

Why Is Interpretation Needed?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 24:36–45; 1 Cor. 12:10; 1 Cor. 14:26; Acts 17:16–32; John 12:42, 43.*

Memory Text: “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (*Hebrews 11:6, NKJV*).

To read the Bible also means to interpret the Bible. But how do we do that? What principles do we use? How, for instance, do we deal with the different kinds of writing we find there? For example, is the passage we're reading a parable, a prophetic-symbolic dream, or a historical narrative? The decision of such an important question of the context of Scripture involves an act of interpretation itself.

At times, some people use the Bible as a divine oracle: simply opening the Bible randomly to seek a Bible verse that they hope will provide guidance. But randomly linking Bible passages as one finds them can lead to very strange and wrong conclusions.

For instance, when a husband left his wife for another woman, the wife got great assurance when she found the following text: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman” (*Gen. 3:15, NKJV*). She was convinced, based on that verse, that her husband's affair would not last!

Any text without a context quickly becomes a pretext for one's own agenda and ideas. Hence, there is a great need for us not just to read the Bible but to interpret it correctly.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 9.

Presuppositions

Read Luke 24:36–45. What prevented the disciples, who were very familiar with Scripture, from seeing the true meaning of the Word of God, even when events predicted within it had unfolded before them?

No one comes to the text of Scripture with a blank mind. Every reader, every student of Scripture, comes to the Bible with a particular history and personal experience that inevitably impacts the process of interpretation. Even the disciples had their own particular ideas of who the Messiah was and what He was supposed to do, based on the expectations of their times. Their strong convictions prohibited a clearer understanding of the biblical text, which helps explain why they so often misunderstood Jesus and the events surrounding His life, death, and resurrection.

We all hold a number of beliefs about this world, about ultimate reality, about God, et cetera, that we presuppose or accept—even unwittingly or unconsciously—when we interpret the Bible. No one approaches the biblical text with an empty mind. If, for instance, someone’s worldview categorically rules out any supernatural intervention by God, that person will not read and understand Scripture as a true and reliable report of what God has done in history, but will interpret it very differently from someone who accepts the reality of the supernatural.

Interpreters of the Bible cannot completely divest themselves from their own past, their experiences, resident ideas, and preconceived notions and opinions. Total neutrality, or absolute objectivity, cannot be achieved. Bible study and theological reflection always happen against the background of presuppositions about the nature of the world and the nature of God.

But the good news is that the Holy Spirit can open up and correct our limited perspectives and presuppositions when we read the words of Scripture with an open mind and honest heart. The Bible repeatedly affirms that people with vastly different backgrounds were able to understand the Word of God and that the Holy Spirit leads us “into all truth” (*John 16:13*).

What are some of your own presuppositions regarding the world? In what ways can you surrender all of them to the Word of God so that the Word itself can reshape your ideas to be more in harmony with the reality that the Bible teaches?

Translation and Interpretation

The Bible was written in very ancient languages: the Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew, with a few passages in Aramaic, while the New Testament was written in Koine Greek. The majority of the world population today does not speak and read those ancient languages. Hence, the Bible has to be translated into different modern languages.

But, as any good translator knows, every translation always involves some kind of interpretation. Some words in one language do not have an exact equivalent in another. The art and skill of carefully translating and then interpreting texts is called “hermeneutics.”

Read 1 Corinthians 12:10, 1 Corinthians 14:26, John 1:41, John 9:7, Acts 9:36, and Luke 24:27. In all the above passages, we see the idea of interpretation and translation. In Luke 24:27 even Jesus had to explain the meaning of Scripture to the disciples. What does this tell us about the importance of interpretation?

The Greek word *hermeneuo*, from which we have the word *hermeneutics* (biblical interpretation), is derived from the Greek god Hermes. Hermes was considered to be an emissary and messenger of the gods, and as such was responsible for, among other things, translating divine messages for the people.

The crucial point for us in regard to hermeneutics is that unless we read the original languages, our only access to the texts is through translations. Fortunately, many translations do a good job of conveying the essential meaning. We do not need to know the original language to be able to understand the crucial truths revealed in Scripture, even if having that linguistic knowledge could be beneficial. Yet, even with a good translation, a proper interpretation of the texts is important, as well, as we saw in Luke 24:27. That’s the key purpose of hermeneutics: to convey accurately the meaning of Bible texts and to help us know how to apply properly the text’s teaching to our lives now. As the text in Luke above shows, Jesus did this for His followers. Imagine what it must have been like having Jesus Himself interpret Bible passages for you!

