

Shema/Listen

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Jon: This is Jon from The Bible Project. This week on the podcast, we're going to do something new. As you know, the Bible was not written in English. It was written in Hebrew, Greek and a tiny bit of Aramaic. Our translations are pretty good, but even so sometimes the English words that we use, don't carry the full weight and nuance of the original words.

Tim: Now, there are so many words that we use that occur in our translations of the Bible but they don't mean what those words mean in their biblical context. And that's the problem is as we read, we read in modern meanings into these ancient words.

Jon: We're going to try to step inside the imagination of the ancient writers as they used these words to describe the world that they lived in, and the experiences they had. Here we go.

We're going to have a conversation today to prototype brand new type of video series that we're calling Word Studies. We're going to take biblical words that were in Hebrew—

Tim: Or Greek or in Aramaic.

Jon: There might be some Aramaic?

Tim: A little bit of the Hebrew Bible is Aramaic.

Jon: But the word in its original language. And we'll discuss that word. This will be kind of a Bible Dictionary kind of series.

Tim: Like a video Bible Dictionary word studies.

Jon: Yeah. It'll be these short little two minute videos.

Tim: Biblical vocabulary has this paradoxical life, I think, in Western culture, where biblical vocabulary has so shaped the English language over the last 400 years through the King James translation, that some words have passed into English and they've become so bland that we don't even know what their original meaning would be in the Bible in Greek or Hebrew. Like righteousness, or glory, or grace, or love.

Jon: Right. The English word that we use, isn't the Hebrew word, but it's this old English.

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Tim: Yeah. It might even be influenced by the biblical translations from a long time ago. But now there are so many words that we use that occur in our translations of the Bible, but they don't mean now what those words mean in their biblical context. And that's the problem is as we read, we read in modern meaning into these ancient words - when we read them in the Bible.

Jon: The first word we're going to do is the Hebrew word "Shema."

Tim: That's right. Because the first half a dozen of these videos we want to make into a little mini-series, unpacking one of the most famous verses in the Old Testament, which is a prayer. Well, it became a prayer.

It's a line in the mouth of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, that he called the people of Israel to listen to. Then this call to listen became itself a prayer in Jewish tradition called Shema. That's because the word "Shema" is the first word in this famous verse.

Jon: Which means "listen."

Tim: It means listen to listen.

Jon: The verse is "Hear, O Israel or listen, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And as for you, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your strength." What translation is that? That's your translation.

Tim: Yeah, that's my translation.

Jon: Heart, soul, and strength is—

Tim: "Soul" is the traditional King James and now the English there.

Jon: But what we want to do is unpack this verse, word by word. "Hear, O Israel" will be the first word. Then we'll talk about the word "the Lord."

Tim: The Lord, the Divine name.

Jon: The Divine Name of God.

Tim: Covenant name of God in the Old Testament.

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- Jon: Then we'll talk about love, heart, soul, and strength. Oh, man, it's going to be so great.
- Tim: These are such power packed words. Awesome.
- Jon: Let's first talk about the word "hear," "Shema."
- Tim: Shema. No breathy "h". No "chrrr" like ruach.
- Jon: Oh, right. It's a pretty simple word.
- Tim: Actually, technically, there's a silent letter after the "A" that way back when would have been like...You know how when you say the word "orange" you close your throat. Before you even say anything, pay attention to what your throat does before you say the word "orange."
- Jon: Yeah, it kind of drops.
- Tim: You close your throat so you can push air out. Orange.
- Jon: Orange.
- Tim: You close your throat. That closing of the throat is represented by a letter in Semitic languages. Then it's what you do after the last syllable.
- Jon: You close your throat at the end.
- Tim: Shema.
- Jon: So it's got this hard start?
- Tim: Yeah, it's called a guttural stop. You literally close the back of your throat. Shema.
- Jon: We don't have that in English. Do we?
- Tim: We don't know. Well, we sometimes use the same muscle.
- Jon: But at the end of a word.
- Tim: But at the end of a word. I don't know. Spaghetti. I'm trying to think of words that end in vowel. Anyway. Shema.

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Jon: I love that we're thinking of words that ends with vowels and spaghetti...

Tim: It's one of the only English words that ends with "l." There's not that many. And they are mostly Italian words. Shema, which is a very super common word, occurs hundreds of times in the Hebrew Bible and it's the word for "hear" or "listen." Just like in English "listen" or "hear."

Jon: So if I'm calling to my kids to get their attention, I'm like, "Shema."

