

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?

a. Concordance

b. Parallel Bible

c. Bible dictionary

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!”¹

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

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How do you study the Bible?

How does the way you study it help you to find the meaning of difficult Bible texts?

What could you do to push yourself even deeper into the Bible?

Both these passages come in the context of judgment decrees—as does Daniel 8 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.”

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 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).

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.

CHAPTER 1 IN BRIEF

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 *apokalupsis*, 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,” *Midnight Cry*, November 17, 1842.