

Emotional Intelligence
and Sola Scriptura

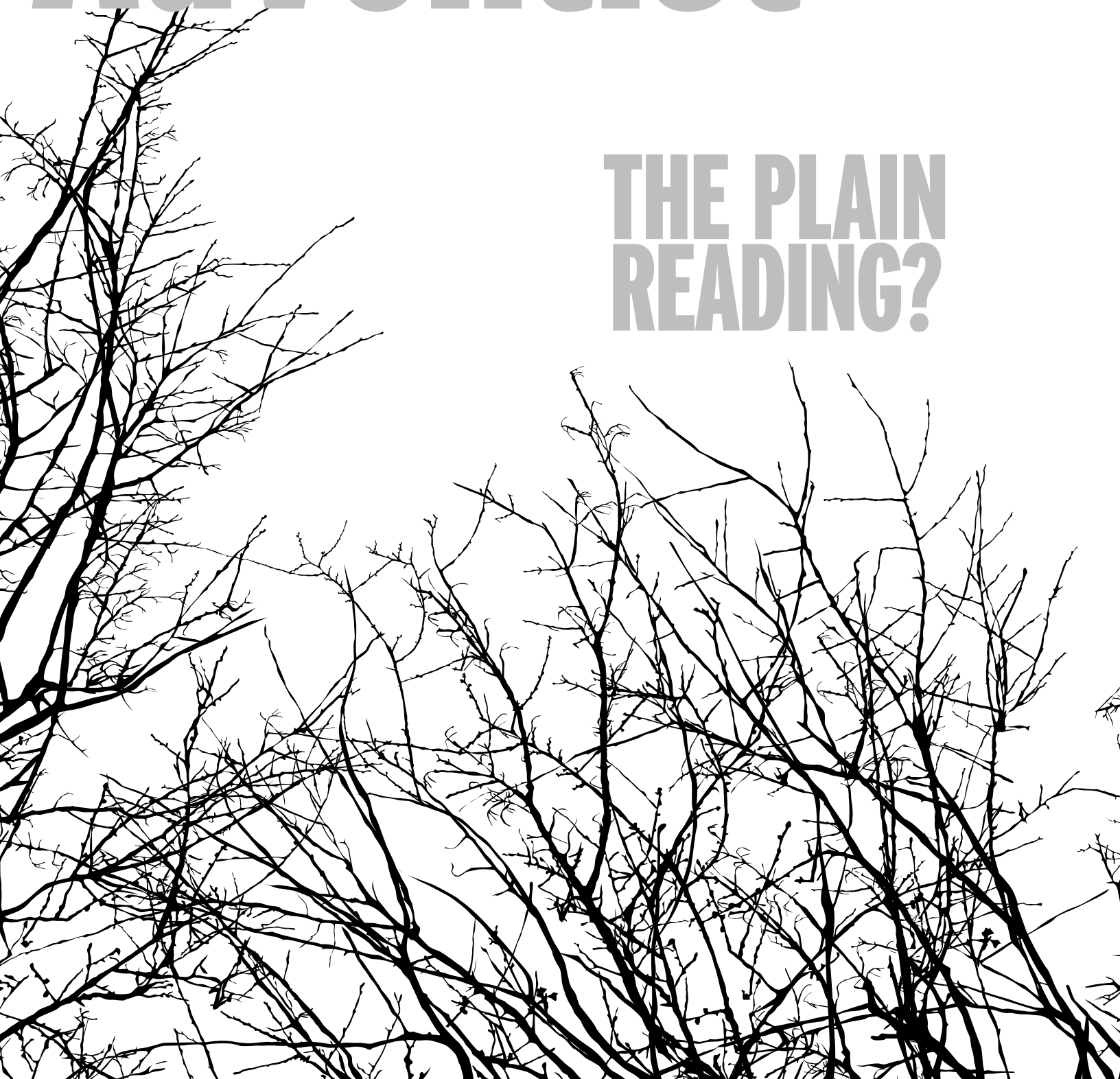
Beyond Proof-Text
Interpretation

The Bible Is Too Important
to Take Literally

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Adventist *Today*

THE PLAIN
READING?



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Open Source

By Loren Seibold

BACK IN THE EARLY ERA OF PERSONAL COMPUTING, it became apparent that there was a need to share files and data between computers. One good software protocol was Gopher, developed at the University of Minnesota, but its creators insisted on charging a licensing fee for its use. At about the same time, Tim Berners-Lee made an agreement with his employers at CERN that a protocol he'd written, the World Wide Web, would not only be free for users, but also available to developers who wanted to adapt and improve its code. Gopher went into hibernation and is almost unknown today. Everyone knows the World Wide Web.

We use the term “open source” to refer to information products that are given away. The most famous is LINUX, Linus Torvald's free-for-use operating system (OS). While Microsoft and Apple offer polished and well-designed operating systems for everyday computer users like me, LINUX is the most widely used OS in the world, the foundation for almost every behind-the-scenes computer system: servers, routers, phone systems, and the computers inside of other products. Any user can take it and make it into what he or she needs.

Big companies hold on to the rights to their products for good reason: they make money from them. It's why Apple is the most valuable company in the world. But there's a price to pay for holding your product too closely: it doesn't develop and evolve. Evidence: telephones chugged along for a century with only minor innovation, until the breakup of Bell Telephone took away the controlling center. The result was a telecommunications revolution.

Making information open-source doesn't instantly make things better, but it does bring a larger community to the conversation. Scientific discovery would have stalled had alchemists back

in the 18th century not decided to share the results of their experiments through scientific journals. It's still the practice among researchers today. There are numerous counter-instances of scientific discoveries that holders couldn't develop but were unwilling to share, stalling innovation for, sometimes, generations. Some now use the term “open source” for any sharing of intellectual products of almost any kind: recipes, scientific experiments, house plans, even medicines. Mostly, it works—sometimes extraordinarily well.

Open-Source Bible

The Bible started out as an open-source project. It appears to have had no master plan, in the corporate sense. It was assembled from subunits of spiritual understanding; holy men of God were moved by the Holy Spirit to speak or write history, poetry, letters, stories, and laws. To those who argue that God micromanaged the document with scientific care, it's only necessary to point out the redundancies in the Old Testament¹ and the Synoptic Gospels. Christians don't claim that the Bible is like the Qur'an, which, according to Mohammed, was dictated by God. The Bible contains congruent themes as well as aching contradictions. To say that it is inerrant, under any cogent definition of that word, is impossible. Yet the Bible serves its purpose. It tells us about God, describes how he has interacted with human beings for millennia, and presents his plans for the future.

As often happens with good new information, these stories and writings were taken over for refinement by talented developers. The Apostle Paul was the Bill Gates of the Christian revolution. He fused a theology out of a few relevant parts of the Hebrew scriptures and the Christ event. (Some of those parts that didn't quite fit remain “bugs” in the

The Bible contains congruent themes as well as aching contradictions. To say that it is inerrant, under any cogent definition of that word, is impossible. Yet the Bible serves its purpose. It tells us about God.

system.) Jesus started a movement, but Paul created a church. Paul's writings are not just doctrine, but desperate attempts to keep the new company of Christians from destroying the message by imposing a theological and behavioral structure on them.

Perhaps it was this tendency to self-destruct that made it seem desirable for Christianity to become a strong monopoly, a process it managed to complete within a couple of centuries. The Bible became a wholly owned product of the Roman Church. The Church selected the books it wanted to include and produced an

Rather than tying traditional doctrines into place around us like a holy life jacket, we should add value to Bible study so that it helps people have an experience with God.

authorized version in a dying tongue familiar only to scholars. It controlled the message, eventually going so far as to say that it not only interpreted but could even contradict the Bible. It claimed to control salvation—for example, exalting a metaphor about bread and wine to a salvation necessity that it could grant or withhold, plus claiming authority over heaven's decisions with a set of metaphorical keys.

It was astonishingly successful. The early Roman Church became to the Christian faith what many major companies are to our economy today: too powerful for their own good, much less for the good of stakeholders. The church controlled culture, art, speech, people, land, armies, and governments. It became, predictably, cruel and insensitive. The church, after all, had to survive, even at the cost of the collateral suffering of some constituents. It was (again, like many companies today) too important to fail.

Yet it did. When William Tyndale, Martin Luther, and others translated the Bible into common tongues and printed the copies on paper by the thousands, it ended Roman Catholic domination over Christianity and opened the doors to competitive denominationalism. The Reformation was an open-source revolution. The next step in this revolution followed

soon afterward, when the Bible escaped the stale, old cultures of monarchical Europe for a new shore: America. There, under the influence of a distinctly humanistic philosophy, a new freedom took root, resulting in some of the most vigorous religious innovation in history. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was one of the products of this era.

We are in the midst of another great open-source revolution right now. The Internet has brought about the greatest decentralization of knowledge since humans roamed the Earth as hunter-gatherers. We are in a time when organizations such as churches are regarded as not only unnecessary, but (for some good reasons) untrustworthy.

And, not surprisingly, the old organizations don't know quite what to do. We in churches are doing—a bit desperately and with much defensiveness—what Christians have tended to do in such situations through the ages: we tell people what the Bible says, with the implication that they must accept it or be damned.

The Plain Reading

There is, precisely here, a dissonance that we can't quite resolve. Bible-believing churches such as ours say that people can read and interpret the Bible for themselves, as we are told Christians did during the Reformation. We have recently heard phrases such as the "plain reading" or the "plain understanding" as shibboleths for good Bible study.

But too often we mean just the opposite. We mean that you must, in your plain reading, find precisely what matches our corporate plan. If you find anything else, you're not doing plain and simple Bible study. Some church leaders have gone so far as to accuse anyone who does not find what the church deems orthodoxy as dishonest, intentionally reading liberal notions into the text. (Interestingly, and for reasons I don't completely understand, they rarely are as upset about those who find reactive, prejudicial, controlling, hurtful, and even hateful ideas in the text.)

So perhaps you see the problem? We have an open-source document that organized religion took in hand and worked into a smooth and coherent operating system, though one that depended upon Big Religion for interpretation and enforcement. We are now in an age in which the controlling center is weakening. Meanwhile, we in Big Religion still claim a belief in personal Bible interpretation that we don't practice, for we go to great lengths to nail down our beliefs with corporate pronouncements and even punitive measures.

The Conversation With Culture

Of the claim that a Bible truth “is absolutely clear and simple,” I have two observations. First, it is more accurate for the big principles of the Bible but becomes less accurate the more particular you get. The Torah is a good illustration of how laws and rules that worked in one era become irrelevant in another. The difficulty, of course, is that many want to declare anything they find meaningful—even if it is based on a single text or obscure passage—to be plain and simple.

Second, it is naive. Every reader interprets. There’s no way to read anything in a cultural vacuum, especially an 800,000-word document assembled by countless speakers and writers over millennia and passed on through multiple languages. If all that’s needed is a plain and simple reading, then why do we have organizations such as the Biblical Research Institute? Why do we bother with universities and seminaries? Why do we have evangelists? Why do we take votes on doctrine at our international gatherings?

That’s not to deny that some readers do, in fact, wrest the Bible to their own ends (2 Peter 3:16), but that’s as easily done in favor of a church’s traditional doctrines as against them. Please remember that even some of our own Adventist pioneers found establishing the Triune Godhead from Scripture difficult, and some correctly observed that this interpretation owed a great deal to Catholic scholars from a Roman culture. In other words, the church is capable of doing some wrestling of its own.

What the Bible has for us evolves from age to age. It is at its best when it is in conversation with culture. We will rarely have the foresight to anticipate this changing conversation, but it’s easily seen with hindsight. Why do we Seventh-day Adventists not believe the same as pre-Reformation Roman Catholics? Or early Lutherans? Or Methodists? Because interpretation changes with time and culture.

And here is where churches lose out: they refuse to be in conversation with culture. And when that happens, people move on and move out.

I recently asked a group of college educators why young Seventh-day Adventists seem so disconnected from the discussions we carry on in places such as *Adventist Today* and *Spectrum*. “They’ve settled many of these questions in their own minds,” they told me. “They’ve got no problem with women’s ordination and LGBT people, for example. They take a redemptive view of such questions, and they’re losing respect for

the church to the extent that we go to great lengths to cinch down what they regard as obsolete points of view.”

Younger people are living in an open-source world, so their faith is also open-source. They don’t attend to our arguments or to the pronouncements of organizations such as the General Conference. This is a problem that, it seems to me, should be front and center for church leaders. Christianity has schismmed wildly since the Reformation, but at least it tended to organize, to clump together. Now, in our open-source world, the clumping

Manipulate the Bible to save the church, and we’ll fail. Make God’s kingdom our goal, and we may succeed in saving the church, too.

factor appears less effective, and churches are suffering ecclesiastical hemophilia: we’re hemorrhaging young people. Merely battening down the theological hatches isn’t helping.

Adding Value

LINUX wasn’t especially accessible as Linus Torvald wrote it, except to other software engineers. But when the code was released into the community, those who saw its value added features and applications. Today billions of users are the beneficiaries in the form of Google’s Android operating system, based on LINUX. Google didn’t patent the core of the Android operating system—it couldn’t, because it’s open-source—but they added value to it.

Perhaps that could be a model for churches such as ours, too: rather than tying traditional doctrines into place around us like a holy life jacket, we should add value to Bible study so that it helps people have an experience with God.

Exactly how we should add that value is a subject for discussion. I don’t know all of the answers, but here are my thoughts:

First, a useful hermeneutic adapts to the times. How some can look at all of the changes in Christianity for the past 2,000 years, yet say that what the Adventist pioneers put into place a century

ago is absolutely perfect in all of its parts, puzzles me. I'm not denying the need for continuity with our original teachings. But please realize how much we have changed since the first Advent message went forth. Why can't we anticipate changes in how we interpret and live out our inspired texts, then welcome them, rather than endlessly fight against them?

Second, we're going to struggle as long as we insist that Seventh-day Adventists be precisely the same the world over. Whether our leaders know it or not, the church in some parts of

We may need to admit that we're heading toward an open-source style of fellowship where we're bonded not by shared Adventist beliefs, but by shared Christian experience.

the world is in trouble. The current push to establish orthodoxy seems to me a weak, desperate response to this larger, more connected but less unified world. What if we thought of ourselves not as having to make all beliefs uniform, but rather as desiring to add value to Scripture in whatever setting people are? For that, you must stay in conversation with culture, and that may mean drifting from the historical center. We may need to sacrifice less important truths for essential ones, a distinction that only the Holy Spirit can help us find.

