

# HOW TO INTERPRET SCRIPTURE

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# HOW TO INTERPRET SCRIPTURE

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# Introduction

As Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we believe in the importance of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> In fact, from the beginning, Adventist believers have considered themselves to be people of the Book, relying on it for guidance in matters of faith and practice. Through the years, the Bible has always been the foundation of our faith, and it ultimately determines what Seventh-day Adventists believe. Yet, in spite of its central place in our faith, biblical literacy seems to be waning. An increasing number of people no longer read and study the Bible. Moreover, strange teachings and even wild ideas are advanced by others, who solemnly claim these teachings and ideas derive from Scripture.

Thus, more is needed than the simple confession that the Bible is the foundation of our theology and the norm for our faith. This something more centers on the question of interpretation. How do we interpret the Bible adequately and correctly? How do we avoid the misuse and distortion of Scripture? How do we handle unstable people who twist the meaning of God's Word? Peter noted this challenge during his ministry, and the trend clearly continues today (2 Peter 3:16). Since Scripture tells us that people can misuse the Word of God and bend it to their own destruction, we must be on high alert and learn to interpret the Bible properly.

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The stakes are high. If we approach the Bible with wrong presuppositions and poor methodologies, we will arrive at distorted conclusions. Our methods of interpretation have a direct bearing on our beliefs and practices. They affect our message and mission.

Our biblical interpretation also impacts our spirituality, affecting how we live and respond to the claims of Scripture. In a sense, the issue of biblical interpretation is like a theological watershed. An illustration of this is a drive on the famous German autobahn. Traveling southwest of Munich toward Lindau at Lake Constance, you cross into a lovely area of rolling hills in southern Bavaria. Not far from the city of Wangen (which happens to be the Hasels' city of origin), you will see a roadside sign that says "European Watershed." What it means is that the immediate area determines the flow of all the creeks and rivers in Central Europe. Here these tributaries are directed to one of two major rivers. The waters will flow into the river Danube and from there to the Black Sea, or they will flow into the Rhine, eventually spilling into the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Fascinatingly, this area is not home to the towering Alps. Rather, it is full of gentle, rolling hills. But here the flow of the water is determined for Central Europe. No matter how many mountains stand in the way, the water flows persistently in two distinct directions: to the Black Sea in the east or to the North Sea.

In a similar fashion, the issue of our biblical interpretation shapes the outcome of our theology, message, and mission. It is common for modern biblical criticism to study the Bible just like any other book, not taking the divine dimension into consideration. Using this approach leads to vastly different conclusions than those that will be reached if we allow for the divine-human reality that Scripture affirms. If we seriously value what Scripture declares in many places—God speaks in and through the biblical writers—we have to allow that the method of our investigation of the Bible is determined by its object.<sup>2</sup> This means that we should not use methods that are alien to the divine dimension of Scripture. Instead, the



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principles of our Bible study must be consistent with the principles that govern our whole relationship with God. Thus, our study of Scripture should involve careful contemplation and devotional reflection, involving both the mind and the heart in the quest for true meaning. The divine reality of Scripture calls for a surrender of the interpreter to the authority of God's Written Word. Rather than criticizing the Word of God, we have to willingly stand under its authority and be transformed and judged by its message.

In this book, we want to outline the basic ideas that shape our understanding of the nature of Scripture. We will study how Jesus and the apostles viewed Scripture. We will reflect on the implications of what it means for the Bible to be the authoritative source of our theology. We will consider what it means when we say we follow the principle of *sola Scriptura*—"by Scripture alone." Naturally, the reading of Scripture involves interpretation, and correct methods of Bible study are indispensable to understand Scripture properly. We will illustrate the impact of different approaches by looking at the biblical story of Creation. We will also explore why history and prophecy are crucial for biblical faith. Finally, we will tackle the challenge of interpreting difficult passages of Scripture and simultaneously remaining faithful to the Word of God.

This book unfolds an approach to biblical interpretation that is in harmony with an important document officially affirmed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church: "Methods of Bible Study."<sup>3</sup> It is a resource for all who desire to study the Bible more diligently and to follow its teachings faithfully. It accompanies and provides additional information on the Seventh-day Adventist Church's second-quarter 2020 adult Bible study guide, *How to Interpret Scripture*.

Of course, this book can be read and studied independently, and we pray it will be a blessing to all who read it, leading them to a deeper understanding and greater love of the Word of God.

