

The Biblical Heritage Center's

DISCOVERING THE BIBLE

Viewing the ancient messages of our Bibles in their cultural & historical context. Understanding the journey of our biblical heritages.

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What Does God Require?

By Jim Myers

An unforgettable moment that almost every Informed Believer, with a Christian biblical heritage, never forgets is the moment he or she became aware of the differences between **the Jewish Yeshua** and **the Roman Jesus**. It is a shocking experience, to say the least. The Jewish Yeshua was the person that lived in the first century CE and some of his teachings are recorded in the **Synoptic Gospels** – *Matthew, Mark & Luke*. The Roman Jesus is a theological creation of Gentile Christians, who were heavily influenced by Roman Emperors and the pre-Christian pagan beliefs of generations of Gentile church leaders.

Who the Roman Jesus was and what he required of his followers fluctuated from time to time; depending on who was in charge of the church. In the famous 4th century CE conflict between two Alexandrian church leaders, **Arius** and **Athanasius**, the Roman Church first ruled that Athanasius was correct, reversed its position in favor of Arius for a while, and then reversed it again back to Athanasius. The status of their followers changed from orthodox believers to lost heretics without any changes in their individual beliefs. Changing the "official standard" for determining who is saved or damned has been repeated many times throughout the history of Christianity. However, the constant factor found almost universally among the different standards of salvation is that they all require adherence to the "correct beliefs," which is determined by a religious institution.

Athanasius taught that "there were three persons in one god," and his group was called "**Trinitarians**." Arius taught that "there is only one indivisible god," and his group was called the "**Monarchianists**." Their struggle for control is one of the famous events in the history of the Christian Church -- the **Arian Controversy**. It took place over three centuries after Yeshua's crucifixion, which is time span longer than the United States has been a nation. *Think about how long that actually was for a moment.* Over 300 years had passed and Christian leaders are still arguing about who Jesus was. Isn't it amazing that the same people taught that the one they were arguing about was the founder of their Church and the source of salvation? *Wouldn't you think that of all the things they could possibly argue about, who their founder was would be last?*

Athanasius ultimately won the argument and his beliefs became important core beliefs which are found in the Belief Systems of over 2,100,000,000 Christians today. Other contributors to the new beliefs pool were **Marcion, Justin, Origen, Tertullian, Augustine, Chrysostom**, etc. Interestingly, the church experience of most Christians is that they are taught primarily about Jesus and Paul, but nothing about the centuries that stand between the writers of the New Testament books and the formation of their

denomination. This situation is not because of the lack of information. One great resource is The Writing of the Early Church Fathers, a 38-volume collection of writings from the first 800 years of the Church. This collection is divided into three series, Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene. They are online at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers.html> -- and anyone may read them and it's FREE!

If it isn't a lack of information that prevents members from being taught about the history of Christianity at their church, what is it? Most institutions simply focus on their agendas instead of revealing how their agenda was created. The agenda is to "save" people, not educate them. According to them, this is what God requires. My experience has been that it is not uncommon for even the most zealous leaders to not even have an accurate understanding of the history of their own denominations. Just as in the days of Athanasius and Arius, infighting results in the splitting of groups into new forms of Christianity. One study reported that there are now over 30,000 forms of Christianity in existence today. Some are mutually exclusive, which means that they teach that they are the true Christians and other Christians are not. They all point to Jesus as their founder and savior – and declare they are doing what God requires. The question that should be a top priority for every Christian is -- **How did a Jewish sect evolve into 30,000 different forms of a Gentile religion?** Why is this never discussed at church?

The Jewish Yeshua and the Roman Jesus are not interchangeable; in many cases they are polar opposites. Neither will fit into the historical and cultural environment of the other. In Yeshua's world the Romans were the "bad guys," while in Jesus' they are "the good guys." I am sure the fact that the Jews traveled on roads lined with crucified Jews hanging on crosses probably had a lot to do with what they thought of the Romans. Of course, the Roman army destroying their Temple at Jerusalem in 70 CE didn't help elevate their popularity either. Roman military campaigns against the Jews continued until 135 CE when **Bar Kohbah** was defeated.

