

Followers of the Way

Sermon: 24 October 2021

Preacher: Philip Quenby

Genesis 1:1

Last week, Lynda took us back to foundations, reminding us that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. This week, we're looking at foundations again – and you can't get much more foundational than the first sentence of the Bible! This is the most important verse in the whole of Scripture. If it's not true, then there's no firm basis for what comes after it. If it *is* true, then everything that follows is of monumental and everlasting significance.

There are two things I'd like you to take from what I'm going to say:

First, a renewed confidence in God's Word and wonderment at the depth of riches it contains. Think about it:

- Written in 3 different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek)
- Using different forms of literature (letters, poems, history, prophecy, apocalyptic)
- By people from every walk of life, from highest to lowest, shepherds to king
- With its writers not always having access to what had been written by the others
- Yet containing no inconsistency (paradox, yes, and some things we can't yet explain fully)
- Never proven wrong
- As solid a guide on facts as on morals

Second, a sense of excitement about exploring the Hebrew roots of our faith and walking in a Hebraic understanding of the Scriptures:

- Not so as to become Judaizers
- Nor to put ourselves back under the Old Testament dispensation
- But as part of becoming true sons of Zion (Zechariah 9:13)
- The Hebrew mind puts God at the centre, with everything integrated into this world view
- The Greek mind elevates man – his mind, body, sexuality
- Greek philosophy distinguishes between physical (bad) and spiritual (good)
- Contrast Hebraic descriptions of God in tangible terms – my Rock, my High Tower

With these two things as background, consider the first sentence of the Bible. Ten words in English but 7 in Hebrew – the number of completeness or perfection.

BERESHITH BARA ELOHIM

'T

HA'SHAMAYIM

V'ET

HA'ARETZ

We call the book Genesis (a Greek word) but Jews call it Bereshith, from its first word in Hebrew (meaning, in the beginning).

Bereshith starts with Bet, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Before this come the first letter, Aleph. This is a silent letter and the rabbis say it represents God contemplating all He is going to do in and through Creation. How much deeper this idea becomes if we think of a trinitarian God, when Father, Son and Holy Spirit combine in perfect love and fellowship to consider and discuss together all that they will do. More about Aleph in a moment.

Bet conveys the explosive B of the first moment of Creation. It's closed on three sides (showing the fixed aspects of Creation – the “things that must be” of Revelation 4:1) and open on the fourth (a picture of potential, possibility, the accommodation of Free Will). Note that Hebrew is written right to left – the opposite of our script – so the open side of Bet is in front of us, not behind us.

The Hebrew letter Bet



Bereshith = in the beginning. Not the beginning for God, but the beginning of Creation and the beginning of time.

In the beginning, God created. The word used for God is Elohim = the strong one. The noun is plural but it has a singular verb (bara) so we know it refers to the Creator God rather than gods in the plural. The plural form emphasises strength, majesty and creative power. But it's also an intriguing hint that the one true God isn't straightforwardly singular.

Strikingly, Jesus is at the very centre of this creative work and of God's unfolding plans and purposes. The central word in the first sentence of Genesis (the fourth word out of seven) is made up of two letters: Aleph (the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet) and Tav (the last letter). When John heard Jesus say, “I am the Alpha and the Omega” (Revelation 22:13), he wrote this in Greek as that was the lingua franca of the time. But as a Jew he almost certainly heard it as, “I am the Aleph and the Tav.” In Jewish thinking, this encompasses not just the first and last letters but all the letters in between – Jesus is the whole shooting match, the all and everything.

THE ALPHA AND OMEGA, THE FIRST AND THE LAST



Aleph Tav is not so much a word as an idea, concept or understanding. It conveys the idea of total completeness, and Jews understand it to stand for the strength or power of the covenant. Since all covenants are established in and through Christ, the Aleph Tav is

like His watermark, appearing over 7,000 times in the Old Testament (though untranslated in our Bibles). Some examples:

Ruth gains an Aleph Tav in front of her name when she marries her kinsman-redeemer Boaz. Even gentiles are adopted into God's family and become His children. From the moment we accept Jesus, we receive His Aleph Tav mark.

Esau loses the Aleph Tav in front of his name when he sells his birth-right for a mess of potage. From that moment, the Aleph Tav appears in front of Jacob's name.

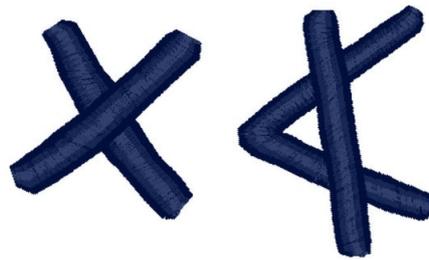
The Aleph Tav is present at Passover: "The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the Aleph Tav blood, I will pass over you." (Exodus 12:13, see also 12:23).

And it's present at the future redemption of Israel: "they shall look upon me Aleph Tav whom they have pierced." (Zechariah 12:10).

Aleph can mean an initiator or author (in the sense of someone who starts something). Tav means the finisher. So, when the writer of Hebrews talks about Jesus as the Author and Finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), he's referring back to Genesis 1:1. It's a reminder that the Bible is a Jewish book through and through.

The shape of the letter Tav has changed over time. Originally it looked like a cross.

Aleph Tav in Paleo-Hebrew



Hold that in your mind as we look at the Hebrew for a wonder or sign, Ot, written by putting the letter Vav between Aleph and Tav.

Ot = sign or wonder

אֵוֶט

Aleph – the leader, the first, the strongest

Vav – and, hook, nail, pin

Tav – the cross, two crossed sticks

Vav is a connective. It can be translated "And", but it's anything that connects or holds together, like a hook or nail. Put this together and we see:

Aleph – the leader, the first, the strongest = Jesus

Vav – and, hook, nail, pin = was nailed

Tav – the cross, two crossed sticks = to the cross

This is our sign and wonder!

The Old Testament books were the only Scriptures available to Jesus' disciples. These provided the foundation for who could and couldn't be the Messiah. If Jesus had told

them things inconsistent with the Old Testament, they would have had to reject Him, even if signs and miracles accompanied His teachings. Because signs and wonders can be deceptive and hence cannot be a basis for Truth by themselves.

Yet Philip told Nathaniel they'd found the man Moses wrote about in the Torah, and about whom the prophets also wrote (John 1:45).

The Aleph Tav symbols reinforce the unity of the Old and New Testaments. They show the whole Bible should be studied as one coherent, non-negotiable text.

Be strengthened and encouraged today. The message of the Bible is so simple, a child can grasp its basic principles. But the Scriptures contain such depths that a dozen lifetimes won't be enough to plumb them.

Is the Bible trustworthy and true? Emphatically, yes! And Jesus is at the very centre of its very first sentence. He is indeed the Way, the Truth and the Life. All praise to His name.

Amen