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Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us,  
But to Your name give glory,  
Because of Your mercy,  
Because of Your truth (Psalm 115:1).

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1. The very first fundamental belief of the Seventh-day Adventist Church sets the stage for everything else we believe. It affirms, “The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration. The inspired authors spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to humanity the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the supreme, authoritative, and the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the definitive revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history.” “Beliefs,” Seventh-day Adventist Church, accessed June 6, 2019, <https://www.adventist.org/en/beliefs/>.

2. Time and again, biblical writers point away from themselves and to God as the Author of their message. Hence, this divine reality needs to be taken seriously when we want to come to grips with the Word of God. This has been aptly pointed out by Gerhard Maier in his book *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 20–26.

3. The statement “Methods of Bible Study” was approved and voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee at the Annual Council Session in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, October 12, 1986, and can be found in *Statements, Guidelines, and Other Documents*, 4th ed. (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Communication Department, 2010), 241–250, or online at <https://www.adventist.org/fileadmin/adventist.org/files/articles/official-statements/Statements-2010-english.pdf>.

# 1 CHAPTER

## The Uniqueness of the Bible

On August 21, 2017, the continental United States anticipated a total solar eclipse. With painstaking scientific accuracy, astronomers had predicted the path of the eclipse. In order to maximize the experience, several important preparations were necessary:

1. Careful planning was required to be in the right place at the right time. While the path of the eclipse was predicted, special effort was required to travel to the path and position oneself in the total shadow.
2. Special safety glasses were needed to avoid damage to the retinas of the eyes. Staring at the sun causes permanent eye damage, and people were cautioned to view the eclipse with special glasses.

Hundreds of thousands of people drove across the country to experience the intensity of the eclipse's focal point, the umbra, as darkness covered the earth in a shadow of totality. Those who experienced it were awed by nature's predictability and overcome by the eeriness of the event.

Today, there is a deepening eclipse of God's Word. We have more access than ever to the Bible through print, apps, and

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translations in 3,350 languages.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in spite of this unprecedented access, enormous challenges remain.

### Ignorance, superstition, and persecution

Looking back to the Dark Ages, we find that people did not own Bibles. The concept of righteousness by faith was not understood by the people, and the church leveraged this ignorance to influence the masses. For example, indulgences were introduced, promising that the purchased certificates offered reduced time in purgatory. In much of the world, that darkness continues to the present day. Significantly, one-third of the world's population will live and die without meeting a Christian or ever hearing the name of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Billions live in countries where superstition and pagan religion keep them in fear and without hope. Wherever the Bible makes an impact and Christianity has attempted to enter, there has been massive persecution. Such was the case during the age of the Reformation, and it remains true today. In 2018, more than 215 million individuals around the globe were persecuted for their Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> In China, increasing numbers of churches are being closed, and pastors are imprisoned.

These facts demonstrate that much more work needs to be done in unreached places of the world before Jesus returns. Efforts need to be made to enter the dark areas that have eclipsed the Bible with error and to point people to the transforming power of God's Word.

### Modernity, postmodernity, and relevance

After the Reformation, America provided a refuge for many persecuted Old World Christians. The separation of church and state was established, providing freedom of religion so that all could follow the dictates of their own conscience. The great Ivy League universities were established to train, based on the foundation of Scripture, a new generation of pastors, theologians, justices, and leaders. Harvard University students were obligated by Harvard's "Rules and Precepts" of 1646 to "exercise himself in reading the Scriptures twice a day that they

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bee ready to give an account of their proficiency therein . . . seeing the Entrance of the word giveth light.”<sup>4</sup> More than fifty years later in 1701, as Harvard moved further away from its biblical foundations, Congregationalist Protestants established Yale University in Connecticut. The center of the university’s seal contains a Bible with the words *Urim and Thummim*, surrounded by the Latin phrase *Lux et Veritas*, meaning “light and truth.” Princeton University, which was established in 1746 in the wake of the First Great Awakening, has an official seal that contains the Bible with the words *Old and New Testament* in Latin and a motto that translates to “Under God’s power, she flourishes.” In his book *The Dying of the Light*, James Tunstead Burtchaell documents the gradual disengagement of higher education in America from its founding churches. The same disengagement can be documented in Protestant universities across the country.<sup>5</sup>

This separation was largely due to the acceptance of modern and postmodern philosophies that brought an element of criticism, elevating autonomous human reason above the Bible. In the twentieth century, the postmodernist agenda had all but erased any concept of absolute truth.<sup>6</sup> In the words of William F. Buckley Jr., “There is surely not a department at Yale that is uncontaminated with the absolute that there are no absolutes, no intrinsic rights, no ultimate truths.”<sup>7</sup> The replacement of biblical presuppositions and assumptions with secular methods has resulted in the demise of most Christian institutions. Sadly, as education goes, so goes the church and society.

