## Chapter 1 **The Interpreter**

One of the jobs I worked while attending college was covering the Prescott Hall front reception desk. It was a good job, as I'd usually get four short calls in a four-hour shift, and I could spend the rest of the time doing homework or chatting with friends who stopped by. However, one night I received a call that resulted in a crisis of international proportions. The phone rang, and I answered it: "Prescott Hall—how can I help you?"

A timid voice responded. "Jose?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't catch his last name. Is he a student here?"

"Jose?" asked the voice again.

OK, she doesn't speak English. That's easily fixed. There were only a few Joses in our dorms, and I knew most of them, so I knew I could find him by the process of elimination. Swiftly I punched the keys on the computer and located the mysterious Hispanic man known only as Jose.

"Here's your transfer, ma'am," I said while she asked again for what I presumed was her son. Then I transferred the call—only to be greeted by a busy signal.

"Uh, I'm sorry," I told the caller, "but his line is busy."

Now the timid voice transformed into something more irate. "JOSE!" the woman cried angrily.

She didn't understand what I was saying. The words I spoke bounced off her ears like bullets off Superman's chest. I had only one option left—I transferred her call to the women's dorm, muttering, "Let's see if they can get anywhere with this situation."

A few moments later, the phone rang again, and I answered dutifully. "Hello, Prescott desk. How may I—"

"JOSE!" the voice shrieked.

I was helpless. This caller wouldn't get off the line. I couldn't make the transfer, and apparently the only word in her vocabulary was "Jose," followed by what sounded like thirty or forty exclamation points. Panic ensured, and all was nearly

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Can	you	think	of	ways	
peop	le int	erpret	the	Bible	
without using the Bible?					

## Study Questions Why have people made so many different versions of the Bible? What are the tools listed below, and how can they help you study Scripture? Concordance a. Parallel Bible Ъ. Bible dictionary C.

lost—until my Spanish-speaking Hispanic friend Gil walked into the lobby.

"Gil," I cried, shoving the phone into his hand, "tell this woman what's going on! Her son's line is busy! She is screaming and probably thinks that we've done something to him or are hiding him somewhere, or worse!"

Gil grabbed the phone and in perfect Spanish translated what I had been trying to tell her. The crisis was defused, and eventually the anxious mother was reunited via telephone with Jose—who I hope has acquired call-waiting since then.

Sometimes we need an interpreter to understand the message.

## The Bible's interpreter

In the book of Daniel, we see something that seems unlikely—a prophet confused by a message sent from God. The prophet says, "And I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days; then I rose and went about the king's business; but I was appalled by the vision *and did not understand it*" (Daniel 8:27; emphasis added).

Daniel was even more upset than Jose's mother was because he couldn't understand what God was telling him. It's just as easy for us to become frustrated when trying to understand what God wants to communicate to us today through His Word. Thankfully, there's a way that works.

The great Reformer Martin Luther once said, "Scripture . . . is its own light. It is a grand thing when Scripture interprets itself." This concept has been echoed throughout history by great Christian leaders. As a Seventh-day Adventist, I find this concept supported by a man named William Miller. One of his top three principles for interpreting the Bible states: "Scripture must be its own expositor [explainer], since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a minister or teacher to explain it to me, and they should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of their creed, or thought to be wise, . . . then their guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom is my rule and not the Bible!"

In seminary I took an exam in Hebrew and had to dissect each verb to make sure my translation was correct. It would have been easier if I could have used a Hebrew dictionary because it would have helped me with the translation. Using a German dictionary would have done nothing except score me a big fat F—and possibly a psychological evaluation. To understand Hebrew, I needed a Hebrew dictionary. So, if we want to understand Scripture, we need to look at Scripture.

Here's an example. Early on in the book of Revelation, when Jesus is having John write letters to seven churches, the text tells us that Jesus is the One who "walks among the seven golden lampstands" (Revelation 2:1). What does that mean? Does Jesus like lampstands? I don't see why He wouldn't—but there's a little more meaning here.

Golden lampstands were used in the Old Testament sanctuary (see Exodus 25:31). They symbolized light in darkness (the sanctuary had no windows). In describing the effect Jesus has on people, the Gospel of Matthew says, "the people who

sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death light has dawned" (Matthew 4:16).

Jesus also likens Himself to "light" (John 8:12), and He even tells His followers, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). In other words, God and His followers bring light to a dark world. So when we get back to Revelation 2:1, we can see that Jesus is likening His churches to lights in a dark world—meaning we are supposed to be sharing the hope and love we have instead of hiding ourselves away where people can't find us.