But first we'll have to accept that around the world we do not, and never will, see every detail the same way—and it isn't essential that we do.

Third, we may need to admit that we're heading toward an open-source style of fellowship where we're bonded not by shared Adventist beliefs, but by shared Christian experience. Already the young—those who are still here with us—are here on a different contract than their elders, though their elders don't quite realize it yet.


That's going to require a flexibility that we find difficult. Open sourcism means a wider drift from the center. It means having to accept new things. (Remember how annoyed you get when

your computer changes its operating system, forcing you to learn new features—and how, later, you can't imagine how you ever managed without the new features?) Flexibility is a strength, but it terrifies churches such as ours. We fear losing our grip; we worry that something in which so many have made such an investment will cease to matter. Fear makes us react badly to change, tempting us to feel that being misunderstood and rejected is inevitable, and so we cling all the more tightly to the irrelevant.

Fourth, let us trust the Holy Spirit to guide us as we attempt to be an open-source church in an open-source world. Once upon a time we listened to the promptings of a Spirit that, like the wind, “bloweth where it listeth” (John 3:8, KJV)—a metaphor for divine guidance toward surprising and unexpected results. Can we now, without a living prophet, still hear the Spirit guiding us as we change?

Saving the Church

Perhaps you've heard a meme that gets trotted out in discussions of future planning: that in the early 20th century, the losers were those who invested in buggy whip companies. Only it's not quite an honest story. Many companies in the horse-transportation industry made the transition into automobiles. Those who worked leather made upholstery, seals, straps, and belts. The skills for carriage framing were adaptable to automobile framing. Blacksmiths transferred their metalworking skills to cars. Henry Timken made his first tapered roller bearings for horse-drawn wagons, but they worked just as well in automobiles, and today Timken is still a global manufacturer of bearings. The companies that survived saw themselves as invested in transportation, not just horses. And they had the flexibility to adapt.

Right now there is a desperate and angry anti-reformation going on, with well-meaning Adventist believers trying to save the church by making the Bible sound increasingly stern and controlling—the very antithesis of an open-source approach. This way of thinking has a constituency, but it's not a plan for the future. We will survive only as we invest in God's kingdom instead of the church. Manipulate the Bible to save the church, and we'll fail. Make God's kingdom our goal, and we may succeed in saving the church, too. 

¹ 2 Kings 18:13-20:11 duplicates Isaiah 36:1-38:8; Psalm 53 duplicates Psalm 14; 2 Kings 24:18-25:30 is nearly identical with Jeremiah 52; and 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 mirrors Ezra 1:1-3.



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EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND SOLA SCRIPTURA

By Richard Beck

I WAS READING A DISCUSSION ABOUT HELL IN A COMMENT THREAD the other day, and multiple people in the thread were saying things like this: “I’m not basing my views on emotion or sentiment. I’ve reached my conclusion because it is the one based firmly on Scripture.”

I’m sure you’ve heard claims like that before. I’ve heard them many, many times.

“I am basing my views on Scripture.”

“My exegesis of the text forced me to adopt the position I currently hold.”

“Though I wish it were otherwise, this is the view that Scripture compels me to believe.”

“This is the clear teaching of Scripture.”

I once quipped at a conference that a Fundamentalist is a person who thinks he doesn’t have a hermeneutic.

I don’t want to rehash that point, as it’s a point that has been made many, many times. We *all* have a hermeneutic. We are all interpreting the text to some degree. We are all privileging—deferring to—certain values, doctrines, creedal commitments, traditions, or biblical texts. Something somewhere is trumping something else. In a document as multivocal as the Bible, this is unavoidable.

So we all have a hermeneutic. The only question is whether you are *consciously* or *unconsciously* using a hermeneutic. Fundamentalists are interpreting the text right and left; they are just *unaware* that they are doing so. This *lack of conscious awareness* is what produces the sorts of statements described above.

When your hermeneutic is operating unconsciously, it causes you to say things like “This is the clear teaching of Scripture.”

What is interesting to me in this phenomenon is not that we are all engaging in hermeneutics, acts of interpretation. That is a given. What is interesting to me is how *self-awareness*, or the lack thereof, is implicated in all of this.


Basically, denying that you are engaged in hermeneutics—a characteristic, as I said, of fundamentalism—betrays a shocking lack of self-awareness, an inability to notice the way your mind and emotions are working in the background and beneath the surface.

I think statements like “This is the clear teaching of Scripture” are psychologically diagnostic. Statements like these reveal something about yourself. Namely, that you lack a certain degree of self-awareness.

Saying something like “This is the clear teaching of Scripture” is similar to saying “I’m not a racist.” Self-aware people would never say either one of those things.

Self-aware people might say, “I don’t want to be a racist” or “I try not to be racist” or “I condemn racism.” But they would never say, “I’m not a racist,” because self-aware people know that they have blind spots. Self-aware people know they have unconscious baggage that is hard to notice or overcome.

And it’s the same with how self-aware people approach reading the Bible. Self-aware people know that they are *trying* to read the Bible in an unbiased fashion. Self-aware people work hard to let the Bible speak clearly and in its own voice. But self-aware people know they have blind spots. They know that there is unconscious baggage affecting how they are reading the Bible, baggage that they know *must* be biasing their readings and conclusions. Consequently, self-aware people would never, ever say, “This is the clear teaching of Scripture.” Nor would they claim to be unbiased in any other area of life, racism being just one example.

What I am saying is that when we approach the issue of sola scriptura—using “the Bible alone”—there is more to this than pointing out the ubiquity and necessity of hermeneutics. There is also the issue of emotional intelligence, the degree to which you are reading the Bible with self-awareness. Perhaps this—a lack of emotional intelligence—is the root problem with Fundamentalism, both biblically and socially. 



BEYOND BIBLICAL BREAD:

Reading the Bible as Jesus Did

By Zane Yi

RECENTLY, AT THE GROCERY STORE, I CAME ACROSS A LOAF OF biblical bread; it was advertised as following a recipe from the book of Ezekiel. “As described in the Holy Scripture verse,” the label read. Curious, I took a loaf home...and found it to be delicious. What can I say? I know the Bible is not a cookbook, but I’m a sucker for clever marketing.

People read their Bibles looking for all kinds of things. Naturally, this leads to debates about what it really says. And this eventually leads to questions of the correct interpretative method. There are appeals to “the plain reading” of Scripture, and when this exhortation yields *different* plain readings, scholars will tout the benefits of one method over the other—the “historical-critical method” over the “historical-grammatical method,” and vice versa.¹

I don’t want to revisit these debates or to champion one particular view over another, but rather to suggest an alternative approach to interpreting the Bible properly. Christians should try to read the Bible the way Jesus, the founding figure of Christianity, read it. I realize this may sound like a strange suggestion. Don’t we read *about* Jesus in the Bible? Certainly. And when we carefully study his teachings, we encounter the distinct way he read the Scripture of his day—one that can inform our own practice today.

Jesus, the Teacher of Scripture

While teaching wasn’t the only aspect of Jesus’ ministry, it was an important part of it. Many people in his day referred to him as “Rabbi,” the honorific Jewish term for “teacher.” What did rabbis teach? Rabbis commented on Torah, or what Christians refer to as the Old Testament. Different rabbis had different schools based on different ways of reading Scripture. Jesus did the same, based on his own distinctive way.

So when Jesus invited individuals to become his students, one of the things he was inviting them to do was to learn *how* to read the Scriptures. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,” he said (Matt. 11:29, NIV). The yoke was a metaphorical way rabbis referred to their interpretation of Scripture. Jesus insists that his way is “easy” and “light” (verse 30).

Students sometimes become parrots of their mentors, imitating what they say and sharing their views on given issues. But great teachers affect *the way* their students think, not just *what* to think. In other words, the point of education is not memorization and regurgitation, but wisdom: the ability to approach people, situations, and issues in a certain way. And this is what happened to Jesus’ original students; they learned how to interpret Scripture in the distinct way that their teacher did—one apparent to those

This becomes evident when we examine Leviticus 19:18, the verse from which Jesus drew his teaching about neighbor love. It’s actually a secondary clause to a teaching prohibiting revenge: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but *love your neighbor as yourself*. I am the LORD” (NIV, emphasis mine). Even more striking are the instructions in the verse that immediately follows it: “Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.”

It’s unclear what the rationale or the significance is for these later teachings. Perhaps they were self-evident to those living in an ancient agrarian society. Commentators note that this chapter as a whole has no clear organizing thread. Instead, it is a loose association of ideas. In many ways, it is a microcosm of the whole

Jesus, I think, would respond as any teacher would today: part of a given reading assignment is really important. This said, certain parts of the Bible were more significant

they encountered: “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13, NIV).

The Way Jesus Read Scripture

So how did Jesus read his Bible? A close analysis of his well-known teaching to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31, NIV) reveals some simple, yet striking aspects of Jesus’ distinct style of interpretation. First, notice that Jesus is quoting from Leviticus 19:18. This shows us that he drew this central teaching from Scripture; he wasn’t channeling it directly from heaven. Jesus loved his Bible and had the highest respect for it; he clearly stated in Matthew 5:17 that his teachings do not detract from anything Scripture teaches, but rather clarify its true meaning. Jesus, I think, would respond as any teacher would today when students ask what part of a given reading assignment is really important. “All of it.” However, with this said, certain parts of the Bible were more significant than others.

Bible, or the way it seems to people, especially when they start reading it for the first time. The phrase “love your neighbor as yourself” is easy to overlook in this passage. It’s surrounded by all kinds of other instruction. Yet Jesus homes in on this one phrase and makes it central to his moral teaching.

It turns out that not all inspired texts are equally important.

Walter Brueggemann notes that the Old Testament has two traditions that are in “profound tension”² with each other. The priestly tradition prioritizes the cultic life of the community and ritual purity, while the prophetic tradition focuses on political and economic life and issues of justice. This is not to say that priests didn’t care about justice and that prophets didn’t care about ritual, but each seemed to emphasize one as being particularly important to fulfilling God’s will.

How is one faithful to both of these traditions when they come into conflict? Which should be prioritized over the other? Jesus sides with the prophets. As Richard Bauckham says: “Jesus does not reject the rules for priestly purity, but he downgrades them. Weightier considerations take precedence.”³ The religious leaders of Jesus’ day were punctilious about paying their tithe. Yet, Jesus admonishes them for neglecting “the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Matt. 23:23, NIV).

Jesus also made fresh connections between passages. The Torah can be broken down into 613 commands. The most important of these 613 commands, widely agreed upon by the experts, was the *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4-5, NIV). What wasn’t agreed upon is what follows the *Shema* immediately in importance. For Jesus, though, it’s clearly love of one’s neighbor, for the way humans relate to each other is how they also relate to the divine.

And this leads me to a final point: Jesus stretched his reading of Scripture to include as many people as possible. One’s neighbors weren’t just faithful Jews: they included enemies, Samaritans, women, children, the demon-possessed, the imprisoned, tax collectors, widows, and the poor.

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Adventists and Scripture

Jesus *appreciated* all of Scripture, but he *read* it prophetically. This has important implications for anyone who professes to be his follower. Do followers of Jesus read the Bible like Jesus?

Early on, at its inception, Christianity was a movement based on the teachings of Jesus. There was no New Testament, so believers were reliant on the teaching of the apostles, who, as students of Jesus, interpreted the Scriptures as Jesus did—prophetically. But as the community encountered competing philosophical and religious groups, this way of reading the Bible was displaced by a doctrinal emphasis in order to distinguish itself from others. Christianity became creedal—more focused on the beliefs one had *about* Jesus than emphasizing living one’s life *inspired by* Jesus and his actual teachings.

The number of doctrines that defined what it meant to be a Christian grew like a patch of unruly weeds. To beliefs about God and Jesus were added affirmations (and denials) about the precise meaning of Jesus’ death, the appropriate mode of baptism, what happens when one takes communion, the best way to organize a church, what happens at the end of the world, the true day of worship, what to eat, etc. All are, undoubtedly, important topics. But equally important?

Like most Christians, most Adventists believe that God inspired those who wrote the Bible and, through them, has something to say to us. But all too often we have approached the Scriptures as a collection of propositions that offer intriguing information...like bread recipes. We don’t need more people reading the Bible this way. We need more people reading their Bibles as Jesus did.⁴

And what would happen if more of us started doing this? Jesus promised his students that “every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (Matt. 13:52, NIV). 

¹ For one official Adventist statement on biblical hermeneutics, see <http://tinyurl.com/zaneyi1>. Recent debates about the ordination of women have led to calls for a renewed study of hermeneutical method. See <http://tinyurl.com/zaneyi2>.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1997), p. 192.

³ Richard Bauckman, *Jesus: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 71. See pp. 68-75 for a very helpful overview of Jesus’ interpretive approach to Torah.

⁴ For an informative recent work by Adventist scholars exploring the way Jesus read the Bible, see *The Bible Jesus Interpreted: Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament* by Jon Paulien and Hans K. LaRondelle (Logos Bible Software, 2013).



"YOU SHALL LOVE THE STRANGER"

A HERMENEUTIC OF COMPASSION

By Abi Doukhan

THERE ARE FEW ISSUES MORE DISPUTED IN RELIGIOUS communities than the role of women and the acceptance of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transsexuals (LGBTs). These are more than theoretical debates, when one considers the emotional toll these disputes take on women and LGBTs. In some conservative Christian groups, women are taught to submit to males and are marginalized from positions of responsibility in the church. Likewise, members of the LGBT community are, at best, sidelined as unworthy to serve in the church and, at worst, insulted, excommunicated, and in some instances even murdered in the name of Christ. Although most commentators claim that their attitudes are grounded in the Bible, one wonders if a reading of the biblical text that leads to oppression of another human being can possibly be legitimate. Is it not contradictory to use a scripture, whose essential purpose is to redeem and liberate, to instead enslave or oppress?

It seems to me that the problem is not so much with the Bible as with the way that we have chosen historically to interpret it. And indeed, against the purists I would venture to suggest that interpretation is inevitable. As soon as one applies oneself to a given text, one cannot avoid reading it through a lens of religion, gender, culture, and ethnicity. The meaning the reader gives to a text is indissociable from his or her perspective. How then, given the myriads of perspectives, can we get to the intended meaning of Scripture? A bit of research shows a multiplicity of interpretations on the issues mentioned above. While some interpretations use Scripture to elevate women, others do so to degrade them. Some interpretations passionately denounce homosexual relationships, while others seem to open up new perspectives on how to approach the LGBT question. Which do we choose?