### Distractions, apathy, and indifference

Contributing to the digression from biblical truth, the Barna Group has shown that 49 percent of “elders” and only 24 percent of millennials read their Bibles once a week.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the market-research group Nielsen reports that the daily average screen time for adults in 2018 increased to eleven hours a day, up from nine hours and thirty-two minutes just four years earlier.<sup>9</sup> Attention spans have dropped at alarming rates as brains have been rewired, resulting in attention deficit hyperactivity

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disorder (ADHD) and attention deficit disorder (ADD) and increased depression.<sup>10</sup> Today, social media anxiety disorder has been recognized as an increasing problem as the overwhelming bombardment of media, day and night, decreases the desire to spend time with family and friends, not to mention studying the Bible.

Has technology and the media in our modern society brought us closer to happiness, peace, and harmonious living? School shootings have increased exponentially. In 2018 there were 97 school shootings in the United States alone—the highest in history.<sup>11</sup> Crime is multiplying. Everywhere we turn, in politics, economics, culture, education, job security, natural and global sustainability, energy resources, and food production, we are facing unprecedented challenges. Secular and religious thinkers alike recognize that our survival is at stake. Modernism has failed and so has its belief in progress and the arrival at ultimate truth through human reason and science alone.

Like the solar eclipse of 2017, the current eclipse of the Bible was predicted with unmistakable accuracy. Jesus foretold that there would come a time of great darkness when “they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake” (Matthew 24:9). Paul said, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Timothy 4:3, 4). John the revelator predicted that an end-time power will try to destroy God’s Word: “The dragon was enraged with the woman [the church], and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring [the remnant], who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 12:17).

How can we prepare for this intensifying time of confusion and darkness?

1. By taking our minds away from the distractions of

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the world, looking to Jesus, and studying the signs of the times in God's Word.

2. Next, we "go" into the darkest places of the world "and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them" and "teaching them to observe all things," as Jesus has commanded (Matthew 28:19, 20).
3. Finally, we must put on the glasses of protection as we gaze heavenward and keep our eyes fixed on the Son of Righteousness, so that we might have a proper interpretation of His Word. The glasses through which we view the world are our assumptions or pre-suppositions. When we approach Scripture we will want to interpret it according to the methods outlined by Christ and His apostles as revealed in the Bible, not the methods of modern and postmodern thinking. Jesus promises "Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them" (John 7:38).

How important is the study of the Bible? When Jesus was on earth, He highlighted His close connection to His Word. The *logos* or "word" came and "in Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness" (John 1:4, 5). To rightly understand His mission and message, our first task is to understand the Scriptures correctly. They tell us all about Jesus, who is the Light of the world.

### The power of the Bible

The Bible is the most unique and powerfully transforming book in human history. Composed of 66 books, written over 1,500 years on three continents, by over forty authors, the Bible is without equal in maintaining multiple threads of unity from Genesis to Revelation as it speaks on hundreds of different topics and issues.

Among the unique themes found only in the Bible are God's transcendence from Creation, His establishment of the seventh-day Sabbath, the holiness of God, the oneness of God in three

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(the Trinity), the righteousness of God, His personal *chesed*—love for all humanity, His redemption plan through the Messiah and His mediatorial work in the sanctuary, His eternal law as the basis of His government, His justice, and His work through the remnant of prophecy.<sup>12</sup> These, among other themes, are only taught within the linear view of the Bible from Creation to the Second Coming.

The Bible is unlike any other book in history when it comes to manuscript support. There are thousands of New Testament manuscripts preserved from the first four centuries after Christ.<sup>13</sup> For Plato, there are seven; Herodotus, only eight; and Homer's *Iliad* has merely 650 surviving copies.<sup>14</sup> No other ancient literature comes close in terms of the number of copies and shortness of time between the originals and the copies.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered by accident in 1947, testify to the Old Testament's accuracy over millennia. Copyists carefully worked in the desert to meticulously reproduce the manuscripts, which predated by more than one thousand years the medieval manuscripts our translations were based on. We can read the entire book of Isaiah and see the remarkable way in which God preserved its accuracy over centuries of scribal work so that today we can rely on the Bibles we hold in our hands.<sup>15</sup>

The Bible was the first massive book ever translated by a group of Jewish scribes in Alexandria. Printed by Johannes Gutenberg in A.D. 1454–1455, it was the first mass-produced book published on a movable-type printing press. It has been widely distributed in many languages and maintains its place as a perennial bestseller. Today, it can be read by the vast majority of the earth's population.