It is pretty easy to figure out how the Roman military felt about the Jews, but how did the Roman Church feel about them? At the First Church Council held at Nicea in 325 CE, **Roman Emperor Constantine the Great** shared a few of his beliefs about the Jews:

“. . . it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul. (. . .) Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd; for we have received from our Savior a different way." (Eusebius. "Life of Constantine (Book III)", 337 CE.)

John Chrysostom (347–407 CE), the Archbishop of Constantinople, was an important Early Church Father. The Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches both honor him as a saint. His influence on church teachings is interwoven throughout the current Catechism of the Catholic Church (revised 1992), which cites him in eighteen sections. Below are quotes from his "**Eight Homilies Against the Jews.**"

"How dare Christians have the slightest intercourse with Jews! They are lustful, rapacious, greedy, perfidious bandits: pests of the universe! Indeed, an entire day would not suffice to tell of all their rapine, their avarice, their deception of the poor, their thievery, and their huckstering.

Are they not inveterate murderers, destroyers, men possessed by the devil? Jews are impure and impious, and their synagogue is a house of prostitution, a lair of beasts, a place of shame and ridicule, the domicile of the devil, as is the soul of the Jew. As a matter of fact, Jews worship the devil; their rites are criminal and unchaste; their religion a disease; their synagogue an assembly of crooks, a den of thieves, a cavern of devils, an abyss of perdition!

Why are the Jews degenerate? Because of their hateful assassination of Christ. This supreme crime lies at the root of their degradation and woes. The rejection and dispersion of the Jews was done by the wrath of God because of His absolute abandonment of the Jews. Thus, the Jew will live under the yoke of slavery without end.

God hates the Jews, and on Judgment Day will say to those who sympathize with them: `Depart from Me, for you have had intercourse with My murderers!' Flee, then, from their assemblies, fly from their houses, and hold their synagogue in hatred and aversion."

It is easy to understand why the Jews were viewed as the "bad guys" by the Roman Church with the Emperor and leaders making comments like those above. Obviously, such comments would not have inspired Jews to convert to Christianity either. Chrysostom's declaration – "The rejection and dispersion of the Jews was done by the wrath of God because of His absolute abandonment of the Jews." – led to the formation of the doctrine of "Replacement Theology." It states that God replaced the Jews as his "chosen people" with the Roman Church. It was the only way to wrestle divine authority away from the nation whose history is recorded in the Church's own Bible.

One thing you will never find in the Synoptic Gospels is Yeshua saying anything about God abandoning the Jewish people and to replace them with a new Gentile religion. This is a key point on which the Jewish Yeshua and Roman Jesus differ. However, the bias beliefs of later Gentile scribes can be identified by how they present the Romans as the "good guys" and the Jews are the "bad guys" in the New Testament. I am sure the Jewish readers of the first century would not have missed their attempt to revise history.

On the other hand, when we view many of the teachings of Yeshua through Jewish eyes, they fit perfectly within the Jewish cultural context of the Late Second Temple Period, which ended in 70 CE when the Roman army destroyed the Temple at Jerusalem. During this period three famous Jewish teachers lived that influenced later Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, which both descended from earlier Jewish sects. The names of those teachers were **Hillel**, **Shammai** and **Yeshua**. Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism usually fail to include the influence of all three in their historical models of this period. Jewish versions fail to recognize the role of Yeshua, while Christian versions downplay or completely leave out the roles of Hillel and Shammai. Readers of Yeshua's words should be aware of all three teachers to accurately understand his words.

Yeshua addressed issues that were important to his Jewish audience. Hillel and Shammai also addressed many of the same issues. The people listening to Yeshua were probably aware of their positions and understood where he stood in relationship to them. Imagine what it would be like for a person living in the year 4010 to find a 2008 Alan Keyes speech without knowing anything about the author's culture, the fact that he was

a presidential candidate, what the positions of the other candidates were or what events were taking place at that time. How accurately do you think he would be able to understand Mr. Keyes' message?