The Stranger in Scripture

I believe that it is possible to approach the intended meaning of a given scripture but that we need a guiding hermeneutical principle, a principle by which one can filter valid from invalid interpretations. Such a principle should be rooted in the scriptures themselves, that is to say, in the general spirit or *ethos* of Scripture. It is in light of the totality of Scripture, of the overarching message of the Bible, that we should approach specific passages in the Old

and New Testaments. But then what is this general spirit, or ethos, of Scripture that might guide our interpretation?

The obvious answer to that question is that Scripture is entirely centered on love. But it's more complex than that. We often forget that Scripture exhorts us to love not merely our fellow believers, who are part of our community of faith and united under a common set of practices and beliefs, but rather—and especially—to show ourselves capable of loving the *stranger*. Both the Old and the New Testaments emphasize not only to care for the next of kin, but specifically to respect, honor, and love the one who is not yet a member of the community: the outcast, the one who doesn't act or think like us. Many Old Testament passages exhort the people of Israel to care for and love the "stranger," the "widow," and the "fatherless."¹ The stranger was to have a place of honor during all major holidays, to be fed and cared for.² This was a sacred duty to remind the Hebrews of their own condition as "strangers in the world," a people rooted in another reality, another dimension. Love for the stranger was so important that it became the very sign of one's love for God. To love the stranger in ancient Israel was to love God himself.³ The face of God was found in that of the stranger; to neglect the stranger amounted to neglecting and forgetting God.

In the New Testament, love for the stranger is poignantly and strikingly illustrated by the Christ. That he gave special attention to widows, the poor, women, tax collectors, prostitutes, and lepers is indicative of his concern for the marginalized of society. The Christ is also the one who, for the first time, showed love and respect to non-Jews: a centurion, a Samaritan woman, a Phoenician woman. There is a clear intention on the part of the Christ to show that love is commanded toward not only the next of kin, but also toward the distant one, the outcast, the stranger, those who do not belong to the community of faith. That the marginalized ones should be a number-one priority is something Jesus taught in the parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the prodigal son. Outcasts should be treated with care, tact, and gentleness, to be welcomed lovingly in their difference, without a thought as to whether or not they are a good fit with the community.

The biblical ethos seems to revolve overwhelmingly around the love of the stranger *qua* stranger, even as she chooses

to retain her difference—for what intrinsically defines the “stranger” is that she is other, that she is different. A closer look at the exegetical enterprise reveals, however, a very different stance toward the stranger. Indeed, it seems to me that when it comes to interpreting Scripture, this love of the stranger is most often conveniently forgotten. Where is the love of the stranger when an interpretation comes to be experienced systematically as oppressive rather than redemptive; when one’s gender or sexuality is judged, degraded, even negated; and when a given interpretation of a text results in marginalization, even expulsion from the community of faith? Are we not to love the stranger here too, as we interpret, as we do exegesis?

The question, of course, is how to proceed. How is love and respect for the stranger to serve as a hermeneutical principle in biblical exegesis? I suggest that to love the stranger as we interpret Scripture would entail two things: (1) that we abandon the Western scientific model of objectivity, which is distrustful of feelings and emotions, for a model that is framed by compassion—specifically compassion for those whose feelings are too often neglected and forgotten in the process of interpretation, and (2) that the stranger be invited to the hermeneutical table in an attempt to open up a space where her voice can be heard, her perspective accounted for.

Toward a Hermeneutic of Compassion

This idea of a “compassionate” hermeneutic strikes one as strange, however. Doesn’t objectivity require us to set aside compassion and sentiment in order not to taint the search for truth? Are we not required, as searchers for knowledge, to remain detached from the subject? In line with this attitude, the standard procedure has been to interpret a biblical passage without a thought for the repercussions of one’s interpretation on the daily lives of the people we are subjecting to our theorizing. And so a biblical passage is made clear for all, but a life has been destroyed and its oppression justified. Light has been shed on sin, but a human being has been cast into darkness, excommunicated from the community whose role was precisely to welcome and save him. An ancient curse has been understood, which then perpetuates for centuries the oppression and silencing of women in a way that profoundly contradicts the biblical message of redemption and liberation.

The above examples make me wonder whether or not we might arrive at better hermeneutical results if compassion were not lost sight of, if our quest were not as detached and cold-hearted? And yet, such a hermeneutical stance goes against everything that Western philosophy and science have stood for: Science must be unemotional if it is to be objective. The object can be tainted only

by the emotional state of the investigator. Can we allow ourselves to feel compassion for the subjects the Bible condemns without risking tainting the sacred text’s intentions?

Yet, is it really true that compassion impedes the quest for knowledge? Might one not, on the contrary, discover an epistemological sense to compassion? I suggest that a loving approach to hermeneutics, far from distorting one’s interpretation, might in fact give deeper insight into the text. Indeed, inasmuch as the whole Bible rests on the principle of love, is it not then imperative to keep this principle in sight when beginning the work of interpretation? And is it not precisely the loss of compassion that has, in the past, given rise to so many distortions of the biblical message, such as the idea that slavery, racism, or anti-Semitism are biblically founded? If we’d had more love and compassion for the subjects of interpretation at hand—Blacks and Jews—we might have come sooner to a more subtle, more nuanced interpretation of the biblical passages that seemed to condemn them and condone their oppression.

And perhaps we might have come to a different conclusion about women and LGBTs in our communities: an understanding that is redemptive rather than oppressive, in line with the spirit of freedom and redemption that permeates the Bible. Perhaps we might see God differently, too, in line with the Bible’s description of God as love.

Think of how the Bible would come across if the hermeneutical principle were to align with the principle of welcoming the stranger and the other. Perhaps instead of seeming so archaic, the Bible might appear surprisingly progressive and cutting-edge in our 21st century, which is just now, after many hurdles, discovering the value of the stranger.

Hermeneutics as an Act of Hospitality

It is interesting that this idea of bringing diverse and forgotten voices to the hermeneutical table is again very much in tune with the method of Western science.⁴ Science itself proceeds today intersubjectively as scientists collaborate on different projects. Similarly, in theological conferences scholars share their work with each other. The idea is that truth can be accessed only as each scientist or theologian brings to the table a missing piece of the great puzzle. The concept that truth is intersubjective is thus what lies behind the diverse forms of cooperation between scientists and theologians.⁵

And yet, I can’t help feeling at times that something is missing in the scientific and theological task where mutual agreement is seen as the basis for truth. I am observing more and more today in the scientific and theological communities a private club

mentality—where only those who agree with the current research paradigm and methodology are admitted. As such, non-Western paradigms of science and medicine may not be taken seriously. In the realm of physics and biology, the Darwinian hypothesis is the only one allowed to ground scientific investigations. In theology, men maintain a monopoly on the research and teaching of Scripture as women are still excluded, more or less explicitly, from this realm of study. I wonder whether or not one can really speak of intersubjectivity in these cases and if we should not again reflect upon the primordial importance of giving the other a seat at the table of scientific investigation.

While it is true that there is a trend to allow forgotten voices to be heard in the scientific or religious community, the arguments given for this are ethical arguments: that marginalized and alienated persons should be shown respect, shown that their wisdom is valuable. But if these other voices aren't listened to for the sake of *truth*, the result is condescending. A scientific community that rallies itself around a single methodology and paradigm, while belittling dissenting voices, is not doing justice to its object. Likewise a theological community that allows for only one voice to be heard, all the while repressing other voices on the basis of gender and sexual orientation, is likewise not doing justice to its scriptures or, for that matter, to the God attempting to reveal himself in these scriptures.

I sometimes wonder what theology would look like if more minorities and women were allowed at the hermeneutics table. Perhaps we might rediscover that the essential message of Christianity is less about conservative values than about the alleviation of suffering and poverty. As for the inclusion of women in theological research, it would open up new horizons of thinking about gender relations. We might rediscover forgotten texts such as the book of Esther, the Song of Songs, and the magnificent passages about the creation of woman in the book of Genesis, all of which emphasize mutual partnership rather than submission of one gender to the other. We might also come to understand the profoundly progressive gesture of Christ's inclusion of women in his ministry. Indeed, there is no biblical protagonist who shows as much interest, sensitivity, and respect for women as the Christ. Moreover, there is no place in the Bible that is more inclusive and welcoming of women than the Gospels, where women are often given key and central roles.

Perhaps forgotten stories such as those of Ruth, or of David and Jonathan, might be revisited for a renewed understanding of what a covenant of love between same-sex individuals might look like. Christ's outrageous friendships with the excommunicated (tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners) might be broadened

to include LGBTs, which would deeply nuance, perhaps even profoundly subvert, the Paulinian rejection of homosexuals.

Might not the central message of love preached in the Gospels be rediscovered afresh if we were to again understand it as the "good news" of salvation, redemption, and liberation offered to all—and from which none might be excluded? As a friend of mine put it: "If it is not good news, it is not the gospel."⁶

As such, we must ask ourselves whether or not our interpretations of Scripture so far have been "good news" to women or to the LGBT community? And if not, have we indeed been preaching the gospel, the "good news" of salvation and unconditional love, to these communities?

The Wisdom of Grace

In the end, it all comes down to one gesture: the gracious welcoming of the stranger. If any hermeneutical principle can guide and inspire the proper interpretation of the biblical text, it is this constant faithfulness to the foundational injunction to love the stranger. It is to the proportion that a theological community is welcoming of the other that its hermeneutics will be reliable. And it is to the proportion that a religious and theological community is welcoming of the stranger that it will best align itself with the very foundations of biblical ethics, whose central injunction and command is to love the stranger. It is only to the extent that the other is loved and welcomed at the hermeneutics table that we can approach the divine intent, which is often overlooked, distorted, and condemned to remain on the margins of the dusty pages of Scripture. ✚

¹ Cf. Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:19; Ex. 22:21.

² Cf. Num. 9:14; Lev. 23:22; Ex. 12:48; Deut. 26:11.

³ This understanding of the stranger as bearing the face of God was mostly developed in Jewish writings, but it has biblical roots in the story of Abraham's welcoming of the three strangers at Mamre, who turned out to be a manifestation of God (cf. Genesis 18). The same idea can also be drawn from the New Testament, where believers are exhorted to remember to welcome the strangers among them, because in doing so, some have "entertained angels" (cf. Heb. 13:2).

⁴ That theological investigations and methodology are grounded in the scientific worldview might come as a surprise to some people, but one can show that the way the Bible is approached in different historical periods is profoundly dependent on the scientific or philosophical model of a given time. The Bible is often approached without a thought to the way that the scientific or philosophical worldview we live in frames a given reading of the sacred text.

⁵ It must be clarified, however, that this concept of an intersubjective approach to truth in no way dismantles the fact that truth is absolute, that is to say, that truth exists outside of human perspective. The idea is simply that we cannot avoid approaching truth with a given perspective; that no one has a completely pure, objective, or divine take on truth; and that the best way to overcome perspectivism is to open up the investigation to other perspectives capable of broadening and correcting given individual perspectives. Thus, it is to the extent that we work together and arrive at a consensus that truth is to be approached.

⁶ I am quoting here Edgar Antonio López López, who teaches at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia.

Keeping the Noise Down

BY RICHARD W. COFFEN

WHEN I WAS A YOUNGSTER, A FAVORITE PARLOR GAME ENTAILED whispering a sentence from one person to another. What the last person heard often demonstrated that the message had become incrementally garbled in transmission, which brought laughs.

This game is a good illustration of the dynamics of human communication. According to the Shannon-Weaver model (1948), the process of communicating entails: (1) an information source who formulates an idea and (2) encodes that idea into a message, then (3) transmits the message through a channel, which can result in “noise” that obscures the message, either when (4) the recipient decodes the message or when (5) the recipient passes the message on to its final destination, the communicatee.

The component Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver identified as “noise” refers not just to distracting sound waves, but to anything interfering with the clear transmission and

reception of the message. A headache or drowsiness might create “noise.” Misconstruing the original message or even part of it, as in the old parlor game, serves as “noise.”

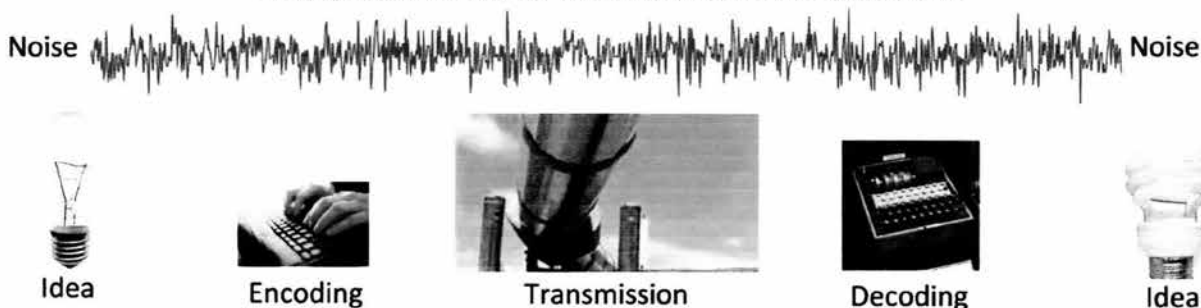
We believe Scripture is *divine communication*—God’s Word. The Shannon-Weaver model can point us in the right direction for understanding its message, from the viewpoint of God as the Communicator, who (1) had an idea; (2) encoded the message in dreams, visions, auditions, symbols, and mental reflections; (3) transmitted the message to human recipients (for instance, prophets)—a process that could produce obscuring “noise” when (4) the Bible writer decoded the divine idea or when (5) translators, copyists, and other recipients of the message attempted to perceive the divine idea.

In religion and theology, the initial step in divine communication, when a deity reveals some form of truth or knowledge through communication with humans, is called *revelation*. The next step of the process, as Bible writers orally or in writing encoded that divine concept into ancient Near Eastern languages, and via specific literary genres, is called *inspiration*. The process continued when copyists reproduced by hand what the original biblical authors spoke to their ancient stenographers¹ or scrawled in their own handwriting.² Such recopying has occurred multiple times prior to the study of existing manuscripts by scholars (“textual critics”³). Each step in the process of transmission was susceptible to distortion. No “autographs” (original documents produced by Bible writers) exist⁴, which makes talk of scriptural inerrancy irrelevant because the claim cannot be empirically verified.

What the Biblical Authors Said/Wrote

Scribes often worked alone, eyeballing the master text line by line, word by word, letter by letter. If you’ve ever tried to hand copy a lengthy document, you understand how eyes and mind can play tricks, resulting in words that get misspelled, terms

Modified Shannon-Weaver Model of Communication



that get replaced with different but somewhat similar-appearing words, and whole lines that go AWOL. For instance, a scribe copying Matthew 5:19-20 (Codex Bezae) omitted everything sandwiched between the words *en tē basileiā tōn ouraniōn* (“in the kingdom of heaven”) at the end of verse 19 and the same words at the end of verse 20. Such errors⁵ constitute noise.