Tim: Yeah, listen.

Jon: Pay attention.

Tim: Pay attention is different than listening. I mean, pay attention requires that you listen, but it also means you do something more. In English we have a separate phrase. Pay attention. In Hebrew...we're getting ahead of ourselves.

First here's a classic proverb. "Ears that Shema and eyes that see, the Lord has made them both."

Jon: Ears that Shema. That's what your ears do is they Shema.

Tim: Yeah. Proverbs 10:12. It's very simple. Your ears is what they take in sound waves and translate them into meaningful signals so that our brains can talk to each other. That's simple. We don't really need to... There are lots of times that gets used.

However, the word "Shema" also gets used to mean more than just that your ears hear things. It also can be used to mean what you just said, "pay attention to." In English, we have a separate phrase - "Listen," and we have "pay attention," but we also use the word "listen" to mean, pay attention.

Jon: We don't mean, "hey, just let sound waves come into your ears."

Tim: It can mean that, but we usually by context indicate that it means to hear. But we also have a separate phrase, "pay attention."

Jon: And Hebrew doesn't have a separate phrase.

Tim: In Hebrew, you just say "Shema." There's just one example picked at random. This is from Genesis Chapter 30. There's a story about Jacob and Leah. Leah is

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one of Jacob's four wives, and he does he doesn't like her as much as the others. She's unloved.

Jon: It's rough.

Tim: Yes, it's horrible. It's really dysfunctional family. She has a son and she named him Shim'on, which is a wordplay on Shema. Shim'on. Then what she says is the Lord has shemad that I am unloved - is what she says. "The Lord has heard that I am unloved."

Jon: She's paying attention.

Tim: Obviously, yeah. It means more than just "He like her to report."

Jon: He was paying attention it's what it meant.

Tim: The fact that she got pregnant and had a child, she interprets that as "the Lord paying attention to her" that she's been neglected by her husband.

Jon: Seems like pay attention denotes...I always forget what it denotes. But it seems like what pay attention is doing is it's saying, "Don't just listen. You're not just hearing, you're interpreting and you're heeding whatever that message is."

Tim: Which is closely linked then to the next nuance of meaning that Shema has, which is if you listen to something, it draws your attention and you focus on it.

Jon: Okay. So just focus.

Tim: But then, if you listen and pay attention or focus on something, you're likely to do something about it, like actually act as a response to what you are noticing. In Hebrew, that idea also is covered by this Hebrew word "Shema."

So that means not only to hear, not only to then pay attention and focus on what you're hearing, but also Shema can include respond. Like actually do something about what you're just noticed because you heard it.

Jon: So if I'm walking through the woods, and I hear someone screaming for help, and all I do is just notice a scream and I don't know if it's a bear...

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- Tim: You might even pay attention to it.
- Jon: Well, but first I just hear it. I'm hearing the birds, I'm hearing the wind, and I hear a scream. I'm just hearing things. That's the first meaning. Second meaning is it gets my attention. I hear that and I'm like, "Oh, that was important. I need to focus on that scream."
- Tim: That's what Leah says is "God paid attention. He shemad my difficult circumstance," meaning he paid attention to me.
- Jon: Then the third meaning would be, I hear it,,I focus on it and then I decide I need to go help that person.
- Tim: You actually run towards the voice and helps the person.
- Jon: And all three of those actions are Shema?
- Tim: Are covered by the word "Shema."
- Jon: So I Shema by just hearing it with all the other background noise, I Shema when I focus on it, and I Shema when I run and help?
- Tim: That's right. And if you didn't run and help, you didn't Shema.
- Jon: I didn't actually Shema?
- Tim: Yes, yes. For example—
- Jon: But I did because I—
- Tim: Yeah, right, you did. I mean, you technically heard but in the deepest sense of the word, you didn't Shema. Look at some examples in the way the word is actually used. This is all over the Psalms. Here's one just at random.
- Psalm 27:7, the poet says. "Shema my voice when I call, O Lord. Be merciful and respond to me." So you're asking God to listen. It's synonymous with "show me mercy," which is synonymous with "do something." It's all the same thing. You're obviously not just asking God to pay attention.
- Jon: Don't listen to this like an album.