The more you learn about the world in which Yeshua lived the wider the vistas of understanding will open to reveal the meanings of his words. Some of the debates between Hillel and Shammai are recorded in the **Mishnah** (Oral Law). On the common issues that Yeshua addressed, which are recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, he sided with Hillel's position in every case except for one, in which he agreed with Shammai.

The animosity between the followers of Shammai and Hillel is hard to understate. Shammai is usually described as holding a strict fundamentalist view of Scripture and observance. Hillel is seen as holding a much more lenient view. One of the controversial issues that would have been of interest to both is recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. It begins with a question from a lawyer, a Pharisee, to Yeshua.

But when the **Pharisees** had heard that he had put the **Sadducees** to silence, they were gathered together.

Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, testing him, and saying, "Master, which is the great commandment in the **Torah**?"

Yeshua said unto him, "You shall love **Yahweh your Elohiym** with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, 'You shall love **your neighbor** as yourself.' **On these two commandments hang** all the **Torah and the Prophets**." (Matthew 22:34-40)

This text is loaded with cultural clues (underlined words) that reveal important insights for those knowledgeable about Yeshua's Jewish culture. It opens with the reference to a topic that would have been very important to every major Jewish sect of that period, especially the **Pharisees and Sadducees**. In the preceding section, Yeshua sided with the Pharisees concerning the issue of "resurrection." The Sadducees held that there was no such thing. They taught that death was the end of the road, and that there was nothing after death. The Pharisees taught that there would be a "resurrection of the dead" at some future point in time and people would live again. After the lawyer saw that Yeshua agree with his position on this important belief and must have felt that Yeshua would also agree on other issues too. However, he also wanted to test Yeshua first -- just to make sure.

Many English translations have the word "law" in their version, but Yeshua would have said "**Torah**" instead. The Jewish Scriptures are **divided into three sections** today – **T**orah, **N**evi'im (Prophets) & **K**etuvim (Writings). The first letters of each section are used to form the name of the Jewish Scriptures or Bible – **Tanakh**. It is important to understand that the books found in our Bibles today were separate scrolls at the time of Yeshua. The fact that we view them as sections of one book is very different from the way they were viewed back then. The fact that we have easy access to our Bibles is very different from what people experienced two thousand years ago. Scrolls were very

expensive and only very wealthy individuals would have been able to purchase any of the scrolls of the books found in our modern translations.

The Pharisees and Sadducees also disagreed about which scrolls should be designated as "Scripture." The Sadducees held that only the writings of the **Torah** were Scripture, but the Pharisees argued that the **Prophets** should also be included. The **Torah** contains *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy*. In the **Prophets** are *Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*. The Pharisees believed the Torah held a higher priority than the Prophets, but they considered both as sacred "Scripture."

Let's take another look at the lawyer's question -- "Master, which is the great commandment in the **Torah**?" Notice that he didn't mention the Prophets. Maybe this was part of his test. Was he trying to get Yeshua to respond in a way that would once again place him in opposition to the Sadducees concerning the Scriptures? Yeshua answered him by quoting not one, but two commandments from the Torah.

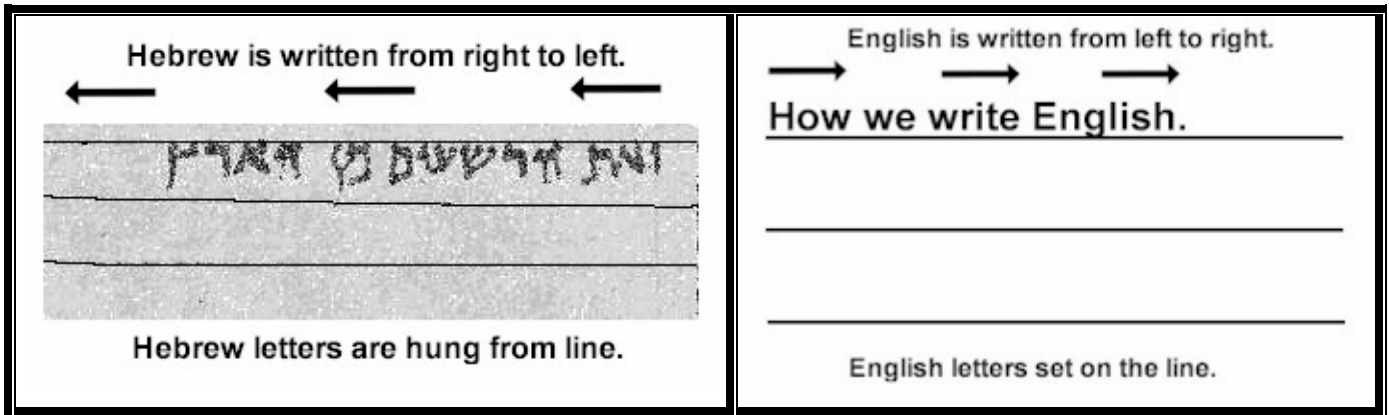
Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our Elohiym. Yahweh is one. And you shall love Yahweh your Elohiym with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