Some scribes worked in factories (*scriptoria*), where an assembly of copyists listened to a reader (*lector*) recite aloud the document to be reproduced. The scribes would dutifully write down what they heard or *thought* they heard. Thus, errors of hearing crept into the purportedly duplicate manuscripts. For example, did the lector vocalize “wash their robes” (Rev. 22:14, NIV, NRSV) or “do his commandments” (Rev. 22:14, KJV)? The Greek for both expressions sounds similar.

In addition to unintentional errors of eye and ear, scribes sometimes deliberately incorporated changes (*glosses* and *interpolations*) in an attempt to clarify meaning or by adding spontaneous pious interjections. These might be penned in the margin of the manuscript, which a later scribe might mistake as material inadvertently omitted and needing reincorporation into the text. By one count, more than 70 scribal interpolations exist in the New Testament.⁶

Assuming the validity of the Shannon-Weaver model, at any of these stages noise muddles the clarity of the original divine communication.

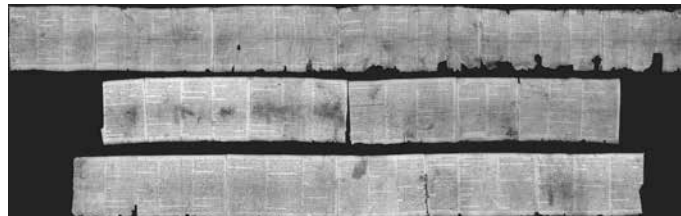
Approximately 200⁷ of the oldest Hebrew biblical manuscripts are among the Dead Sea Scrolls—quite ancient but still copied centuries *after* the last Bible author, the Chronicler.

The next oldest Hebrew Bible documents are the Aleppo Codex (c. A.D. 920) and the Leningrad Codex (c. A.D. 1008).

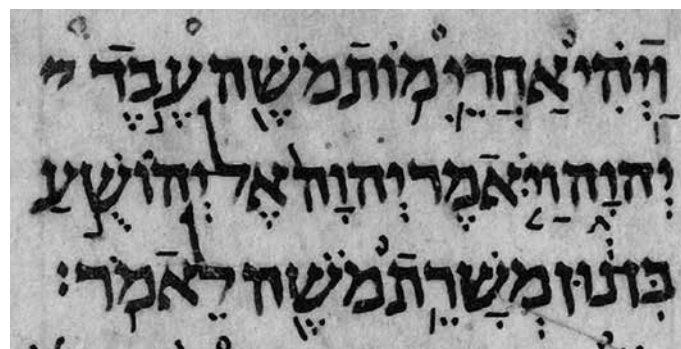
The earliest New Testament manuscripts date to the second and third centuries. For example, the John Rylands Library Papyrus 52 (designated by \mathfrak{P}^{52}), which is also known as the St. John’s fragment, was written between A.D. 125 and 175.

Papyrus 90 and Papyrus 103 (\mathfrak{P}^{90} and \mathfrak{P}^{103}), found in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, were copied sometime between A.D. 125 and 200.⁸

Today’s biblical scholars (unlike those who produced the King James Version) have access to about 10,200 Old Testament manuscripts⁹ and from 24,000 to 25,000 New Testament manuscripts¹⁰—many of which are fragments, as illustrated above. Part of the noise connected with these documents has to do with variants (deviations in spelling, grammar, vocabulary, etc.). Guesstimates of the number of such errors in the Hebrew texts include “several hundred thousand”¹¹—“an astounding number.”¹² Of these, 6,000 are “troublesome” for translators.¹³



Scholars date the writing of the Isaiah scroll (1QIsa^a), which is one of the original seven Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in Qumran in 1947, at 150-100 B.C.



This section of the Aleppo Codex shows Joshua 1:1.



This view of Exodus 15:21-16:3 is from the Leningrad Codex, the oldest complete manuscript of the Old Testament in Hebrew.



Portions of John 18:31-33 are recorded on the John Rylands Papyrus \mathfrak{P}^{52} , which is on permanent display in Manchester, England.



This fragment of John 19:1-7 is a Greek text known as \mathfrak{P}^{90} .

Scholars also estimate that between 200,000 and 400,000 variants exist in the New Testament texts.¹⁴

These shocking numbers are inflated because, for example, the misspelling of a word in one manuscript might be duplicated in others belonging to the same “family”—thereby inflating the number of variants. Many, though not all, variants (such as grammatical, syntactical, and spelling errors) have no or few significant theological implications.

Here are selected examples of variants:

Genesis 18:22 asserts: “*Abraham* stood yet before the LORD”

Everyone operates from certain presuppositions. What can we do when authorities disagree on the interpretation of what a given passage meant?

(KJV). Scribes deliberately changed the Hebrew, which stated that YHWH remained standing before Abraham. Thinking this was problematic divine behavior, they reversed the subject of the sentence. (Scribes made as many as 18 such changes,¹⁵ called *tiqqūnēy sōferīm*¹⁶).

Psalm 22:16 begins with a reference to “dogs” and ends with the words “*they pierced* my hands and my feet” (KJV). However, the “best” Hebrew texts say: “*like a lion* are my hands and my feet.” Manuscripts differ as to the original wording. The Hebrew word translated “like a lion” is *kā’ārî*, whereas the Hebrew behind “they pierced” is *kā’ârû*. The two final Hebrew letters look much alike: *î* (*yodh*—*î*) and *û* (*waw*—*û*). Confusion of several Hebrew alphabet letters that look very similar is a common source of variants.

1 Kings 22:28 records the final words of Micaiah as a word-for-word citation of Micah 1:2. A scribe who assumed that *Micaiah*, a prophet in 1 Kings 22, was *Micah*, the minor prophet, penned the words from Micah 1:2 in the margin. A future copyist incorporated this “correction” into the main text.

Matthew 6:13 ends with the words “~~For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.~~” A pious copyist added these struck-through words, which don’t appear in the best¹⁷ manuscripts.

1 Corinthians 11:24 in some versions asserts that at the Last Supper Jesus said: “This is my body, ~~which is broken for you.~~” However, the best manuscripts don’t include the struck-through words. Bones of Passover lambs weren’t broken.

1 John 5:7-8 reads: “There are three that bear record ~~in heaven; the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one.~~ And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, ~~and the water, and the blood;~~ and these three agree in one” (KJV). It’s a favorite proof text for corroborating the Trinity. However, the struck-through words are a scribal interpolation.

As secondary communicatees, we want to deal with *what the original text actually said*. Because most of us don’t know the original biblical languages and are unable to ascertain for ourselves what the original biblical writers authored, we must rely on the skills and judgments of textual critics.

Fortunately, many modern versions of Scripture take variants into account. My favorite, the New English Translation (NET), offered free on the Internet, contains 60,932 translators’ notes. Other helpful versions include the New Jerusalem Bible and the New Revised Standard Version. Usually, the more recent the translation, the more it takes variants into account.

What the Biblical Writers Meant—Having read what the scriptural writer penned, we want to ascertain (if possible), with the help of scholars, what those authors *meant* by what they wrote “way back then.” What point did the original communicatees get? Because most of us aren’t familiar with the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek and didn’t live during the prescientific age of the ancient Near East, we’re compelled to learn from the research of linguists, archaeologists, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists.

Everyone operates from certain presuppositions. What can we do when authorities disagree on the interpretation of what a given passage meant?

We can search for information online. Where was a particular scholar educated? What “flavor” is the institution where he or she teaches? Beware of someone with an ax to grind—an apologist, perhaps, who has been hired to defend a particular theological perspective. Which person appears to factor in the most background information—linguistic, grammatical, syntactical, historical, cultural, philosophical, and theological? Despite opinions to the contrary, “conservatives” can learn from “liberal” scholars, and “progressives” can learn from “traditionalists.”

Augustine said: “Let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master.”¹⁸ All light originates from the “light of men” (John 1:4, NKJV). Paul could, therefore, quote: (1) Seneca and Aratus (*Phaenomena*) in Acts 17:28, (2) Menander (*Thais*) in 1 Corinthians 15:33, and (3) Epimenides (*Concerning Oracles*), whom Paul called a “prophet” in Titus 1:12. He also alluded elsewhere to other non-Judaeo-Christian authors.¹⁹

What the Text Now Means—Referring to the wisdom *from* and *of* Scripture, Ellen White admonished: “There must be careful research.”²⁰ After doing our exploration in order to learn what the scriptural authors actually wrote and what the text meant to the original recipients, we can try to ascertain what the inspired text *means* today. At this juncture, the Spirit helps to apply the inspired communication to those of us who are secondary communicatees. Theologians call the Spirit’s role in this activity *illumination*. Scripture thereby becomes the *living* Word of God.

It should be obvious that as late-coming recipients of God’s communication, we depend on the Bible visionaries, Jewish scribes, Catholic monks, specialists in “dead” biblical languages, archaeologists, textual critics, students familiar with life in the ancient Near East, and the findings of other lovers of Scripture. Collectively, these specialists serve as noise-cancelling headphones, reducing the static that otherwise interferes with the divine communication. 🙏

¹ The technical term is *amanuenses*.

² Evidence seems to indicate that writing was a more uncommon skill than reading. See Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Remains of His Day* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2015), pp. 73, 76, 79.

³ Please understand that the word *critic* is academic jargon for someone who reads the biblical text carefully and seriously. In this context, it doesn’t have negative overtones.

⁴ By contrast, files in the Ellen G. White Estate do contain “autographs,” and they reveal that prophets aren’t inerrant, which, of course, White never claimed for herself or for her documents.

⁵ To prevent these types errors, many faithful scribes used a letter-for-letter or word-for-word counting system as a checksum for accuracy.

⁶ Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 4th edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 98.

⁷ Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), p. 103. Some scholars put the number at 220; see Soulen and Soulen, p. 49.

⁸ See <https://carm.org/manuscript-evidence>; <http://www.bible.ca/ef/topical-the-earliest-new-testament-manuscripts.htm>

⁹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Hebrew_Bible_manuscripts

¹⁰ See <http://irr.org/todays-bible-real-bible>; <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/crossexamined/2013/11/25000-new-testament-manuscripts-big-deal>

¹¹ See http://www.jstor.org/stable/1453187?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

¹² See https://books.google.com/books?id=22YwCgAAQBAJ&pg=PA799&pg=PA799&dq=Kennicott+astounding+number&source=bl&ots=zulLi4O5e6&sig=G2_ZXCYG3ZJ0D6paic759_25wkY&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwixhrSJxpDKAhVL32MKHehbBuwQ6AEIHDA#v=onepage&q=Kennicott%20astounding%20number&f=false

¹³ See <http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Doc11/tcpetersen.pdf>

¹⁴ See <http://danielbwallace.com/2013/09/09/>

the-number-of-textual-variants-an-evangelical-miscalculation

¹⁵ See <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/behaalot/tzip.html>; Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, p. 65.

¹⁶ Pronounced *tiqqune sopherim*.

¹⁷ There are many criteria for judging which manuscripts (or fragments thereof) among the thousands available are “best.” For example, see <http://www.theopedia.com/new-testament-textual-criticism> and/or http://legacy.earlham.edu/~seidti/iam/text_crit.html for more information on New Testament manuscripts.

¹⁸ *On Christian Doctrine*, Book II, Ch. 18, p. 28.

¹⁹ See <https://biblethingsinbibleways.wordpress.com/2013/07/14/paul-and-his-use-of-greek-philosophy/>; <http://spindlegirls.com/library/rfaber/aratus.htm>

²⁰ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1892), p. 90.

Seven Fundamental Rules for Interpreting Scripture

By Jack Sequeira

1. Since Jesus spoke and the Bible writers wrote primarily for the people of their day, always consider the historical, geographical, and cultural setting of the passage you are studying.

2. Always take into account the context of the unit, chapter, and book when interpreting a text. The meaning of each verse must agree with the theme of the unit and chapter, as well as the overall teaching of the Bible.

3. When interpreting a passage or verse, be sure to study each sentence grammatically to get the correct meaning. Pay special attention to the verbs (present, past, or future tense), as they deal with actions.

4. Find the meaning of each text as intended by the Bible writer or inspired speaker before making application. This is called bridge building, and it is important when giving Bible studies.

5. Interpret difficult texts in the light of the clear teachings of the whole Bible. Study all that Scripture teaches on a given subject before coming to a conclusion on any single verse.

6. The New Testament must be interpreted in the light of the Old Testament and vice versa. The Old Testament is promise, and the New Testament is fulfillment; each complements the other.

7. For accuracy, use the best translations and, if possible, compare with the original text.

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Beyond Proof-Text Interpretation:

Hearing the True Voice of the Sacred Text

By Olive J. Hemmings

SACRED TEXTS SUCH AS THE BIBLE OR the Qur'an hold a powerful sway over a culture. But it is not the power of the sacred text that is problematic. Rather, it is that the text loses its real religious and cultural power when used to advance particular beliefs, interests, and ideologies. Proof-text methods of Bible interpretation are one way that interpreters make this happen.

Proof-text interpretation is the practice of extracting texts out of their literary and historical contexts, often stringing together several texts to prove or support an assumption or to establish an idea. Proof-text interpretation may even be masked by an elaborate Hebrew or Greek word study that ignores the historical context in which a word is used.

An interesting case study is 1 Corinthians 11:3, a passage used in arguments regarding male headship. Theologians have engaged in much deliberation over the meaning of the term *kephalé* and whether it means "head" or "source." Anyone can choose a meaning and come away with an idea that suits his or her agenda. However, an elaborate word study becomes redundant if one understands the ancient ideology of gender, namely male ontological superiority and consequent authority over females, symbolized by the covering of the woman's head. But even at this point, one has not transcended proof-texting. A reader who stops there will almost certainly conclude that the author of 1 Corinthians subscribed to the ideology of male headship, whereas the literary context indicates that he did not. He

overthrows the headship/head covering argument in verse 11. This is consistent with Greek rhetoric, in which the teacher/philosopher first lays out an inferior argument and then overthrows it with the better argument. In this instance, the better argument is found "in the Lord" (in Christ), where there is no ontological hierarchy among humans. This is consistent with the Bible writer's argument in passages such as Galatians 3:28.