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- Tim: Yeah. He's saying, "God, do something. Help me." When God helps you, that's how you know He has shemad.
- Jon: I put on a noise machine for the kids at night, and they're hearing it—
- Tim: Like white noise machine?
- Jon: Yeah, it's white noise. It's a machine and it makes the sound of like a river.
- Tim: I got like. I've used an app for that before, too. The white noise app. But you have a machine?
- Jon: Yeah. Actually, it's something that my wife did. So now we just do it every night. There are different things. There's water, there's the sound of a forest, the sound of just white noise. So you hear that, but you're not really listening to it.
- Tim: Yeah, the whole point is actually that it becomes white background noise that you don't pay attention.
- Jon: So the Psalmist here isn't saying, "God treat my voice like background noise that you can fall asleep to."
- Tim: That's right. That would mean that God has not Shemad.
- Jon: He hasn't actually Shemad. But there's no other word. What would a Hebrew person be doing if they're listening to background noise?
- Tim: Well, this is how words work in languages is the kind of like our heaven and earth circles. Venn overlapping circles? Venn diagrams. That's a common tool used in linguistics. So you have separate words. Like in English, "Hear" and "Listen," they're two separate words but the circles overlap in a big way.
- Jon: So you could use the word in one sense, use the word in another sense?
- Tim: Yeah, but you would have to do a full study of those two English words and how they're different. They don't fully overlap, but they do overlap. There are other words for pay attention, don't simply mean to listen. Yeah, yeah, there is one. Kashav [SP]
- Jon: What does that mean?

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Tim: It means to notice. You notice by either hearing or looking. That's kashav. But Shema is the broadest word "to hear," and it overlaps with kashav - to notice. It also overlaps with the word like "to act," asah, which means to do something.

The word Shema overlaps with all these other ideas, but it's just one word that you can use in these different ways. And it's similar. English has similar. If I ask my five-year-old to clean up the yogurt that he just intentionally spilled on the floor, if he doesn't do it all ask him, "Why aren't you listening?" Which means, "Why aren't you acting?"

Jon: And he could be like, "I did listen." And you're like, "No, you didn't actually listen?"

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Okay, got it.

Tim: It's very similar to how the word works in English.

[00:16:04]

Tim: Here's another interesting example. This is when Israel's at the foot of Mount Sinai. They've been rescued out of Egypt, and they're about to enter into this really formal covenant agreement, like a marriage. This is a story in Exodus Chapter 19.

This is the significant line. God says, "If you Shema me and keep My covenant, then out of all the nations you'll be my treasured possession. Even though all the earth belongs to me, you'll be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." This is about Israel becoming a different kind of nation, a different people group that represents God's character for all the nations, and all hinges upon them listen. Shema. If you Shema.

Now, there are two things interesting about this sentence that God says. One is that in Hebrew there's this really cool idiom or kind of grammar tool that's used in Hebrew word. If you want to emphasize a word, you just use the word twice. When you're reading and Hebrew, it actually reads, "if you shema shema." If you listen listen.

Jon: Listen listen.

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Tim: Which means "really listen." This is for verbs. You can do it with nouns too like Song of Songs, meaning the best song, or the Holy of Holies, meaning the really holy place. But you can do it with the verbs through this other way. When you're reading Hebrew, they're very obvious to notice because it's just shema shema.

First of all, if you really Shema. Then second, the phrase right after it, shows you what Shema means. If you Shema and keep my covenant, they're synonymous. So to not keep the terms of the covenant means that you haven't listened.

Actually, this line is so important that all throughout the book of Exodus, the rest of the Torah on into the historical books, this motif, of listening or not listening becomes this key theme running through the whole story, which highlights the interesting fact.

In English we have a separate word for listening to somebody who knows better than you and doing what they say. Actually, probably I have a few words for it.

Jon: What word do you see?

Tim: Obey.

Jon: Oh, obey. Listen to someone—

Tim: Who knows better than you or who's in a position of responsibility over you or authority over you. Obey. Or you can wear it on t-shirt with hundreds of giant's face. Obey.

We have a word for responding to and acting to the wishes of somebody who's in authority responsible for you, knows better than you. That's what obey means. Obey.

We have this separate English word for "obey" that was fascinating. There is no ancient Hebrew biblical word for obey.

Jon: There's no ancient biblical word for "obey"?

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Tim: It's Shema. In Exodus 19, you have, God has rescued Israel, He knows what's best for them, He's taking responsibility for them as their authority and what He ask them to do is keep the terms of the covenant.

Actually, if you look in almost all of our modern English translations in Exodus 19:4, they don't translate it "if you listen." What they translate it is "if you obey." Just go look it here. I'll just do a quick survey.

Jon: This is for Exodus?