You shall not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am Yahweh. (Leviticus 19:18)

The first commandment is called the "**Shema**." In Rabbinic Judaism today it is a declaration of faith, a pledge of allegiance to One God. It is said by Jews upon arising in the morning and upon going to sleep at night. It is said when they praise God and when they beseech Him. It is the first prayer that a Jewish child is taught to say and it is the last words a Jew utters with his or her last breath. It is still one of the most important commandments in the Torah.

The second is also a very important commandment and is found in Jewish prayers and synagogue rituals today. The commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" is a defining characteristic of Judaism. The importance of this teaching goes all the way back to the time of Adam and Eve. If Cain had followed this commandment the biblical history of mankind would have been very different.

Just how important these two commandments were to Yeshua is missed by many readers of modern Bible translations. A cultural clue is found in Yeshua's answer to the lawyer's question and its meaning may have sent shock waves through his audience as they grasped what he was saying. The clue consists of one word – "**hang**." Let's look at that part of his answer again – "On these two commandments **hang** all the **Torah** and the **Prophets**." What did "hang" mean to him in that context? Below is a picture of a line from "The Peshier to Habakkuk" scroll, which was found in a cave at the Dead Sea. I enhanced the lines so you would be able to see them better. Notice the differences between Hebrew and English.



The line is the key; it is the thing that supports the letters. Without the line the whole message would come crashing down. Yeshua’s point was that Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18 combine to form the line, which supports all of the letters of the Torah and Prophets. Without the Jewish people loving God with all their heart, soul and might; not avenging or bearing a grudge against God’s people; and, by loving their neighbor as themselves – the whole Torah and Prophets will collapse. This was the heart of the kingdom message Yeshua preached as he traveled from town to town. A point that he made repeatedly was that focusing on specific commandments, while destroying “the line” that held supported them, was not what God required.

The importance of loving one’s neighbor is also seen in the teachings of Hillel. Compare his teaching to those of Yeshua. Keep in mind that Hillel’s were first. Hillel was teaching before Yeshua was born and he died when Yeshua was just becoming a teenager.

- Hillel: “What is hateful to yourself do not do to another, that is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary.” (BT Shab. 31a)
- Yeshua: “In everything, do unto others as you would have them do to you . . . for this is the Torah and the Prophets.” (Matt. 7:12)
- Hillel: “Judge not your fellow man until you yourself come into his place” (M. Abot 2:5)
- Yeshua: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged.” (Luke 6:37)

Both Hillel and Yeshua are teaching about the same commandment of “loving your neighbor.” Rabbi Akiva, an important teacher of the second century CE called “love your neighbor the major principle of the Torah” (JT Nedarim 9:4). The priority of this commandment is seen in the teachings of generations of rabbis. It should also be noted that in Hebrew the phrase “as yourself” can also mean “as though he were yourself.” The bottom line is that one should treat his fellowman the same way that he or she wants God to treat him or her. This is what Yeshua taught that God required.

Even though the rabbis agreed on the requirement of love, they engaged in heated debates over one central question -- “Who is my neighbor?” Shammai’s position was that “a neighbor was only God-fearing, observant Jews.” Hillel took the position that everyone, including one’s enemies, was included in the term “neighbors.” But there was

one exception – “the hated, apostate Samaritans.” They also worshipped only Yahweh, but had their own Temple and version of the Torah. The status of their place in the Jewish society was always in question. It was within this cultural and historical context that Yeshua decided to address this popular issue in a very famous parable.