Many people have access to various translations, but many don’t. Whatever translations you have to work with, why is it important to study the Word prayerfully and seek to obey its teachings?

The Bible and Culture

Read Acts 17:16–32. In Acts 17, Paul tried to deliver the gospel message in a new context: the philosophy of Greek culture. How do different cultural backgrounds impact how we evaluate the importance of various ideas?

A background knowledge of Near Eastern culture is helpful for understanding some biblical passages. “For example, Hebrew culture attributed responsibility to an individual for acts he did not commit but that he allowed to happen. Therefore, the inspired writers of the Scriptures commonly credit God with doing actively that which in Western thought we would say He permits or does not prevent from happening, for example, the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.”—“Methods of Bible Study,” section 4.P. at www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/bible-interpretation-hermeneutics/methods-bible-study.

Culture also raises some important hermeneutical questions. Is the Bible culturally conditioned, and thus only relative to that culture in what it asserts? Or does the divine message given in a particular culture transcend this particular culture and speak to all human beings? What happens if one’s own cultural experience becomes the basis and litmus test for our interpretation of Scripture?

In Acts 17:26, the apostle Paul gives an interesting perspective on reality that is often overlooked when people read this text. He states that God made us all from one blood. While we are culturally very diverse, biblically speaking there is a common bond that unites all people, despite their cultural differences, and that’s because God is the Creator of all humanity. Our sinfulness and our need of salvation is not limited to one culture. We all need the salvation offered to us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Though God spoke to specific generations, He saw to it that future generations reading the Word of God would understand that those truths go beyond the local and limited circumstances during which the Bible texts were written.

As a parallel, think about algebra, which was first invented in the ninth century A.D. in Baghdad. Does this mean, then, that the truths and principles of this branch of mathematics are limited only to that time and place? Of course not.

The same principle applies to the truths of God’s Word. Though the Bible was written a long time ago in cultures very different from ours today, the truths it contains are as relevant to us now as they were to whom they were first addressed.

Our Sinful and Fallen Nature

Read John 9:39–41 and John 12:42, 43. What hindered the people in these passages from accepting the truth of the biblical message? What words of warning and caution can we take away from these incidents for ourselves?

It's easy to look back with scorn at the religious leaders who rejected Jesus despite such powerful evidence. Yet, we need to be careful ourselves that we don't foster a similar attitude when it comes to His Word.

There is no question that sin has radically altered, ruptured, and fractured our relationship with God. Sin affects all of our human existence. It also affects our ability to interpret Scripture. It is not just that our human thought processes are easily employed for sinful ends, but our minds and thoughts have become corrupted by sin and, therefore, become closed to God's truth. The following characteristics of this corruption can be detected in our thinking: pride, self-deception, doubt, distance, and disobedience.

A prideful person elevates himself or herself over God and His Word. This is because pride leads the interpreter to overemphasize human reason as the final arbiter of truth, even truths found in the Bible. This attitude diminishes the divine authority of Scripture.

Some people tend to listen only to those ideas that are attractive to them, even if they are in contradiction to God's revealed will. God has warned us about the danger of self-deception (*Rev. 3:17*). Sin also fosters doubt, in which we waver and are inclined not to believe God's Word. When one starts with doubt, the interpretation of the biblical text will never lead to certainty. Instead, the doubting person quickly elevates himself to a position where he judges what is and is not acceptable in the Bible, which is very dangerous ground to be standing on.

Instead, we should approach the Bible in faith and submission, and not with an attitude of criticism and doubt. Pride, self-deception, and doubt lead to an attitude of distance toward God and the Bible that surely will lead to disobedience, that is, an unwillingness to follow God's revealed will.

Have you ever found yourself fighting against conviction from what you have read in the Bible—that is, it clearly directed you to do one thing, but you wanted to do another? What happened, and what did you learn from your experience?

Why Interpretation Is Important

Read Nehemiah 8:1–3, 8. Why is a clear understanding of Scripture so important for us, not only as individuals but as a church?

The most important question in the Bible is the question of salvation and how we are saved. After all, what else matters in the long run? What good is it, as Jesus Himself told us, if we gain all that the world offers and lose our own souls (*Matt. 16:26*)?

