their culture to continue (only now under your rule), or do you bring it to an end and replace it with your own? If you want it to continue, you allow their language to continue to be spoken. If you want full assimilation, you discourage or even outlaw their language. You destroy a culture by disconnecting the people from their native language.

Since a culture is bound up in its language, then that specific language uses words that often only have meaning inside that culture. Why? Because certain concepts that exist within one culture may not exist in any other culture. Therefore, when attempting to translate languages... which essentially is an attempt to express the thoughts and concepts of one culture in the terms used by another culture...at times there are no words to express some of those unique concepts. And, all too often, the translator doesn't know or acknowledge other cultural concepts. Thus, there is little choice but to use several familiar words to explain a word that is completely foreign to your culture and language in order to get the meaning across. Here's an example of what I'm telling you. Even if you are not Jewish I suspect you've all heard the Hebrew word **shalom**. Usually, when asked a gentile says shalom is a greeting that most literally means peace. It can mean that in a very simplistic sense, but that's not all. Shalom is one of many Hebrew words that is rooted in Hebrew culture and it is more a complex concept than merely a word. It expresses a special kind of well-being that comes only from God. Shalom is divine in its source...coming only from the God of Israel... and it is worked out in the lives and existence of the Hebrew people should God see fit to bless them with His shalom. It's actually even more complex than that but we'll leave it there. The word shalom is used scores of times in the Old Testament, so how ought we translate this to English? A translator cannot use an entire sentence to translate one single word, so he must pick something that comes the closest to what he thinks is the best choice to get across a meaning

that works in that particular situation. Thus, we'll find the Hebrew word shalom translated by numerous different English words in the Bible. Peace, grace, mercy, kindness, hello, good-bye, and a few more. But none of these words tells us what that term actually meant to the minds of the speaker and hearer in ancient Hebrew culture. There are dozens of Hebrew terms that are similar, and the translator is in a bind every time he encounters one of these.

So, how *does* a translator choose? Especially if that translator has minimal familiarity with ancient Hebrew culture, or even of the Jewish culture at the time of Jesus? Truth be told, for hundreds of years, there has not been a lot of interest by Bible translators (and especially the Old Testament translators) to gain that knowledge. There are a few reasons for this; but I believe the two most prevalent ones are a belief that anything associated with Hebrew-ness, Jewishness, and Israel is not particularly relevant for a modern Christian. And, along with that view, I've had it told to me on a few occasions from heads of denominations that there is a kind of mysterious nature to the words of the Bible that are able to transcend language and culture. That is, the words of the Bible are so unique, nearly magical, in that they represent the only case known where a language CAN be separated from its culture and proper meaning still extracted. It is vitally necessary that we NOT remove the biblical words from their culture. Cultural context is the critical ingredient that can never be left out of translation or understanding the Bible.

OK. If I still have your attention, and you are thinking about how one might embark on this refinement or recalibration of understanding the Bible...and therefore of ascertaining truth and morality from God's perspective... then there is one overriding matter that cannot be bypassed, because it represents the proverbial "elephant in the room". The second part of Returning to an Objective Morality will dive into that matter and present to you a definitive answer of just how reinstating an objective morality into our lives can be achieved.