But he (the lawyer), willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

And Yeshua answering said, “**A certain man went down from Jerusalem** to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there **came down** a certain **priest** that way; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a **Levite**, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain **Samaritan**, as he journeyed, came where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, went to him, bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, set him on his own beast, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the next day when he departed, he took out two pence, gave them to the host, and said unto him, ‘Take care of him; and if you spend more, when I come again, I will repay you.’ Now which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor unto the man that fell among the thieves?”

And he (the lawyer) said, “He that showed mercy on him.”

Yeshua said unto him, “Go, and you do likewise.” (Luke 10:29-37)

Yeshua doesn’t reveal anything about the victim, but the use of the phrase “went down from Jerusalem” would have caught his Jewish audience’s attention. “Going up to Jerusalem” was a reference used to signify going to the Temple, while returning home was “went down from Jerusalem.” The fact that a priest and Levite also “came down” would seem to support the position that they were also returning home from the Temple after completing their schedule of service. If they had been going to the Temple the phrase “going up” would have been used. An example that may better reflect the message for modern readers is – “A priest and a preacher were returning home after completing their church service and they saw an injured man.”

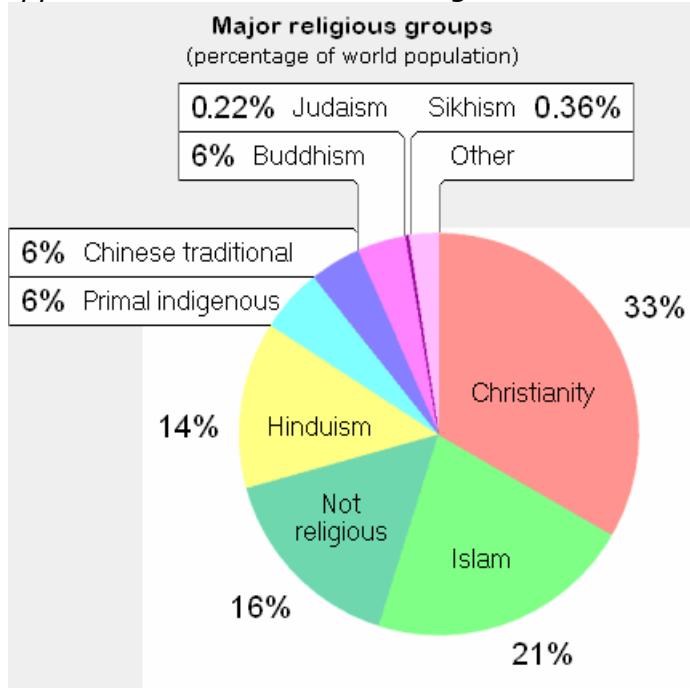
Why would they ignore the injured man and not help him? Many commentaries state that they did it because they did not want to lose their ritual purity and would have become unable to participate in Temple activities. But the man wasn’t dead; if they had touched him it would not have defiled them anyway. However, since they were coming down it doesn’t seem like it would have been an issue anyway.

Regardless, what did God require and what was most important to Him – religious rituals or preserving the life of a human being? Hillel and Shammai would have had an interesting debate over Yeshua’s parable and may have agreed or disagreed as to whether the victim was the “neighbor” of the priest or the Levite. What do you think they would have thought when Yeshua introduced a “Samaritan” who fulfilled the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself,” while the priest and Levite didn’t. What would they have wanted the victim to do for them if their places had been reversed? *What would they have told the man that God required of him?*

When Hillel died in 10 CE, Shammi took over the Pharisee role within the Sanhedrin and became the primary religious influence in Judea. In the region of Galilee where Yeshua lived and was raised, the teachings of Hillel held sway. The Pharisees that opposed Yeshua are often identified as Judeans, which reflect their link to Shammai; whereas those sympathetic to Yeshua are called Galileans, which reflects their link to Hillel. The famous rabbi Gamaliel defended the followers of Yeshua and he was Hillel's grandson. Pay close attention to the geographical setting in which events of the Synoptic Gospels take place. It will alert you as to whether the audience should have more followers of Hillel or Shammai and what issues would have been important to them.

