

Can you hear Me now?
A word study on the Old Testament use of the term “hear”

The Hebrew noun šēma' (or šēmû'âh) and its verb šāma' is used to mean “the physical sense of hearing” and often includes the mental process of “understanding the content of the message”.

Word studies of ancient Hebrew words can be very difficult. While context can provide information on the nuances of meaning, the best source for most scholars is found in the Septuagint where Jewish scholars translated Hebrew into Greek.

In the Old Testament, the noun “hear” (šēma') is used largely to indicate the act of hearing the content of a message.

You shall not bear a false report (šēma' or šēmû'âh); do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. (Ex 23:1)

No, my sons; for the report (šēma' or šēmû'âh) is not good which I hear the LORD'S people circulating. (1 Sam 2:24)

The verb “hear” can have a variety of subtle meanings. Some examples of the use of the Hebrew verb šāma' can be seen in the following:

The perception of hearing

But Absalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, “As soon as you hear (šāma') the sound of the trumpet, then you shall say, ‘Absalom is king in Hebron.’” (2 Sam 15:10)

Listening - hearing with the nuance of understanding

Lamech said to his wives, “Adah and Zillah, Listen (šāma') to my voice, You wives of Lamech, Give heed to my speech, For I have killed a man for wounding me; And a boy for striking me; (Gen 4:23)

Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand (šāma') one another's speech.” (Gen 11:7)

When Abram heard (šāma') that his relative had been taken captive, he led out his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. (Gen 14:14)

“No, my lord, hear me (šāma'); I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead.” (Gen 23:11)

Attentive listening

Then to Adam He said, “Because you have listened (šāma') to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’; (Gen 3:17)

Abraham listened (šāma') to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard. (Gen 23:16)

Can you hear Me now?
A word study on the Old Testament use of the term “hear” (page 2)

Listening with the nuance of obedience

But Moses spoke before the LORD, saying, “Behold, the sons of Israel have not listened (šāma’) to me; how then will Pharaoh listen to me, for I am unskilled in speech?” But Moses said before the LORD, “Behold, I am unskilled in speech; how then will Pharaoh listen (šāma’) to me?” (Ex 6:12, 30)

Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient (šāma’)!” (Ex 24:7)

Yet they did not listen (šāma’) to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do as their fathers. (Jud 2:17)

God emphasized the relationship between “hearing” and “doing” (Ex 19:5-8; Deut 28:1-2; 30:11-14). The conditional Mosaic Covenant invoked a human being’s responsibility of hearing (and doing) the word of God, and through this relationship, the nation of Israel became the “people of the Law.”

For important notices, Moses began with “Hear, O Israel” before announcing the Ten Commandments (Ex 5:1), commanding the nation to love the Lord (Deut 6:4) and clarifying the purpose of the Conquest (Deut 9:1).

As bearers of divine revelation, prophets throughout the Old Testament placed an emphasis on “hearing.” The phrase “thus says the Lord” is mentioned over 400 times in the Old Testament, and it is used primarily to cite divine authority (Josh 24:1-3; Isa 28:16; Jer 31:1-40) in several contexts such as confronting the enemies of God (Ex 4:22; 5:1; 7:17; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3; 11:4), rebuke (2 Sam 12:6-12), and comfort (2 Kings 19:6-32; Isa 37:6-33).

In using the phrase “thus says the Lord,” the prophets of God called on a human being’s responsibility for hearing the word of God.

The prophet Eli instructed Samuel on the attitude with which he should hear God:

Then the LORD came and stood and called as at other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for Your servant is listening.” (1 Sam 3:10)

In a like manner the writer of Proverbs inspires a similar attitude of hearing (Prov 2:1-6). Phrases such as “make your ear attentive” and “from His mouth come knowledge and understanding” portray an intentional act of hearing and attentive listening.

However the nation of Israel was often deaf to God’s word and were unwilling to listen to His prophets (Num 14:22; Deut 1:43; 8:20; Josh 5:6; Jud 2:17-20; 2 Kings 17:14; 2 Kings 18:12; Neh 9:16-29; Ps 81:11; Jer 6:19; 7:26; 25:3-7; Ezek 2:7-8; 3:7-11; Hos 9:17; Zech 1:4).