Getting to the Heart of a Text

The proof-text approach takes one throughout the Bible, matching all of the texts that mention male headship, but it will not get one to the heart of any of the texts. Each text must be interpreted on its own merit, because the contexts and actual subject matter may differ in each instance. In 1 Corinthians 11:3, the subject matter is not male headship, but worship attire. Male headship is the cultural rationale for head covering. If one does not identify the subject accurately, one has already distorted the text. The sacred text is possessed by a voice other than that of the author of the text, and the author has been coerced and neutered in the service of a pet topic, an idea, a doctrine, or a cultural more.

This is not to say that the average person who interprets the Bible in this way is calculatingly weaving an idea with the use of "matching" texts; such a Bible student is often unaware that he or she is inappropriately taking the verses out of context. Proof-text interpretation is based on the premise that the sacred text is ahistorical because of its divine origin.

As such, it has divine power and thus can be used for coercive purposes. For example, in the 16th century the Catholic Church subjected the churchman scientist Galileo to torture and banishment before forcing him to recant the heliocentric view of the universe, which the church believed to be anti-biblical. For Galileo to embrace this view of Copernicus, namely that the Earth and planets revolve around the sun at the center of the solar system, was for him to reject texts (such as 1 Chronicles 16:30, Psalm 93:1, Psalm 96:10, Psalm 104:5, and Ecclesiastes 1:5) stating that God "established the world" and that it "shall never be moved." These texts had long served as proof for the geocentric view of the universe, which placed the Earth at the orbital center of all the celestial bodies. In spite of the clear evidence of science, Galileo was forced to recant for biblical reasons. While this is a caricature of the problems of the proof-text method, it illustrates the danger of coercion. Once a church forms doctrines and policies by taking sacred texts out of their historical or literary contexts, the task of re-appropriating these texts becomes an uphill and even dangerous one. So there is a rather dark side to the proof-text method, in spite of the often-noble intentions of its adherents to abide by the word of God.

Encouraging Personal Bible Study

Another case in point is how the Reformers unintentionally gave this method a footing in Protestantism. What we call the historical-grammatical method of Bible

interpretation was a radical intervention by the Reformers to reclaim the “plain sense” meaning of Scripture from the mystifying allegorical interpretation that dominated Medieval Christianity. Allegorical interpretation was a subjective, seemingly arbitrary methodology that, according to the third-century church father Origen, required special spiritual insight by select people to decipher the meaning of the objects, parts, and elements of Scripture.¹

The “plain sense” that the Reformers sought through the historical-grammatical method was not mindless literalism.

So only an interpreter endowed with spiritual insight could figure out that the man going to Jericho in the parable of the Good Samaritan is Adam, Jericho is the world, Jerusalem is Paradise, the thieves are evil powers, and the Samaritan is Christ. By such methods, the church maintained an exclusive right to determine meaning and assume doctrinal authority even where, in the Reformers’ view, they did not harmonize with the biblical message.

The Reformers instead encouraged a Bible study methodology that would engage Christians in personal study rather than in ritual affirmation of the

church’s theological tradition. The “plain sense” that the Reformers sought through the historical-grammatical method was not mindless literalism. They wanted to arrive at the fully intended meaning of the author of the text by a study of the language in its literary, historical, and cultural contexts. While it presupposes that the text is the work of the Holy Spirit, its account of the historical context and the grammatical choices made by the author is similar to the approach to literature in general. So when the Protestant Reformers discouraged moving beyond the text to discover another meaning,² what they were concerned about was the imposition of the allegorical method, such as that used by Origen.³

How did proof-text interpretation develop from this noble attempt? The historical-grammatical method rightly affirms that God cannot contradict God’s self, but it concludes that since God cannot contradict God’s self, there are therefore no contradictions in the Bible. Though it rejects the idea of verbal inspiration, it asserts that Scripture is God-breathed and therefore true in all of its parts. So although it is not a dictation/verbal methodology, it relies upon an equivalent theory⁴ that makes it difficult to acknowledge the historical reality of the text and the limitation of the human vehicle of divine revelation.⁵ This is why for a long time Joshua 10:12 and Revelation 7:1 were used to prove what we now know to be scientific inaccuracies regarding the solar system and the shape of the Earth. In this instance, proof-text

interpretation transforms the text into something it does not claim to be—a science book—rather than seeing in the text God’s miraculous intervention in human crises.

Analyzing Form, Content, and Source

The use of higher critical tools in Bible interpretation is an attempt to fulfill the original purpose of the Reformers, namely to get to the true meaning and intent of the text. According to Edgar Krentz, it arises from the Reformation legacy of concern for the historical sense of the Bible.⁶ It takes literary analysis further than the historical-grammatical method by analyzing not just its context and language, but its form, content, and source. The aim is to avoid the shortcomings of the historical-grammatical method by attending to the human aspect of the Bible. It does not require that an author be a scientist or a historian in order to be a vehicle of divine revelation.

For example, any attempt to internally reconcile the seemingly overlapping and conflicting accounts in the Gospels misrepresents and confounds the text. Ancient storytelling is primarily oral and is not concerned about the accuracy of the details or whether the story has already been told or written in some form. Rather, it is concerned about the lesson to be learned from a story. The Gospel writers used common sources but edited the stories in ways that serve their unique purposes. The Seventh-day Adventist Church pointed to this latter higher critical principle in defending Ellen White

Continued on page 47

ONE DAY IN THE MID-1990S, MY BOSS AT *Christianity Today* magazine came to give me feedback on a guest editorial we were preparing. And as the executive editor, I valued his reactions.

The author of the editorial was the Mennonite social activist Ron Sider, author of *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. Ron was noted for his passion for justice and compassion for the poor. “I really like Ron’s spirit,” my boss said, “but I wish he didn’t have such liberal conclusions.”

Ron is anything but a theological liberal, I told my boss. As a matter of fact, I said, he reads what Scripture says about caring for the poor and the dangers of wealth like a fundamentalist. “Ron takes what Jesus says about ministry to the poor far more literally than you do,” I said.

Chrysostom, for example) and those who found spiritual rather than historical or scientific value in the biblical accounts (Origen of Alexandria and Augustine of Hippo). Basil (d. 379) wrote: “For me grass is grass; plant, fish, wild beast, domestic animal, I take all in the literal sense.” Augustine (d. 430), on the other hand, wanted Christians to pay attention to the science of his time and not “[speak] so idiotically” in the presence of pagans. He called such talk “too disgraceful and ruinous.”

I don’t know anyone who takes it *all* literally. If we took the cosmology of Scripture literally, we would believe that the Earth is flat like the floor of a tent with the heavens pitched above; that it is circular, surrounded by a sea; that there is a solid dome overhead, holding back the waters that are over the earth; and

THE LITERAL TRUTH ABOUT THE PLAIN READING OF SCRIPTURE

BY DAVID NEFF

Most born-again Christians wrap the Bible’s teaching about poverty and money in protective layers of reasoning about the differences between biblical times and now. When it comes to money, the “plain reading of Scripture” makes contemporary Americans uneasy.

I don’t want to argue that Ron was right and my boss was wrong. But I believe every Christ follower needs to hear Jesus’ stern words—“Sell all that you have and give to the poor, ... and come and follow me”—with all of their abrasive force. If you haven’t struggled with the plain meaning of Jesus’ uncomfortable words, you haven’t gotten to know Jesus.

I’ll wager that the same Christians who aren’t bothered when their pastors don’t follow the plain meaning of Jesus’ statements about money get pretty riled if their pastors don’t promote the so-called plain reading of Genesis 1-3, the book of Job, or the story of Jonah. Christians can be mighty selective on the plain reading of Scripture.

Take Every Single Thing Literally?

In the early centuries, there was a great gulf between those who preferred the plain reading of Genesis (Basil of Caesarea and John

that the sun moves daily across the surface of that dome.

Those who approach the Bible with a strong preference for the “plain reading” make exceptions for cosmology. Like John Calvin and John Wesley, they believe God spoke in the language of appearances. Wesley wrote: “The inspired penman in this history ... describes things by their outward sensible appearances, and leaves us, by further discoveries of the divine light, to be led into the understanding of the mysteries couched under them.”

If we are not to take all of Genesis literally, we must do our best to listen for the Author’s intent.

But before we look at the Author’s purpose for the first chapters of Genesis, let’s think about some science. For a long time, Young Earth Creationists stretched the biblical flood into a geological theory that gave alternative explanations to a lot of data.

But flood geology has no bearing on genetic research. When Francis Collins and his team sequenced the human genome (1990-2003), their goals were primarily medical: detecting, diagnosing, curing, and preventing disease. However, after the genome was mapped, evolutionary implications began to surface. One key conclusion: that we humans do not have a common male-female pair of ancestors in our family trees. The

Christians can be mighty selective on the plain reading of Scripture.

genetic complexity of contemporary humans requires an original population of about 10,000 rather than a primordial pair.

This creates problems for the plain reading of the Genesis account of human origins—although it does address the old conundrum of where Cain found a wife. At least two teachers at Christian colleges have paid a steep price for surfacing the irreconcilable conflict between the genetic data and a plain reading of Genesis.

Conflicts like this don't mean that we need to doubt Scripture but, rather, that we must ask whether Scripture aims at something different than what we thought. Back in my seminary days, one of the great defenders of the plain reading of Genesis got me thinking about other purposes the author(s) might have had. It was Gerhard

Hasel, who wrote compellingly about the polemical nature of the Genesis creation story as an anti-Babylonian tract.

Genesis contrasts the God of Abraham, who creates through his divine word, with the warlike god Marduk, who according to the Babylonians created the world out of a monster's bloody guts.

More recently, I have learned from Wheaton College's John Walton. Walton, like Hasel, believes in the inerrancy of Scripture (a requirement for Wheaton's faculty), but he believes that we misunderstand the ancient Scripture and the ancient mind if we think that Genesis is about how the world was "manufactured." The ancient mind to which Genesis is addressed was more concerned about how the world is ordered than about its origins. By following clues in the text and by carefully comparing other texts from the ancient Near East, Walton concludes that Genesis describes God's ordering of the cosmos as a sacred space, a temple for the Creator. Genesis 1 does not speak of any particular human or couple, but of humanity as a whole. Genesis 2-3, however, does single out two individuals placed in God's well-ordered sacred space to experience God's presence and mediate their knowledge of God. They are to be priests. The two should be thought of as archetypes (representatives of our race) rather than prototypes (the first models off the assembly line), Walton says. Unfortunately, these archetypes fail in their calling.

Walton's reading shows great respect for the text while allowing for the findings of genetic science. Walton's work also shows that slopes aren't always slippery. In our reading of Genesis, we have "bundled together certain things that don't necessarily need to be," says Walton. We can separate overlapping issues like the image of God, the origin of sin, the historical Adam, and human origins.

Change in one of these areas doesn't need to undermine the others.

Arguments like Walton's are built on technical scholarship beyond the reach of most believers. Herein lies one reason for the love affair a lot of believers have with the "plain reading" of the text. Their Protestant heritage makes them suspicious of elites, whether academic or ecclesiastical. The Reformation wrestled the authority to interpret Scripture away from the Roman hierarchy and empowered the common people to read Scripture for themselves. The Reformers never claimed that every untutored person could understand everything in the Bible, but they did claim that ordinary readers, using ordinary means, could find all truths essential to salvation.

This rebellious heritage shoved American Christianity in a democratic direction. American Christians, by and large, don't want any elites telling them what to believe. The doctrine of the "plain reading" of Scripture often serves as a proxy for a kind of spiritual libertarianism.

Intensely Ethical

What Walton says about the creation stories is also true of Scripture as a whole. The creation narratives tell how God ordered a place in which to live with his people. Scripture tells us how God wants his people to order their lives and their loves. Scripture is intensely ethical.

It is too bad that the King James Version renders 2 Timothy 3:16 as saying that Scripture is profitable for *doctrine*, since that word that has come to mean abstract, impersonal truths. The Greek simply means *teaching*. The Hebrew word *torah* means the same thing. (Unfortunately, the KJV translates *torah* as *law*.) Torah-teaching was God's gift to his people, a means to order and sanctify every aspect of their lives. Jesus' teaching was also ethical. Whether in the synagogue at Nazareth or in the Sermon on the Mount, he taught his followers about how the kingdom of God changes the ways they should order their lives and their relationships. Paul's letters are also ethical, opening with some theological groundwork but in every letter moving inexorably toward ethical conclusions. Ultimately, all Scripture is about ordering our lives and our loves in keeping with God's desires for the well-being of all his children.

This brings me back to my friend Ron Sider, whose plain reading of Scripture propels him into a passionate battle for the poor and the hungry. If that's where a plain reading of Scripture leads you, wonderful. But if the plain reading leads you to create opposing camps and to accent the differences between "real Christians" and all of the others who bear the name of Christ, please, please, please, think again. 🙏

AN ESSENTIAL TEACHING OF JESUS ON HERMENEUTICS:

Building Up Dead Prophets Kills Living Ones

By Ron Jolliffe

LISTENING TO THE WORDS OF JESUS DOES not always make us comfortable, but according to Mark 4, Jesus repeatedly stated that anyone who has ears must listen—even if a teaching challenges commonly accepted beliefs.

What I'm suggesting in this piece is that Jesus seems not to agree with a pure, *Bible-only* approach to Christianity. In the scriptures quoted below, Jesus makes the audacious claim that a commitment to what prophets taught in the past is the equivalent of killing living prophets. Such a statement seems to undermine the need to attend to hermeneutics (the principles of how one is to understand texts), yet it is recorded in Jesus' own words.

Quoting Dead Prophets

In the presentation that follows, the core of Jesus' words has been preserved for line-by-line comparison (see boxed graphic on facing page) as both Matthew and Luke adapt Jesus' earlier saying for their respective audiences.

Matthew 23:29-32¹

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
for you build the tombs
for the prophets and adorn the
memorials
of the righteous, saying,
‘If we had lived in the days of our
fathers,
we would not have taken part with them
in shedding the blood of the prophets.’
Thus you witness against yourselves,
that you
are sons of those who murdered the
prophets.
Fill up, then, the measure of your
fathers.”

Luke 11:47-48²

“Woe to you!
for you build the memorials
for the prophets

whom your fathers

killed.

So you are witnesses and consent to
the deeds of your fathers; for they
killed them and you build their
memorials.”