When viewed through the eyes of the Jewish culture Yeshua's teachings fit perfectly within the Late Second Temple Period, but many of the interpretations linked to the Roman Jesus do not. This may present a tremendous challenge for those who have been taught that belief in the Roman Jesus was the top priority of God. I know what it's like to believe that you have done everything that God requires to ensure that your eternal destiny will be heaven. No one likes to have to face the uncomfortable situation of having to deal with questions they thought they had found the answers for long ago. *But what choice do we have if we discover our old comfortable answers are not supported by the Scriptures on which they were supposed to have been based?*

Powerful institutions and organizations have vested interests in protecting and promoting their historical models. As a matter of fact, their very **power depends on how many people can be persuaded that their beliefs are true.** *What would happen if their members no longer believed them?*



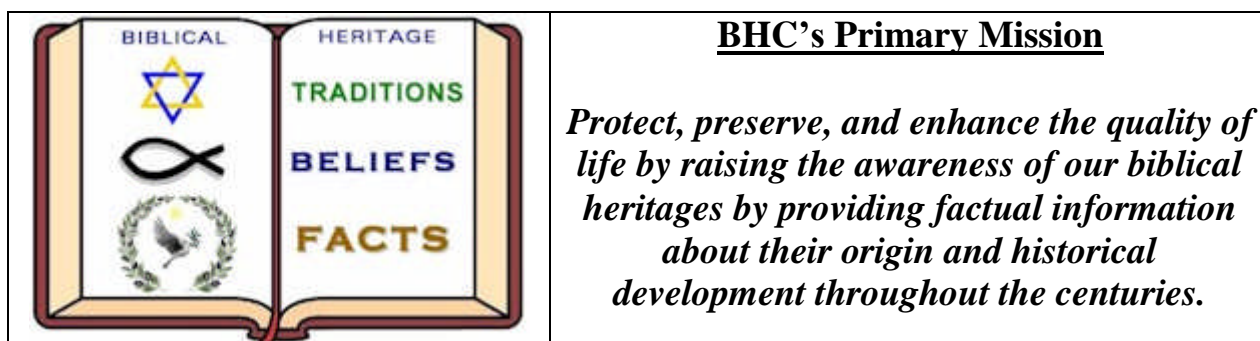
Prepared for Wikipedia using data for 2005 from Adherents.com.
NOTE: Total is more than 100% due to rounding up the figures.

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d6/Major_religions_2005_pie.png

Two religions that share a common biblical heritage are Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism. Combined they make up one-third of the world's population. Look closely at the pie chart you will see that Judaism's slice is so narrow that it looks like a bold line. It is Christianity that has the largest piece of the entire pie.

What would happen if 2,100,000,000 Christians decided that what God required was for people to "love their neighbors as themselves," not blind adherence to man-made doctrines? If the top priority, the most important commandment, is the preservation of human life, it is impossible to justify religious beliefs that harm or take human life. *It's what one does in his or her daily life that was the most important to the Jewish Yeshua.*

When the top priority is correct beliefs a person can do anything to another person and "believe" that his or her salvation is still assured. But, when the top priority is "loving one's fellow man through actions that preserve and protect life," the situation is completely different. **Which will make our world a safer and better place?** **BHC**



Thank you for reading this newsletter.

Matters of belief & faith are important factors in the quality of life we lead, because they affect the religious, political and social environments in which we live. They influence how we relate to other people by creating the moral and value systems we hold. The Bible and the heritages linked to it are held by over 2,000,000,000 people today. It is extremely important that they have factual information about the critical components of the Belief Systems that influence many of their daily decisions and create the realities through which they view life.

One of our most important missions is to raise the awareness of the power biblical heritages play in Belief Systems by providing factual information so people are able to accurately understand the origins and historical development of the biblical heritages over the centuries. Incorrect information leads to bad and harmful decisions.

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