But to know what the Bible teaches about salvation depends very much on interpretation. If we approach and interpret the Bible wrongly, we will likely come to false conclusions, not just in the understanding of salvation but in everything else that the Bible teaches. In fact, even in the time of the apostles, theological error had already crept into the church, no doubt buttressed by false interpretations of Scripture.

Read 2 Peter 3:15, 16. What does this tell us about how important a correct reading of Scripture is?

Indeed, if we are a people of the Book, who want to live by the Bible and the Bible alone—and we do not have other authoritative sources such as tradition, creeds, or the teaching authority of the church to interpret the Bible for us—then the issue of a correct hermeneutic of the Bible is so important because we have only the Bible to tell us what we shall believe and how we shall live.

The issue of the interpretation of Scripture is vital to the theological and missiological health of the church. Without a correct interpretation of the Bible, there can be no unity of doctrine and teaching, and thus no unity of the church and our mission. A bad and distorted theology inevitably leads to a deficient and distorted mission. After all, if we have a message to give to the world but are confused about the meaning of the message, how efficiently will we be able to present that message to those who need to hear it?

Read the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6–12. What are the theological issues here, and why is a correct understanding of them so important to our mission?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “What to Do With Doubt,” pp. 105–113, in *Steps to Christ*, and from the document “Methods of Bible Study,” section 1 (Preamble), section 2 (Presuppositions Arising From the Claims of Scripture), and section 3 (Principles for Approaching the Interpretation of Scripture). “Methods of Bible Study” can be found at www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/bible-interpretation-hermeneutics/methods-bible-study.

“In your study of the word, lay at the door of investigation your pre-conceived opinions and your hereditary and cultivated ideas. You will never reach the truth if you study the Scriptures to vindicate your own ideas. Leave these at the door, and with a contrite heart go in to hear what the Lord has to say to you. As the humble seeker for truth sits at Christ’s feet, and learns of Him, the word gives him understanding. To those who are too wise in their own conceit to study the Bible, Christ says, You must become meek and lowly in heart if you desire to become wise unto salvation.

“Do not read the word in the light of former opinions; but, with a mind free from prejudice, search it carefully and prayerfully. If, as you read, conviction comes, and you see that your cherished opinions are not in harmony with the word, do not try to make the word fit these opinions. Make your opinions fit the word. Do not allow what you have believed or practiced in the past to control your understanding. Open the eyes of your mind to behold wondrous things out of the law. Find out what is written, and then plant your feet on the eternal Rock.”
—Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People*, p. 260.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How do our worldview, our education, and our culture influence our interpretation of Scripture? Why is it so important for us to be aware of the outside influences that we inevitably bring to our interpretation of the Bible?
- 2 We all agree that we are sinful and negatively impacted by sin. In what ways does sin affect how we read the Bible? That is, what does sin do to us that could cause us to misinterpret the Word of God? For example, how might a desire to do something condemned in the Bible cause us to read the Bible in a skewed way? In what other ways does sin filter how we interpret the Bible?
- 3 How can a better understanding of the biblical times and culture help us better understand some passages of Scripture? Give some examples.

Losing Four Sons in Poland

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

God blessed Wiesława Winiarska with four sons in Lodz, Poland.

Then her son Grzegorz died in a freak accident when he was 26. He had taken up running and, while jogging near railroad tracks, was sucked onto the tracks by the wind of a fast-passing train.

Her son Jacek committed suicide at 28. He struggled with life and hanged himself.

Slawek was 39 when he was beaten badly in a street mugging. He died in the hospital.

Her last son, Jaroslaw, was diagnosed with a brain tumor when he was 16. After multiple operations, he died at 33.

Winiarska has no sons to turn to for help in her old age. At 68, she is in failing health. She has diabetes and has suffered two strokes. She has severe back problems and walks with a cane. She has lost most of her sight and expects to go blind.

“My life hasn’t been a bed of roses,” she said. “Even so, I can say that I am happy. In fact, I have never been as happy as I am now.”

Several years ago, a young medical student, Tomasz Karauda, knocked on her house door with a free copy of *Signs of the Times* magazine. After that, he visited often to talk and offer encouragement. He helped her travel to the hospice to visit her dying son Jaroslaw, and he comforted her the day that he died.

“Tomek was the first person in my life who helped me,” Winiarska said. “He showed me God.”

After she lost her last son, she gave her heart to Jesus.