Furthermore, the Bible has survived major attempts to eliminate or nullify its contents, whether during the Christian persecution by the Roman emperor Diocletian, the French Revolution, or today's postmodern secularism. Not only has it survived, but it has also flourished, inspiring the greatest works of music, art, and literature ever created.

The Bible is also unique in its content and message. It focuses on the plan of salvation and God's redemptive acts in



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history. Unlike other religious books, it is constituted in history and, therefore, can be confirmed through archaeological and historical research. The Bible and history are intertwined in the prophetic foretelling of God's future plans and His eternal kingdom. The Bible speaks equally to men and women and to people of different social, economic, and educational levels. It inspires, ennobles, and effects enormous change. It is the *living* Word of God because the same Spirit of God through which Scripture was inspired (2 Timothy 3:16, 17) is promised to believers today to guide us into all truth as we study the Word (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13).

### A precious gift

The Bible, a priceless gift and legacy, cannot be taken for granted because it was purchased with a weighty price. Recently, I had the privilege of holding a rare Bible. Only two complete copies have survived. One is in a library in Nice, France, and the other rested in my white-gloved hands. It was the New Testament translated into French by Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples during the Reformation, around A.D. 1524. This was the first Bible ever printed in French and the first printed New Testament to have made its way to the Waldensian valleys. (Some of the Waldenses were known as the *insabbatati* or *sabbatati* because they kept the seventh-day Sabbath.<sup>16</sup>)

Their mission was to reform the Church and to call Christians back to faithfulness to the Bible, in spite of bloody persecutions and massacres that nearly exterminated them. They traveled extensively through Europe and were sowing the seeds that contributed to the coming Protestant Reformation. Their work influenced Wycliffe and his followers and Hus and Jerome and their followers, and their influence came to full fruition in the time of the Anabaptists, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. They have given Protestants an inspiring example of faithfulness to the Word of God in times of great apostasy and ruthless persecution.<sup>17</sup>

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What makes this Book so precious is not its scarcity but the reason behind it.

The Waldenses were declared heretics and hunted to near extinction.<sup>18</sup> Their Bibles were collected and burned. Before Luther translated the Bible into German for the people, this New Testament had existed for the French-speaking faithful in the valleys of northern Italy and Switzerland and spread from there to the rest of Europe. Young Waldensian students carried excerpts of the Bible with them to the universities in the lowlands to witness of the power of the Word.<sup>19</sup> Today, their resolve remains a testament of faithfulness and determination in the midst of the severest of trials.

### Scripture's destination and hope

It is the journey that matters, not the destination: this has become the mantra of our postmodern culture today. The sad reality is that our focus has shifted to the journey because many no longer know where they are going. They have lost all sense of direction and the pursuit of any destination. Could it be that in humanity's desire to free itself from all absolutes, it has become empty, lost, and without hope?

Here we must reintroduce the Bible. The God who inspired it provides for the deepest longings of the human heart, giving it purpose and direction. Happiness does not revolve around an existential journey that focuses on oneself; rather, happiness revolves around the saving grace of Jesus Christ. God, through His active work in history and through the divine word of prophecy, gives each person purpose, hope, and a future. This is why Moses, as he approached his own death on Mount Nebo, could offer these words: "Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be careful to observe—all the words of this law. For it is not a futile thing for you, *because it is your life*, and *by this word* you shall prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess" (Deuteronomy 32:46, 47; emphasis added).

It is the understanding of God's Word that brings life. It contains directions to the Promised Land, given by Jesus

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Himself. He promised to “prepare a place for [us]” and affirmed, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:2, 6). According to Jesus, it is the journey that matters because it is all about the destination.

Our task in this book is to examine the role of Scripture and learn how to rightly study its holy pages. This quest will reward us with an understanding of God’s covenant plan of redemption for a lost planet. When we understand His message, we will understand the joy, hope, and peace that make His revelation more relevant today than at any other time in earth’s history.

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