A few notes about the text will orient us. First, the word *woe*, which signifies damnation to hell, emphasizes the seriousness of this anathema. Readers should therefore pay careful attention. Second, the Greek word *build* has connotations that are both literal (to build a monument) and figurative (to build a reputation). Third, this saying of Jesus is not limited to graves. The word *tombs* is favorite vocabulary for Matthew, but it appears only once in the New Testament outside his Gospel. Matthew also retains, with Luke, Q's³ reading *memorials*—a general word that includes tombs, monuments, and inscriptions as well as things to be kept in mind, to be remembered. Finally, the words *Thus* or *So* explicitly connect and equate the memorializing of dead prophets with murdering, or killing living representatives who speak for God, while at the same time placing the source of their condemnation in the witness of their own mouths. Memorializing dead prophets shows that a person agrees with the ones who killed them. This is strange logic.

Putting it all together, this saying of Jesus reads something like this: You are hell-bent who build up dead prophets; for in doing this you prove you would have killed them too (Q 11:47-48).

Matthew 23:29-32

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!

for you build the tombs

for the prophets and adorn the memorials

of the righteous, saying, If we had lived in the days of

our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in

shedding the blood of the prophets.⁷

Thus you witness against yourselves, that you

are sons of those who murdered the prophets.

FILL UP, then, THE MEASURE OF YOUR FATHERS

Luke 11:47-48

Woe to you!

for you build

the memorials for the prophets

whom your fathers

killed.

So you are witnesses and CONSENT TO

THE DEEDS OF YOUR FATHERS; for they

killed them and you build their memorials.

The last line of Matthew says that those who build up these dead prophets fill up the measure of [their] fathers. Does Jesus really believe that strongly in the dangers inherent in sacred text? How could he correlate reverence for prophetic texts with killing living prophets? This seems indefensible to text-based religion. If these were not Jesus' own words, Bible-only believers might kill someone who said this—oh, that's right, they did!

The claim of Jesus in this text is not a matter of garbled transmission, nor is it an issue of an isolated "problem text." It is an axiom of Jesus studies that the larger the number of independent attestations to a saying, in both intra-canonical and early extra-canonical sources, the higher the likelihood that one has an authentic note from the historical Jesus.

Pushing Away the Living

With that axiom in mind, consider the following additional examples of this audacious claim of Jesus:

1. His disciples said to him: "Twenty-four prophets have spoken in Israel, and all (of them) have spoken through you" (*The Gospel of Thomas* 52:1).⁴

2. He said to them: "You have pushed away the living (one) from yourselves, and you have begun to speak of those who are dead" (*The Gospel of Thomas* 52:2).⁵

Although *The Gospel of Thomas* does not equate the disciples' avowal of 24 prophets with killing the living one, Jesus does say that by basing their affirmation of him upon Scripture, they had pushed him away. The living prophet, according to Jesus, cannot be authenticated—or perhaps even recognized—solely by appeal to the ancient prophets, perhaps because the living prophet will say things that were never spoken by any earlier prophet about issues that did not exist in the days of the dead prophets. This, of course, is patently true if it is a *living* voice.

There are additional comparable passages. One appears in the fragmentary *Egerton Papyrus*:

... to the lawyer[s: "... e]very one who act[s contrary to the l]aw, but not me! ... what he does, as he does it." [And] having turn[ed] to [the] rulers of the people he [sp]oke the following saying: "[Ye] search the scriptures in which ye think that ye have life; these are they which bear witness of me. Do not think that I came to accuse [you] to my Father! There is one [that ac]cuses [you], even Moses, on whom ye have set your hope." And when they sa[id]: "We know that God [hath] spok[en] to Moses, but as for thee, we know not

John 5:39 is ... a condemnation of those who look to the voices of dead prophets, rather than to the living, for guidance.

[whence thou art]," Jesus answered and said unto them: "Now [already] accusation is raised against [your] unbelief. [No one o]therwise ..." (Fragment 1, verso [lines 1-20]).

The text of Moses upon which these followers set their hope becomes their argument for condemning Jesus, but Jesus says their appeal to Moses is an expression of their unbelief in God. Allegiance to a dead prophetic text prevents their recognition of the living voice. Jesus himself, at that narrative point, is not yet sacred text, so their allegiance to dead prophets dismisses Jesus as a mere living voice.

The *Egerton Papyrus* reminds us of the similar words frequently quoted in John's Gospel:

"You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (5:39). ... "Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope" (5:45).

John 5:39 is not a command to study the Bible, as it is so often taken to be. It is rather a condemnation of those who look to the voices of dead prophets, rather than to the living, for guidance. The Fourth Gospel's *eternal life* is found in living voices rather than in the texts left by dead prophets.

The concentric circles of such texts continue to expand, once this insight becomes clear. One thinks of those *you-have-heard-that-it-was-said-but-I-tell-you* sayings in Matthew 5, which revise not only tradition but also Scripture. The escape route, of course, for these verses is to limit the scope of these texts to conversation exclusively about those who reject Jesus' own living voice. That effectively puts us back into the game of "What does the text say?" I don't claim to have solved this dilemma about sacred scriptures, but I do recommend that a scriptural hermeneutic actually be scriptural, especially with regard to the words of Jesus.

The Text-Based Paradox


So, does the death of Jesus and the subsequent inclusion of his words in the text of Scripture demand that these verses no longer mean what they once meant while Jesus was living? Are believers now free to quote dead prophets without being in jeopardy of killing living prophets? It seems rather doubtful. Consider the texts in Scripture about living water, or about how "new wine must be put into fresh wineskins" (Luke 5:38, RSV), and about sayings such as "you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them" (Luke 11:46, NIV)—and there are many more.

These verses confront text-based approaches to religion with a paradox. Jesus, now *in* the authoritative text, condemns making texts authoritative. What does a believer do when the text he or she reveres says not only that one should not revere texts, but also that revering texts is tantamount to homicide—even to killing Jesus? Although Christian Fundamentalists claim that Scripture contains everything anyone needs to know, Jesus affirms that the living voice resides in the living. Atavism kills living prophets. Jesus affirms present-focused, active living: "Love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:35-36, NRSV). Nice words—even safe words, because they have been domesticated, tamed for readers because of their ancient contexts.

But dare we push away living voices that object to sending illegals out of the country by citing ancient prophets who demand that laws are to be obeyed? Dare we push away living voices that ask for higher taxes on those who can pay more

to assist widows, orphans, and single-parent families? Dare we push away living voices that ask for social justice laws, for lessening official uses of lethal force, and for making the ballot easily accessible to all citizens, by citing dead prophets who spoke of submitting to the governing authorities? Does the living voice instead advocate for issues that did not exist in the days of Scripture? Nuclear weapons? Living green? Solar panels? Transgendered rights? If so, might being a living prophetic voice place one in danger of crucifixion from one's own community? One thing is clear: whatever Jesus meant, it is safer to enshrine only what Jesus and the prophets said.

Text-based communities, whether Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, typically ignore and thereby silence (kill) living prophetic voices about the environment, peace, inclusiveness, sustainability, social justice, minority rights, political integrity, etc., to name just a few obvious examples.

Occasionally Adventists exercise a living prophetic voice to wider communities, but it is more rare to find us fulfilling our responsibility to use our ears to hear the living prophetic voices in the wider communities that speak to us. If an essential principle of hermeneutics according to Jesus is that the living word is heard from living prophets, might a corollary be that attending to living prophets might also resuscitate dead ones? 

¹ Translation is my own.

² Translation is my own.

³ Q is used here as a simple designation to refer to the common core of words that appear in both Luke's and Matthew's Gospels for verses that are not also found in Mark. When this designator, Q, is used with chapter and verse numbers following it—as in the next paragraph of this paper, Q 11:47-48—those verse numbers refer to the words found in both Luke 11:47-48 and the verses in Matthew 23:29-32 that are Matthew's version of that material.

⁴ See http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gth_pat_rob.htm

⁵ *ibid.*

ELLEN WHITE *on* BIBLE STUDY

Edited by Alden Thompson

The contentious debate over righteousness by faith and the law in Galatians at the 1888 General Conference triggered fruitful comments from Ellen G. White about Bible study. These quotes should be seen against the backdrop of General Conference President G. I. Butler's statement that Adventists had "never taken a stand upon Bible exegesis which they have been compelled to surrender."¹

Unity in broad outline still allows for disagreement in interpretation.

"Some interpretations of Scripture given by Dr. Waggoner I do not regard as correct. ... The fact that he honestly holds some views of Scripture differing from yours or mine is no reason why we should treat him as an offender or as a dangerous man. ... I know it would be dangerous to denounce Dr. Waggoner's position as wholly erroneous. ... That which has been presented harmonizes perfectly with the light which God has been pleased to give me during all the years of my experience."

—Manuscript 15, 1888

The spirit in which we work is more important than a specific interpretation of Scripture.

"Many hours that night were spent in prayer in regard to the law in Galatians. This was a mere mote. Whichever way was in accordance with a 'Thus saith the Lord,' my soul would say, Amen, and Amen. But the spirit that was controlling our brethren was so unlike the spirit of Jesus, so contrary to the spirit that should be exercised toward each other, it filled my soul with anguish."

—Manuscript 24, 1888

Do not fear discussion, change, controversy, or difference of opinion.

Whenever the people of God are growing in grace, they will be constantly obtaining a clearer understanding of His word. ... But as real spiritual life declines, it has ever been the tendency to cease to advance in the knowledge of the truth. Men ... discourage any further investigation of the Scriptures. They become conservative and seek to avoid discussion. The fact that there is no controversy or agitation among God's people should not be regarded as conclusive evidence that they are holding fast to sound doctrine. ... When no new questions are started by investigation of the Scriptures, when no difference of opinion arises which will set men to searching the Bible for themselves to make sure that they have the truth, there will be many now, as in ancient times, who will hold to tradition and worship they know not what."

—*Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 5 (1889) pp. 706-707

Trust one another and be open to change.

Those who sincerely desire truth will not be reluctant to lay open their positions for investigation and criticism, and will not be annoyed if their opinions and ideas are crossed. ... We have many lessons to learn, and many, many to unlearn. God and heaven alone are infallible. Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed. As long as we hold to our own ideas and opinions with determined persistency, we cannot have the unity for which Christ prayed."

—*Review and Herald*, July 26, 1892

Expect mistakes; do not resort to voted resolutions; live out Jesus' two great commands.

"If a man makes a mistake in his interpretation of some portion of the Scripture, shall this cause diversity and disunion? God forbid. We cannot then take a position that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text of Scripture in the very same light. The church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but we cannot force the mind and will, and thus root out disagreement. These resolutions may conceal the discord, but they cannot quench it and establish perfect agreement. Nothing can perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christlike forbearance. ... The great truths of the word of God are so clearly stated that none need make a mistake in understanding them. When, as individual members of the church, you love God supremely and your neighbor as yourself, there will be no need of labored efforts to be in unity, for there will be oneness in Christ as a natural result."

—Manuscript 24, 1892

¹ Cited in George R. Knight, *Angry Saints* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1989), 15.

I AM IN THE MIDST OF READING THE BIBLE IN CHRONOLOGICAL order, using an ESV Bible app on my iPad. The user-friendly app makes it easy to track my progress in the chronological reading feature, and I like the English Standard Version—but enough of the sales pitch.

I confess. I have never read the Bible through from beginning to end. I'm sure I have read most of it in bits and pieces, but I've never succeeded in reading the whole thing straight through. Although I've started the project a number of times before, I'm going to make it this time. I am.

Part of the reason I believe I'm going to succeed this time is that I'm approaching the project differently. I decided at the outset that I would do my best to read the Bible as though I knew nothing and believed nothing, allowing myself to just absorb what the writing is telling me. No previous beliefs. No prior interpretations of stories and events. No cosmic view. No denominational system. No doctrinal angles. No presuppositions.

Such vacuity is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. It is hard to discard your belief system when approaching the Bible. Everything that forms one's paradigm can be so deeply

Bible to confirm what we already believe. We take courses to learn our narrative better. We go to Sabbath School classes, study again what we already believe, and then have "discussions" to regurgitate and confirm it among ourselves. We preach what we believe. We refine our official statements about what we believe. We don't seek and search so much as we confirm and deepen. We assume that the task of building a belief system has already been done. And surely it was done right. Right?

So, I confess I got tired of the circle of confirmation, the platitudes, the pat answers. Thus I launched my project to try to think from neutral ground.

Getting around to the subject of hermeneutics... What kind of hermeneutic is it that seeks to reinforce what is already believed? Does it have a name? Is it not generally the unacknowledged hermeneutic of Adventism? And where does that kind of hermeneutic lead? If you start a research project already committed to a particular result, you will likely find a way to prove your proposition. Thus we march in a circle.

I suppose there is value in already knowing the answer. You don't have to experience the brain drain of exploring and

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

By Edward Reifsnnyder

engrained, even in the subconscious. After a lifetime of Sabbath School lessons (child and adult), sermons, Bible classes from first grade through college in Adventist schools, evangelistic meetings, Adventist books, and Ellen White writings, it may be all but impossible to ignore the narrative. But for discovery purposes, I'm working on it—doing the best I can.


Why would I bother to try to approach the material with an uninformed mind? I guess I'm just independent enough to want to see if the Bible tells me the same thing—or close to the same thing—as the "authoritative" people and sources have been telling me all of my life. I guess this attitude says, "Why trust them?" Why start with the presuppositions they have provided to me ready-made? After all, they may have built their belief system on what all of the authoritative people before them were saying. And so I ponder whether I will come up with the same ideas they did.

Could it be that Adventists have a case of long-term groupthink? Maybe that is what a denomination is supposed to be: a serious, perpetual case of groupthink. But questions have arisen in my mind. Do we believe what we believe because the Bible clearly says so? Or is it because our forbears made certain interpretations, and our subsequent cumulative and collective reinforcement has jelled into an unalterable narrative—a narrative we hold to be truth? To find out, I decided to start fresh with a shot at *sola scriptura* and see where it goes.

My observation is that all too often we spend our time in the

thinking for yourself. You don't have to suffer the dissonance—both internally and corporately—that can come from arriving at a position different from the groupthink position. An acceptable level of comfort can come from simply trusting what the pioneers and all of their successors have posited and believed. No doubt that is the safest route in today's church, especially for our theologians. Heaven forbid if one of them should sincerely find the text leading in a direction that differs from the groupthink solution. But then, that's how it is with "truth," isn't it?

Actually, is there any point in having a discussion about hermeneutics in our Church if we are fully, unalterably committed to what we believe? Isn't it imperative that any hermeneutic we might adopt would lead us back to the same answers? Isn't it likely that we would adopt a hermeneutic that is non-threatening? We couldn't possibly adopt a hermeneutical definition that runs the risk of leading us away from where we are, could we?