Can you hear Me now?
A word study on the Old Testament use of the term “hear” (page 3)

While the vast majority of biblical passages indicate that hearing and listening to the word of God is the responsibility of human beings, two biblical passages possibly suggest otherwise.

1. Yet to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear (Deut 29:4).

As Moses gave his final address to the nation of Israel, all except Moses, Joshua and Caleb were under the age of 57 (see note). During the 40 years of wandering, many were born in the desert; yet, many were old enough to see what the Lord did in Egypt, and they experienced the Lord’s miracles and provision in the desert. However, “to this day,” they did not yet understand the implications of His actions.

What Israel did not fully realize was that the direction, guidance and power of their national life were due wholly to the Lord. In the renewal of the covenant at Moab, Moses sought a total commitment of the nation in every aspect of their life and their relationship to the world. In so doing, would the nation of Israel have “the heart to know.”

This view is derived in part from Paul’s understanding of this passage when he refers to it (Rom 11:8). In his contrast between Gentiles and Jews (Rom 9:30-10:21), Paul preaches that the nation of Israel failed to attain righteousness because of their reliance on works instead of faith. The Jew’s covenant relationship to God and slavish devotion to keeping of the Law did not achieve salvation. It was faith alone, and despite the experience of **seeing** and **hearing** the miracles of the Exodus and desert wilderness, the nation of Israel did not develop a loving trust in God.

In essence, disobedience and rebellion created a mindset that could not fully understand the implications of God’s saving works.

2. He said, “go, and tell this people: ‘keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.’ “Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed” (Isa 6:9-10).

Isaiah’s commission to warn Judah of judgment is somewhat ironic. Instead of perceiving an opportunity to repent and believe, the very offer made Judah more obstinate. Persistent unbelief culminated in a hardened attitude resistant of any thought of repentance. The chapters before and after this passage (Is 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) all show the recalcitrant stubbornness of Judah.

Isaiah 6:9-10 is a chiasm:

‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand.’
Render the hearts of this people insensitive,
 Their ears dull,
 And their eyes dim,
 Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
 Hear with their ears,
 Understand with their hearts,
 And return and be healed.

While the focus of the chiasm is on “seeing,” it is clear that one is responsible for seeing, hearing and understanding the word of God. God knew that Judah was not willing to repent and be cleansed; its people could not believe, because they would not believe (Zech 7:11-13).

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Can you hear Me now?
A word study on the Old Testament use of the term “hear” (page 4)

The New Testament quotes Isaiah 6:10 six times to express the same sentiment.

Jesus refers to it in connection to the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13:14-15; Mark 4:10-12; Luke 8:10). The Jews could not believe, because they would not believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

The apostle John refers to it in observing that the Jews refuse to believe in Jesus despite witnessing His miracles (John 12:39-41). The Jews could not believe, because they would not believe that Jesus was God.

The apostle Paul refers to it (Acts 28:26-27; Rom 11:8) in making the case that the nation of Israel's stubbornness towards Jesus was foretold by Isaiah, and that the blame for this recalcitrance of faith was entirely theirs. This point, Paul tells the Jews, is the basis for God's offer of redemption directly to the Gentiles. The Jews could not believe that their method of achieving righteousness through human effort was insufficient, because they would not believe the sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

Despite gaining knowledge of God through seeing and hearing, the nation of Israel failed to act upon it. Because human beings failed to genuinely glorify or give thanks to God, God stood aside and let the consequences of willful rejection of Him produce its ugly results in human life (Rom 1:21-25).

References:

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Note:

The nation of Israel wandered for 40 years as a consequence of their lack of faith and rebellion to enter the Promised Land (Num 14:33-34; Ex 16:35). This judgment event at Kadesh-Barnea took place 2 years after the Exodus and 38 years later, the Conquest began (Deut 2:14); with the exception of Joshua, Caleb, the entire adult population 20 years old and upward were sentenced to die in the wilderness.

Oldest age who didn't receive judgment at Kadesh-Barnea: 19

Years of wandering after Kadesh-Barnea: 38

The oldest age of the new generation: 57