Tim: Yeah, Exodus 19:5. New International Version, "if you obey me fully." English Standard Version, "if you will indeed obey My voice." New American Standard, "if you will then indeed obey My voice." New Revised Standard Version, "If you obey My voice." King James, "if you obey My voice." At least those are the big five.

So the majority of translators don't even let you know that the Hebrew word here is actually the word "listen." And because they're giving you the meaning, what it means here isn't simply "listen." It means "response."

Jon: Now we've talked about four different layers.

Tim: Yes, that's right.

Jon: Like you could hear someone scream, but it's background noise.

Tim: Did you hear that or did you not hear that?" "Oh, I think I heard it."

Jon: Then there's the pay attention. Like, "That's an important scream. What is that?" Then there's like, "I'm gonna go and help this person who's screaming." That's the third one. Then there is [unintelligible 00:21:55] fit in this, like someone telling you to help that person. That person commanding you to come help him?

Tim: Yeah. It would be like, "Come help." You're a soldier, and it's like you're general, and they are like, "I order you! Come get me out of this pit or something." I'm sorry. That was really stupid.

Jon: No. We had to stay in that world that I created.

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Tim: You're following orders. You're honoring the directive you've been given by somebody who knows better than you.

Jon: Because how do you ingest an order through your ears? Right?

Tim: Yeah, respond to it. That's right.

Jon: When you're ordered by someone, they're always telling you.

Tim: Yes.

Jon: They didn't have like memos back then. You wouldn't get an email order.

Tim: All of this is underneath some of these famous lines in the Hebrew prophets. Like Jeremiah repeats this line where he says, "Israel, they broken the covenant. They have eyes, but they don't see. They have ears but they don't Shema." It's very intuitive. You get what he's saying there.

This is also what's underneath that famous parable image in the New Testament in the letter of James about not just being a hearer of the Scriptures but a doer. You know the passage?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It's at the end of Chapter 1. The end of James. It says, "Don't merely listen..." Now, he's writing in Greek, but he's Jewish. He grew up reading the Hebrew Bible. So even though he's writing in Greek, the apostles are often thinking in Hebrew.

"Don't merely listen and deceive yourselves. Actually, do what the Scriptures call you to do. Anyone who listens to the Scriptures, but doesn't do what they say it's like, looking at your face in the mirror, and then after looking, going away and immediately forgetting what it is you look like."

Jon: So he compares listening to seeing?

Tim: Yeah. It kind of swaps that out the ears with the eyes.

Jon: Like, "Did you really look if you don't remember what you were looking at a second later?" Did you really see it?" And his point is, "No, you didn't actually

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just see it." In the same way, "Did you really listen if it didn't change your behavior?"

Tim: That's right. That's the Hebrew word "Shema" has these ranges of meaning. When you bring it all the way back then to the famous verse that were focusing on, the Shema, which became a prayer and Judaism that Jewish people pray morning and evening, every day. And what is it that they're to hear? It says, "Shema, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone, or the Lord is one."

Maybe we should add the word one so we can talk about that. Because this isn't making a philosophical statement about the multiplicity or singularity of God's being. This is about Israel worshiping their fidelity to one God who redeemed them from slavery, not any of the other gods, the Canaanites or Babylonians. So "Listen, the Lord is our God." That's something you—

Jon: You need to listen to.

Tim: Yeah, totally. I mean, just stop and think about that. You can totally hear that and just be like, "Yeah, of course. Of course, yes. Whatever. I'm Jewish. I'm one of God's people. Fine."

Jon: It's like when you go to your kid and you're like, "Listen, I'm your dad."

Tim: Yeah, totally. But somehow listening to the fact that this God alone is my God is supposed to have a fundamental effect on my behavior. If it doesn't, then I haven't listened. And it's clear that I don't listen well, because my whole tribe has adopted the practice of saying this out loud to ourselves every morning when you wake up and every night before you go to bed. So the listening to this fact becomes something that shapes our whole culture and life together as a people. That's the purpose of the Shema. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God the Lord alone."

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode. The Bible project is a nonprofit. We're based in Portland, Oregon. We believe the Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus and has profound wisdom for the modern world.

We make videos and other resources that you could find on our website, thebibleproject.com. You can watch all our videos on YouTube, youtube.com/thebibleproject.

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This year we have a lot of great stuff coming out. We've got this Word Study series kicking off, we're still cruising through the Gospel of Luke, we're still working on a series on how to read the Bible, and we got a few theme videos coming out this year. Thanks for listening in and being a part of this.