Why don't we just be honest with ourselves and forget the idea of developing a position on hermeneutics? Why don't we say: "We already have the truth. It doesn't matter how we arrived at it"? Isn't it a lead-pipe cinch that if we were to engage in the exercise, we would define a hermeneutic that would fully support our past conclusions? Personally, I probably wouldn't like that riskless idea, but it would save the Church a lot of money and turmoil if we just said, "We are where we are and we aren't going to any other place, no matter how we define a hermeneutic." 

Does *It* Matter?

By Winona Winkler Wendth

A CLASS DISCUSSION ON THE NATURE AND VALUE OF NARRATIVE ended with a recap of the story of Adam and Eve. It's a fine example of a number of different essential story structures, which is one reason the story has stuck with us all this time: it has a malleable core.

A young man stopped by the lectern while I packed up my notes and texts.

"So what ticked that snake off, to begin with?" he asked.

"Does it matter? ... What do you mean, exactly? If you're looking at a story of revenge, you have only so many options."

"So: Someone stood in the way of his getting what he wanted."

"Yes. Or someone hurt him in some way."

"What could that be?"

"Does it matter?"

This student had accurately identified one of the basic story structures I had introduced in class; we have six or seven of them, depending on whom we're talking to, including a two-person romance, a love triangle, quest, revenge, a stranger coming to town, and a local kid leaving town. Many writers suggest that in the end, we have only two: the equilibrium, pleasant, or not, is disrupted by either an outside agent showing up or an inside participant deciding to leave. The Eden story is both, and depending on where you are in your life or where you are in the world, one or the other will speak to you most strongly.

This student's interest was in the snake—an outside element, a creature with an uncanny wisdom. "He was testing her, trying to see if she remembered what she had been told" was his take on the narrative, filling his own experiences into the empty spaces.

The original story as we have it does not provide backstory. Neither does it follow the participants into another chapter; by the time they're out, it's over. Most of my students know snakes as characters in popular culture, such as Kipling's Kaa in *The Jungle*

Book (as portrayed by Walt Disney): creatures in constant motion but legless, ever-present but not always visible. Kipling's snake, as the literature presents him, is not an angry character and has no reason to be so. He just is. But he keeps everyone off-center, just a little bit. General snake imagery did its work for this class.

What did that story mean to these young men and women, who were more or less ignorant of theology? We spent nearly a class hour unpacking it, weighing in on one translation or another, and seeing little difference (there is none from a storyteller's point of view). "Right," one student concluded, "that's the way it is. You can't win, no matter what you try. ... This is life, right? Jeez."

The snake showed up to cause trouble because he was angry and vengeful; Eve left town because she was not happy where she was—"and who wants to live like that?" one student asked. "No life, just wandering around." We can't avoid dissatisfaction or disappointment. Breaking the rules isn't always bad; but it's not always good. The story has been around for thousands of years, told and retold to meet a variety of needs as each teller elides some information, provides backstory, and turns it into a tool to maintain social norms, which change over time.

We are the stories we tell, and we cannot help but tell stories; we cannot help but look for and find them. The best ones last the longest. Those that answer the most questions, that speak most deeply to us, persist in our personal and collective histories. Even nonbelievers find in *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* a hope of slipping by inevitable death through resurrection by someone who loves us. These stories persist because they speak to human beings over the centuries and across cultures, and they provide hope. Perhaps they also remind us that some of us are, by nature, disobedient and risk-taking, and there are angry

characters out there always taking it out on us. Academic work on the derivations of the stories or their original purpose, or a complex studies of variants, do not make the stories weaker or stronger, less affective, or more compelling. We cannot explain away a good story or ground it in our own assumptions about intentionality—and stories like this, especially, are too distant from their sources to do that.

The fractious relationships among writers, academics, and literary critics mirror the relationships among denominational story crafters, theologians, and those who work with the Bible as literature. The challenge we have with texts is not that we don't

We need “plain readings” that are even more “plain” than those that make many Adventist academics wince; they are readings absent theology; they are readings that resonate in a larger world of collective human experience.


study them enough, but that we study them too much. Central questions are lost, and everyone is cranky. What are those questions? They are not “What is the Hebrew word for ... ?” or “How does this fit into the overall story of salvation?” They are “Why does this story speak to me so strongly?” and “What is happening, here, that causes everyone—whether a believer, or not—to respond? We need “plain readings” that are even more “plain” than those that make many Adventist academics wince; they are readings absent theology; they are readings that resonate in a larger world of collective human experience. Few of us would mistake a snake for symbol of home and hearth, family, and acceptance; no reader is likely to respond to tests of obedience

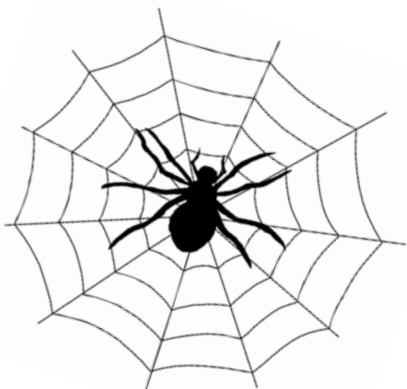
without a notion of opposition. A globe of ripe, red fruit does not become a symbol of death except in the context of personal desire in the face of external directive and the notion of punishment; by itself, it's beautiful, luscious, and seductive. It's the story that makes the fruit dangerous.

The reader knows the final outcome for Snow White and for the key players in the Garden of Eden. But the story takes us to an unexpected end—the final “therefore” that closes the plot. We can't get that “therefore” in the story of The Garden, however, absent the Christian Testament, which is why we push and push in that direction to make it work. This is the work of the theologians, who sometimes ask the wrong questions.

Some further right questions: Is this story about a woman who takes a risk, or a woman who is easily duped? Is this story generated by a stranger who “comes to town” and ruins everything? Or is this a story about a person who is willing to risk life itself in order to become an agent of, and the major character in, her own life? An incursion or an escape? Both. A coming of age story? Yes; aren't all of our stories about that? What did Eve know at the end that she didn't know at the beginning of this story? Pain and suffering—an unavoidable human truth. Does she express remorse? No. Are they all out there, now, fending for themselves, in pain and confusion? Yes; that's what growing up means.

For my students, “to do [these stories] justice,” as critic A.O. Scott writes, “was to grapple with painful and personal matters, with one's own thoughts about sex, alienation, injustice, and death, to ‘stare into the abyss’ and then write a term paper about it.” After 15 weeks, most of them could do that, which is what literature is meant to provoke (the staring-into-the-abyss part, not the term-paper part). We must teach our students and children to focus on the painful and personal parts of reading stories in their “search for meaning” and to put less energy on preparing the term papers. Let the stories speak for themselves and pull some truths out of us; see them for what they are, not what we have been told they are or what we want them to be or what further study could possibly reveal (little, if anything).

And when a student asks why the snake was angry, or why Eve took a risk, or why Adam followed, or whether it was a pomegranate or apple, or who wrote the story in the first place, or why, a good question to ask is: “Does it matter?” Those ancient stories leave spaces for answers, and we have to provide them ourselves, knowing they are tentative, personally and sociologically. “We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” writes Joan Didion. What we do when we move into those spaces and provide our own stories is what it means to live. 



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A LIVING HERMENEUTIC

BY BRUCE CAMPBELL MOYER

A STORY IS TOLD OF A EUROPEAN TEACHER TELLING A CLASS of African students the story of Joseph's experience in Egypt. When he was finished, he asked the class the lesson of this story, expecting them to tell him of Joseph's commendable faithfulness to God. Instead, the students replied that the important lesson was Joseph's faithfulness to his family.

The correct answer, of course is both. The different answers were determined by different cultural backgrounds.

Years ago I taught Greek to African ministerial students. When we translated Revelation 8:13, which describes an eagle flying in mid-heaven crying "woe," my students translated *aetos* as owl, a bird associated with bad news.

What is happening here?

Inescapable Influences

The reality is that every time I open my Bible, there is a committee determining not only how I will read the words, but even which words and which books I will read. My committee is composed of my age, gender, race, economics, political leanings, education, and denominational allegiance—in other words, my culture. As a Seventh-day Adventist, I may be more likely to read the book of Daniel (and other Old Testament books) than members of more New Testament-oriented, less apocalypse-intensive denominations.

This is not a problem when all or even most of us share the same culture, but the Seventh-day Adventist church is a missionary community with a commitment to share the good news with every language and people group (Rev. 14:6). How do "all the saints" (Eph. 3:18, NKJV) manage to grasp the "width and length, the depth and height" (verse 18, NKJV) of the gospel together? This must be a matter of prayer and grace—prayer on our part and grace on God's.

Over the past few decades, we have witnessed the rise of a number of particularized perspectives on the Scripture, resulting in a number of discrete "theologies": liberation theology, black theology, and feminist theology, to name a few. While some of these may have pushed the envelope a bit far, most of them have been helpful in allowing others of us to realize that there

are other, often-legitimate perspectives on the Scriptures than our own. This, too, is part of grasping "with all the saints" the magnitude of God's love and redemptive project.

This is not new. We first see in the fifteenth chapter of the book of Acts one reading of the Scripture coming from traditional Aramaic-speaking Jews and, countering it, another reading that reflects the Greek-speaking—and perhaps more cosmopolitan—Diaspora Jews. The two perspectives reflect two different cultures and demonstrate that we do not escape our culture when we accept Jesus as Lord. We bring that culture with us. It is the only thing we can do.

This was why my Greek II students in Africa wanted to translate *aetou* (eagle) in Revelation 8:13 as an owl, the bird who brings bad news. They also insisted that the seat of emotions is in the abdomen rather than the heart, resulting in their version of John 14:1 as "Let not your liver quiver."

Real and Legitimate, But Different

Kosuke Koyama, who served as a missionary from Japan to Thailand, in one of his books described two versions of an afternoon tea: one in the parlor and the other in the kitchen. In the parlor, the European missionaries gathered for tea and discussion. Their cultural backgrounds included ivy-walled seminaries and universities; careful, critical examination of the Scriptures; sitting on proper chairs; and taking tea and cookies while dressed in their Sunday best. Meanwhile, in the kitchen (and you must attempt to picture a Southeast Asian kitchen), the activity seemed chaotic; everything and anything appeared to go into the wok, while steam roiled through the small kitchen. The conversation was loud, less scholarly, and multilingual.

Koyama used these two scenes to describe two different methods of Bible study, both real and both legitimate. Again, it is necessary to bring the two together somehow, to inform each other and to enlarge the other's understanding of God and his redemptive project.

While some readers may not be comfortable with liberation theology and the writings of Paulo Freire, we would do well to

read his small book *Pedagogy for the Oppressed*. Whatever else it may have been, liberation theology was a plea to listen to how the poor and often oppressed peoples in Latin America read and understood the Scriptures.

The addition of a 28th fundamental belief in 2005 (inserted into the official Seventh-day Adventist statement of 28 Fundamental Beliefs as number 11) was an attempt to move, if only slightly, from a Western perspective to one that takes the rest of the world into consideration by recognizing the reality of the demonic. The seed was planted in an Institute of World Mission class being taught in East Africa that dealt with harassment and deliverance by and from evil spirits, a very real part of African

and Paul, and the many other cultures in between. Archaeology helps here, but simple sensitivity, asking questions of the writer and his times, is important and insightful. Why did the writer say what he said? To whom was he talking? How did the original readers understand what was written?

We must understand our own cultural biases. If we know only the culture of our origin, we know no cultures. It is only when we expose ourselves to other cultures that we come to know our own. This is the benefit of reading/exploring the Scriptures in a multicultural congregation or small group.

We must allow the Bible to critique us and our culture and to let meaningful interaction give us a deeper and transforming

The reality is that every time I open my Bible, there is a committee determining not only how I will read the words, but even which words and which books I will read.


and most Second World and Third World cultures. One of the local participants pointed out that students in the local college were not allowed to discuss this in their classes, because it was not part of the (then) 27 statements of belief—even though an awareness of evil spirits was the daily reality in African lives. Western minds had seen psychological difficulties and hormonal imbalances in what people in other parts of the world interpreted as spiritual harassment or demon possession. Consequently, the majority of the church was being dictated to by a Western enlightenment model and left to manage (poorly) without being able to even discuss the matter.

A Suggested Take-Away

What does all of this mean to us? Let me suggest four lessons:

We must attempt to understand the cultures of Moses, Jesus

and Paul, and the many other cultures in between. Archaeology helps here, but simple sensitivity, asking questions of the writer and his times, is important and insightful. Why did the writer say what he said? To whom was he talking? How did the original readers understand what was written?

Obedience, or the obligatory practice of the Scriptures, happens when we move beyond eavesdropping and actually enter into the conversation. This is done through praying, doing or living out our part in this community of faith, and remaining faithful to the others who have been or are now engaged in the wonderful, ancient conversation. 

¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2000).

The Bible Is Too Important to Take Literally

By Jim Walters

“TAKING THE BIBLE SERIOUSLY BUT NOT LITERALLY” IS THE subtitle of Marcus J. Borg’s *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. I agree with Borg and advance three points, in brief form, supporting a thoughtful approach to interpreting the Bible.

A literalist mindset is contrary to the lofty notions we appropriately have about what it means to be a human being, created in our God’s image.

The Bible deals with the most serious, profound issues of life, and for that reason it rightfully commands our attention.

The issue of belief in something is inevitable, and I—and along with most people reading this essay—have ample warrant to embrace the Bible story.

Why Literalism Is a Problem

A literalist mindset is satisfied only by a simple truth. And while truth may, by definition, be ultimately straightforward, the process of getting to truth is anything but simple in this day and age, with the knowledge that we now possess about the universe spanning from the micro to the macro.

Take, for example, what we know about the ancient culture in which our religious forebears, the Hebrews, lived. Life was hardscrabble, often short, and the great majority of the population was illiterate. Home education was the only education—except for the .01%. Most folk lived at Maslow’s most basic level in the hierarchy of needs: survival, preoccupied with satisfying hunger and securing physiological safety. Further, “they consulted shamans for toothaches, thought that the gods spoke through birth defects and markings on sheep livers,” says

evangelical scholar Charles Halton.¹ It is natural that the Hebrews would view their God’s involvement in their difficult lives very concretely. For example, Deuteronomy 23:12-14 states that God told the people: “Designate a place outside the camp where you can go to relieve yourself. As part of your equipment have something to dig with, and when you relieve yourself, dig a hole and cover up your excrement. For the LORD your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you. Your camp must be holy, so that he will not see among you anything indecent and turn away from you” (NIV). In other words, divine protection depended upon God’s walk-through visual inspection of sanitary conditions. Of all the various ways God is pictured in the Bible, this is one of the less elevated portraits.