“I feel like Job,” she said. “I have received so much, and I have lost so much as well. But God has given me a second life, just like Job.”

Winiarska loves Psalm 23:4, which reads, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me” (NKJV).



WINIARSKA, pictured, also loves to share her life story with Adventist congregations. Young people usually respond with tears. She tells them that she would never want anyone to suffer an ordeal like hers.

“God’s love keeps me alive,” she said. “My new life began with baptism. Without God, I don’t know what would have happened to me.”

Thank you for your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 2017 that helped build a television studio for Hope Channel in Poland, broadcasting the gospel to the Polish-speaking world.

Key Texts: *Heb. 11:6; Luke 24:44, 45; 1 Cor. 12:10; 1 Cor. 14:26; John 1:41; John 9:7; Acts 9:36; Luke 24:27; Acts 17:22–26; John 9:39–41; John 12:42, 43; Neh. 8:1–3, 8.*

Part I: Overview

Sometimes people say that they take the Bible just as it reads, without any need for interpretation. While it is laudable to take the Bible seriously and to be willing to follow what it commands us to do, no one approaches the Bible with a blank mind. We all are influenced in our thinking and understanding by our education, family, the culture we grew up in, and by our experience. We all have some presuppositions with which we approach the text. The reading and study of the biblical text inevitably involves some interpretation. The Bible was written in languages (Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic) that many of us did not grow up with or are only rudimentarily acquainted with. And as any translator knows, every translation into another language involves some form of interpretation. You must know a language really well in order to understand some of its subtleties or when irony is at work. Furthermore, our thinking is darkened by sin and thus not neutral when it comes to spiritual things. The very fact that different churches and denominations exist, even though they all claim to live by the Bible, demonstrates that some form of interpretation is at work in all of us. Yet, we study the same Book and can reach conclusions that unite us, despite all of the above differences. Interpretation is essential to understanding, and this week we will study some methods of interpretation that will guide our Bible study.

Part II: Commentary

The meaning of a sentence is not determined just by the individual words that are used but by the context in which those words are employed. If we do not adequately take into consideration the immediate and wider literary context of a statement and how it uses the words in this circumstance, we quickly will come to wrong conclusions. Similarly, we need to take into consideration the historical background of what is written. It helps us to situate the text. Any text without a context quickly becomes a pretext for one's own opinion. If we ignore the context, we will soon read something

into the text that the writer actually did not intend to convey. We call this *eisegesis*. But rather than reading something into the text that is not there, we should do a thorough *exegesis*. That is, we should read out of the text that which the text actually states. Seventh-day Adventists want to follow nothing but the Bible. We do not have a pope or a teaching tradition that determines the definite meaning of Scripture. Thus, a careful and sound interpretation of the Bible is crucial for our theology and mission. It shapes our theological identity and beliefs.

Presuppositions and Worldviews

Every person holds a number of beliefs that we consciously or unconsciously presuppose. We assume them to be true, even though we cannot absolutely prove them. These most basic convictions about the world and our values are described in what is called worldview. Our worldview determines what is important for us and what is not. It filters our perception and interpretation of reality and provides a model of the world that guides us to live in the world. Our worldview encompasses our understanding of God, of human nature, of morality and truth. A worldview is made up of beliefs and answers to questions in these areas. Our worldview is influenced by our parents, our education, our peers, our experiences, the media, culture, and religion. We use our worldview every day and perceive and interpret reality through it. It influences our thinking and our actions and behavior.

Think

Think about different aspects in which our worldview impacts our thinking and behavior. Share with the members of the class the challenges that arise when different worldviews collide.

As long as we remain teachable, our worldview develops. When learning and growing radically alters many of our core beliefs, or when we have a conversion experience, our worldview can change. This change usually takes place when the previous worldview has been shown to be untruthful. After such a change, the person will continue to make adjustments and will try to bring other beliefs in line with the rest of his or her core beliefs. A conversion to Jesus does not automatically wipe out years of previous education. But it does involve a change from one worldview to another and a harmonizing of all one's beliefs with the Bible.

Think

Read Luke 24:36–49. How did the experience of the risen Christ and His explanation of Scripture change His disciples' view of reality? Share how your conversion experience has impacted your understanding of the Bible. If we only gradually bring all of our previous beliefs

into harmony with Scripture, what does that tell us about how we should deal with others who are growing in their understanding?