By looking at other places in Scripture that have phrases, images, and objects like those in the passage we're studying, we can get a clearer sense of what that passage or that prophecy is saying to us and where things are taking place.

In the case of Daniel, we are greeted with a myriad of time prophecies. Take a look at this important one in Daniel 8:13, 14: "Then I heard a holy one speaking; and another holy one said to the one that spoke, 'For how long is the vision concerning the continual burnt offering, the transgression that makes desolate, and the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled under foot?' And he said to him, 'For two thousand and three hundred evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state.' "

You may be tempted to think of these 2,300 days as twenty-four-hour days and come up with the time in this prophecy being somewhere around six years. Problem is, the sanctuary wasn't in its "restored" or its "rightful state," or "cleansed," as some translations have it, six years after this prophecy was given.

So now what?

As we will discuss more in the next chapter, prophecy uses lots of symbols for its descriptions, and symbols aren't to be taken literally. I mean, can you imagine reading Daniel 7:3—which pictures four horrible beasts emerging out of the sea—and thinking Daniel's prophecy means that at some point four monsters will run amok around the planet, ravaging everything in their path?

Maybe you do. But while I agree that it would be incredibly exciting to have a sort of prophetic *Jurassic Park*, I'm going to let you in on something. *Shhh*—hold this book up close to your face, and I'll whisper it to you:

They aren't literal beasts. They represent something else.

OK, back to the timeline in Daniel 8. The point is that the time periods in Daniel's prophecies aren't literal either. We need a different formula so we can understand when the events in these prophecies will occur. When we search Scripture for the answer, we find two texts that help us understand Daniel's time prophecies: "According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, you shall bear your iniquity, forty years" (Numbers 14:34; emphasis added). And "I assign to you a number of days, three hundred and ninety, equal to the number of the years of their punishment" (Ezekiel 4:5; emphasis added).

## Study Ouestion

What is the principle"?	e "day for a ye

Study Questions	Both these passages come in the context of judgment decrees—as does Daniel 8
How do you study the Bible?	and the 2,300 days. These passages indicate that the 2,300 days are actually 2,300 years. When those years start and end is the subject of another chapter. For now, just remember that this way of calculating time is referred to as the "day for a year principle."
	principle."  Because I am a pastor, I get a lot of weird phone calls, some of them about people's interpretation of the Bible's prophecies. People have called to tell me that the locusts in Revelation 9 are helicopters and that the mark of the beast in Revelation 13 referred to none other than President Franklin Delano Roosevelt—who died sixty years prior to that bizarre call. Other people have suggested the mark of the beast is a computer chip, and that the knowledge that Daniel 12:4 says shall increase
How does the way you study it help you to find	refers to the latest gadget at the Apple store. I'm still waiting, though, for a call from a nut who goes to Yellowstone Park, and sees a bear with three ribs from an unfortunate deer in its mouth, and thinks he or she has spotted a prophetic beast wandering around (see Daniel 7:5).
the meaning of difficult Bi- ble texts?	At the time I'm writing this chapter, a popular piece on YouTube features a hippie videoing a double rainbow. While steadying his video camera, he marvels, weeps, and yells about the beautiful sight. After regaining his composure, he asks in hushed tones, "What does it mean?"
	Biblically speaking, the rainbow is God's way of reminding us that He won't destroy the world via a flood again. In this guy's case, however, my first thought was, I'll tell you what it means—it means, "Time to lay off the marijuana, my friend." People tend to want to look for hidden and obscure meanings in various areas of life. That's true of prophecy too. But when we allow Scripture to interpret itself by giving us the clues we need, we avoid coming up with something crazy and making our faith (and our God) look dumb, unreasonable, and unstable.
What could you do to push yourself even deeper into	CHAPTER 1 IN BRIEF
the Bible?	The study of prophecy is not a quest for some secret, mystical meaning—though this isn't to say that God doesn't know things we don't know or that He has no mystical qualities. Instead, God uses prophecy to reveal things to us. Matter of fact, in the Greek language in which the New Testament was first written, the word translated "Revelation" is <i>apokalupsis</i> , which means "disclosure" or "a revealing." In other words, prophecy is about God revealing His message to us in Scripture, not about His hiding it from us.
	ENDNOTE
	1. William Miller. "Rules of Interpretation." <i>Midnight Cry.</i> November 17, 1842.