Translation and Interpretation

If you want to interpret the Bible correctly, it is helpful to study the Bible in the original languages in which it was written. If that is not possible, use a translation that is following the original languages closely. Such a formal translation emphasizes word-for-word equivalency in the translation process and gives a more exact and literal rendering of the biblical languages. When we study and compare how certain words are actually used in various contexts by the Bible writers, the Bible itself can reveal its meaning. While such a formal translation makes an excellent study Bible, its readings are more wooden and stilted. In contrast to formal translations, there are dynamic translations that emphasize meaning-for-meaning instead of word-for-word equivalence. Here the translation is restructured into idiomatic usage that represents the equivalent thought or meaning in our language. While such translations are very readable, the interpretation may be misleading or erroneous. Finally, there are paraphrase translations. They are far freer with the original languages than are dynamic translations. Because a paraphrase is more interpretation than translation, it is not well suited for serious Bible study.

Think

If different Bible translations are available in your language, show them in your Sabbath School group and give examples of the different translations of a Bible passage. Do it in such a way that listeners are strengthened in their faith and encouraged to study the Bible more seriously for themselves. Recommend a trusted Bible translation in your language for Bible study.

Some denominations issue their own authorized Bible translation. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has not done so but uses established translations that are available through Bible Societies. Some Adventists have worked with Bible Societies to help make the Bible available to those who don't have one and have made valuable contributions for various Bible translations. Think about ways you can help in the promotion, distribution, and study of the Bible.

The Bible and Culture

A knowledge of Near Eastern culture can be helpful for understanding some biblical passages. Read the passage in "Methods of Bible Study," section 4.8.P. for some illustrations at www.adventistbiblicalresearch

.org/materials/bible-interpretation-hermeneutics/methods-bible-study. Today critical scholars maintain that the Bible is culturally conditioned (i.e., it reflects the culture in which it originated) and thus is restricted in its authority because it is limited to a certain cultural setting, they say. While the Bible indeed was written in a particular culture, “the biblical writers insist that the theological message of Scripture is not culture-bound, applicable for only a certain people and a certain time, but permanent and universally applicable.”—Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), p. 85. Jesus was born in a particular culture, and yet, He was not just the Savior for the people in His time. He *is* the Savior of the world. His coming into a particular culture does not make Him culturally relative but gives Him a significance that transcends every culture.

Think

Some people just focus on those things that differ from culture to culture and thereby quickly lose sight of the commonalities that exist in all human beings across cultures. What basic aspects of human existence and human desires are present in all cultures? How does God’s spiritual answer to these aspects transcend any particular culture and speak to all human beings? How can you help to make the Bible’s message applicable to the people in your culture? Where can culture become a hinderance for the acceptance of the Bible’s message?

Our Sinful, Fallen Nature and Biblical Interpretation

Besides all of the above-mentioned aspects that show why interpretation is necessary, there is another factor that is often overlooked. It has to do with the consequences of our sinful, fallen nature. Read Ephesians 4:17, 18 and reflect on what Paul writes there. Here Paul describes some consequences that have arisen because of the blindness of our hearts and the futility of our minds. Sometimes even our understanding and interpretation of Scripture is tainted and dimmed because of our sin. Sometimes we do not follow the things of the Bible because we fear the pressure of our peers or the scorn of our relatives and friends. That is why we need the help of the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds and to make us willing to follow what we have discovered.

Part III: Life Application

A person has heard the biblical truth. The reading of Scripture has provided

a new perspective that God is real and alive and that living the Bible's message is worthwhile. However, when some prayers are not answered as hoped for and the health of a child is in jeopardy, this person resorts to the traditional sources of healing that are customary in his or her culture. These traditional sources of healing are mediated through powerful witch doctors in the community.

1. **Think about similar tendencies and temptations that you face when your biblical faith is challenged. In what areas are you tempted to trust your received education or your parental upbringing or your experience more than the truth of the Bible?**

2. **Some people who are trained in Western philosophy and critical thinking believe that there is no supernatural being that can intervene in history or do miracles. Their closed worldview prevents them from accepting many supernatural stories in the Bible as real. Where does your worldview influence your interpretation of Scripture?**

3. **A person who is new in the faith wants to study the Bible more thoroughly. What Bible translation could you recommend for this task?**

4. **Why is faith important for a proper understanding of Scripture? What is the role of faith in the process of interpretation?**