The Bible is not so much a seamless thread of eternal truths as it is a varied and insightful history of God’s people, of their perceptions of the Eternal, and of the interaction between them and their Creator. In stark contrast to the Deuteronomic God as sanitation inspector, witness the Jobian God who challenges all human questioners: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding” (Job 38.4, NKJV).

The Bible’s Profundity

In contrast to the literalist’s view of the Bible as a cosmic Google search engine in pursuit of stuff, the Bible—like all great literature—deals with the most profound issues of human existence, beginning with the very meaning of life.

Genesis 1 is not primarily about the mechanics of how natural objects came to be. This view of Genesis trivializes its importance to the Hebrews—and to us. The Israelite thinkers who wrote the Bible’s first chapters were not attempting to create a scientific exposition of how inorganic matter related to life. Rather, “[t]hey were overwhelmingly interested in the mystery of the purpose and meaning of their history as a people, and so with the nature of the Ruler of all history,” argues ecumenical theologian Langdon Gilkey. “They, and the Christians who followed them, confessed God to be the Creator and Ruler of all things, because each had received a vivid answer to fundamental religious questions: Who has put us here; who has fashioned us and for what purpose; who is the ultimate power over our existence; and

who claims us as the Lord and Ruler of our life and destiny?”²

Ron Osborn, in his *Death Before the Fall: Biblical Literalism and the Suffering of Animals*, joins John Walton in contending that to impose our modern scientific questions upon Genesis 1, a prescientific text, would be a form of cultural imperialism. Further, the early chapters of Genesis are much more about *who* God is than *what* God does. Walton sees these chapters as essentially a “temple inauguration” in which the different elements of the cosmos are assigned their proper order within the six days leading up to the climactic Sabbath. God, says Osborn, takes up his “residence in this cosmic temple on the seventh day.”³

Belief’s Inevitability

Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*, winner of the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 2002, is about the inevitability of belief in some story; the question is: *Which story?*

Pi, the son of a zookeeper in India, was a prescient child who eventually chose to add both Christianity and Islam to his native Hindu faith, saying he just wants to love God.

The family decides to sell the zoo, and its animals are transported via Japanese freighter, only to be shipwrecked, with young Pi stranded in a lifeboat with four wild creatures. Early on the hyena eats both the zebra and the orangutan, only to discover that a tiger has been hiding under a tarpaulin. The tiger overcomes the hyena, and then through cunning Pi is able to outwit the tiger for 227 days at sea before washing ashore in Mexico.

Recovering in a hospital, Pi is visited by investigators from the Japanese shipping company who want to hear what happened. Pi tells them the story, but they find it unbelievable. So Pi offers them an alternative tale: he’s adrift in the lifeboat with three other humans: the ship’s cook, a sailor, and Pi’s own mother. The cook amputates the sailor’s leg to use it for fishing bait, and later he kills the sailor and Pi’s mother. But soon afterward the cook is killed by Pi, who dines on him.

So Pi asks the investigators which story they prefer, as they find both incredible. Finally, they choose the story with the animals, and Pi thanks them for their interest, adding, “And so it goes with God.” At one point Pi asks them: “If you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for?”


I recently heard an extended NPR interview with Martel

While truth may, by definition, be ultimately straightforward, the process of getting to truth is anything but simple in this day and age, with the knowledge that we now possess about the universe spanning from the micro to the macro.

about his new book, *The High Mountains of Portugal*—which is also about journeys and features an animal—and its author’s continuing exploration of faith.

“In both *Life of Pi* and in this one ... it happens to be religious faith,” Martel explained, “but I mean faith in a broader sense, too—any kind of faith, whether it’s in a person, in a political movement, even a sports team, whatever. That deeply unreasonable phenomenon intrigues me. ... We are so moved to be rational. Faith, whether it’s falling in love with someone or falling in love with a god, doesn’t have that immediate cause and effect.”

In a different interview, Martel said that the *Pi* book can be summarized in three statements: “Life is a story... You can choose your story... A story with God is the better story.”⁴

I, as a Christian, am reminded of Professor Karl Barth’s answer to an interviewer who once queried this great theologian about how he would summarize his voluminous writings on faith and doctrine. As the story goes, Barth, without missing a beat, recalled a verse he learned at his mother’s knee: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” 

¹ *Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither?* Charles Halton, ed. (Zondervan, 2015), p. 19.

² Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1965), p. 24.

³ Ronald E. Osborn, *Death Before the Fall: Biblical Literalism and the Suffering of Animals* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), p. 38.

⁴ Jennie Renton, “Yann Martel Interview,” as published on Textualities.net, 2005.

HOW THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS INTERPRETED THE BIBLE

by David W. T. Brattston

AROUND A.D. 200, A LEADING CHRISTIAN TEACHER OBSERVED: “Those who follow heresies avail themselves of the prophetic Scriptures. They do not make use of all the Scriptures, and then they do not quote them entire, nor as the body and texture of prophecy prescribe. Instead, selecting ambiguous expressions, they wrest them to their own opinions, gathering a few expressions here and there; not looking to the sense, but making use of the mere words. For in almost all the quotations they make, you will find that they attend to the names alone, while they alter the meanings; neither knowing nor using the quotations they adduce according to their true nature.”¹

Even today self-appointed interpreters of Scripture seize upon one verse, deduce an interpretation favorable to their thesis, and then bend the meaning of all related Bible verses to it. If a selected verse is treated as governing all that the Bible has to say, the result could be 31,102 unique Bible interpretations.

Books of the Bible were not divided into chapters until the late first millennium and were not separated into verses until halfway through the second millennium. Each Gospel, epistle, etc. was written as a distinct whole, not as a collection of random verses strung together into a handy book of quotations for all occasions, like Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations* or *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, which was commonly referred to in the West as “The Little Red Book.” Selecting a single verse as standing on its own and comprising the whole of Bible teaching is a method the original writers never intended.

Fortunately, the disciples of Jesus wrote down some of what he said, and their followers wrote down what the apostles said, including material not contained in their writings. We possess a vast literature, which was committed to writing while unwritten sayings were still fresh in memory. They preserve not only the words of Christ’s teachings, but also the context—such as how the books of Scripture join together and how particular words

were used in the greater context of common speech in the New Testament era. They help us uncover the original wording of New Testament passages that are now in doubt due to variations in manuscripts (just as the Dead Sea Scrolls do for the Old Testament). They also tell the specific settings in which they applied, details about how sections of Scripture would have been understood by the original hearers, and how they were meant to be understood.

Irenaeus

Polycarp had conversed with many who had seen Christ, and the apostles themselves instructed him and appointed him bishop of the church in Smyrna.² He was probably “the messenger of the church at Smyrna” addressed in Revelation 2.8. He later directed the Christian training of a younger man named Irenaeus. The time that elapsed between the earthly life of Jesus to the time Irenaeus wrote is about the same as between the formal incorporation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1863 and publication of this issue of *Adventist Today*. Irenaeus was thus only a few steps removed from the apostles and Jesus.

Irenaeus upheld the principle that a person trying to interpret the Bible should do so in company with the church and the interpretation it has received. He wrote: “And then shall every word also seem consistent to him, if he for his part diligently read the Scriptures in company with those who are elders in the church, among whom is the apostolic doctrine.”³

He developed this theme more fully in *Against Heresies* 3.4.1, where he wrote that “it is not necessary to seek the truth among other people that is easy to obtain from the church; since the apostles, like a rich man depositing his money in a bank, lodged in it all things pertaining to the truth: so that everybody can draw from it the water of life. For she is the entrance to life; all others are thieves and robbers. On this account are we bound to avoid

them, and to choose the things pertaining to the church with the utmost diligence, and to lay hold of the tradition of the truth.”

Clement

Clement of Alexandria wrote a decade or two after Irenaeus, between A.D. 192 and 202. Clement was the principal or president of the foremost school of Christian learning of the era, and he could draw upon the knowledge of other professors, just as Jiří Moskala, dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, can today obtain information and insight from his other faculty members.

As a way of combating heresies, Clement noted that “the truth is not found by changing the meanings (for so people subvert all true teaching), but in the consideration of what perfectly belongs to and befits the Sovereign God, and in establishing each one of the points demonstrated in the Scriptures again from similar Scriptures.”⁴

He also said that it is essential for the Bible student to hold the genuine hope of learning in order to benefit spiritually, rather than to impress other people or to make them feel less worthy or to win arguments. He wrote: “Drawn by desire to discover what is good, he seeks thoughtfully, without love of strife or glory, asking, answering, and besides considering the statements made. For it is incumbent, in applying ourselves not only to the divine Scriptures, but also to common notions, to institute investigations, the discovery ceasing at some useful end.”⁵

Tertullian

The time from Christ’s earthly ministry to that of Tertullian approximates that between the Great Disappointment and ourselves. Tertullian wrote that interpreters are to determine the sense of the words as consistent with the thrust of the Bible passage: “No divine saying is so unconnected and diffuse, that its words only are to be insisted on, and their connection left undetermined.”⁶

Around A.D. 207, when writing against heretics who taught that only Jesus was God and contained all that was divine, Tertullian chastised them because “they make selections from the Scriptures in support of their opinion, and refuse to consider the other points, which obviously maintain the rule of faith without any infraction of the unity of the Godhead. For as in the Old Testament Scriptures they lay hold of nothing else than, ‘I am God, and beside me there is no God,’ so in the Gospel they simply keep in view the Lord’s answer to Philip, ‘I and my Father are one;’ and ‘He that has seen me has seen the Father; and I am in the Father, and the Father in me.’ They would have


the entire revelation of both Testaments yield to these three passages, whereas the only proper course is to understand the few statements in the light of the many.”⁷

If a selected verse is treated as governing all that the Bible has to say, the result could be 31,102 unique Bible interpretations.

In other words, when there are many Scripture verses on a topic and some seem inconsistent, preference should be given to the teaching of the many. It is both dangerous and unwise to deduce an interpretation from the minority and then press-gang the meaning of all others to this interpretation.

He enunciated a further rule: maintain the true meaning of the important words despite whatever obscurity adversaries throw over the subject under the pretense of figurative and allegorical language.⁸ He wrote, “Since some passages are more obscure than others, it must be right that uncertain statements should be determined by certain ones, and obscure ones by such as are clear and plain.”⁹

Conclusion

All three of these ancient church fathers, who were 17 and 18 centuries closer to Jesus than ourselves, saw proper Bible study and exegesis as a group endeavor, with the object of attaining a consensus, both within the living church and with what the church had always taught. To them, Scripture interpretation was not a forum for indulging in maneuvering texts, or in originality and creativity. Rather, the practice these church fathers received from the apostles—who lived not many generations earlier—was that Scripture is to be read as a unit, with all parts kept in mind as of equal authority. Viewing it through the window of a few preselected verses creates a division in the text that was foreign to its original authors. 

¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.16.

² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.4.

³ *Against Heresies*, 4.32.1.

⁴ *Stromata* 7.16.

⁵ *Stromata*, 8.1.

⁶ Tertullian, *De Praescriptione*, 9.

⁷ *Against Praxeas*, 20.

⁸ *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 19.

⁹ *ibid*, 21.



In Search of the “Plain Reading” of Scripture

By Alden Thompson

In the film *Francis of Assisi*,¹ the celebrated monk vividly highlights the issue this article addresses. Surrounded by his small band of followers, he reads the Gospel passages driving his vow of poverty: “If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and ... follow me” (Matt 19:21, Douay-Rheims); “Take nothing for your journey, neither staff, nor wallet, nor bread, nor money” (Luke 9:3, ASV); and “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matt. 16:24, KJV).

Later, the movie depicts Francis returning from a pilgrimage to Egypt only to find his vision in ruins. Massive institutions had replaced simplicity. Passionately Francis confronted his followers, declaring that the words of Scripture are to be followed “Without interpretation!” “Without interpretation!”

Yet the movie script ignores the scriptures describing Jesus’ wealthy followers—such as Zacchaeus, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and the women who went with Jesus, supporting him and his disciples with “their considerable means” (Luke 8:3, *The Message*)—who used their fortune to fund worthy projects. In real life, Francis likewise had wealthy patrons who did not live a life of poverty. Francis was not calling everyone to privation. He simply wanted to preserve a pure movement.

The “Without interpretation!” line in the movie reflects the classic cry of passionate people who want the Bible to affirm their passion. And the cry for the “plain reading” of Scripture is like that. Just as Francis’ vow of poverty was a stark reaction to the decadence of the Roman church, a reaction that could easily ignore the complexity of Scripture, so the calls for a plain reading of the text in our day represent a deeply rooted reaction to perceived “critical” threats to Scripture, a reaction that easily overlooks the complexity of the Book that is intended to provide “water in which lambs may walk and elephants swim.”²

Ironically, I, too, am arguing for a plain reading of Scripture, but one that includes all Scripture and that recognizes both differences and similarities within the Book. Then we can seek for unity in the teachings of Jesus.

Today’s calls for the plain reading of Scripture are linked with the Fundamentalist reaction against the burgeoning critical impulses of the 19th century, a century that had moved from the deep piety of a Bible-reading Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832)—“But better had they ne’er been born, Who read to doubt, or read to scorn”—to the flippancy of the secularized Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), who wrote, “I’m glad the silly book is gone.”³

Thus those who sought an education in the 1930s found a great gulf between thinkers and believers. Kenneth Kantzer, former editor of *Christianity Today*, put it this way: “I sought an accredited school committed to a consistent biblical theology, with a scholarly faculty, a large library, and a disciplined intellectual atmosphere. I couldn’t find any.”⁴ So he chose two institutions: As a believer, he attended Faith Theological Seminary, a newly minted Bible school, founded in 1937 with no tradition to back it up; as a thinker, he enrolled at Harvard University.

A major obstacle to the plain reading of the text is a belief in inerrancy (that the Bible is without “error”), a position the Fundamentalist movement bequeathed to us. But uneasiness still lurks in the shadows. Some years ago I was in dialogue with an Adventist brother who was very unsettled by my approach to the Bible. He argued fervently for the plain reading of Scripture, clearly assuming that our only safety was in a simple, straightforward reading of the Bible. My approach, he feared, was putting Scripture at risk.

Though this man avoided the term “inerrancy,” it seemed to me that he was very close to that position. In my view, inerrancy makes it impossible to maintain a plain reading of parallel passages in either

Testament. In Matthew 4 and Luke 4, for example, the second and third temptations are reversed. If we say one is right, then the other is wrong, and we have lost the plain reading of Scripture.

At one point I asked this man why he went to such lengths to *avoid* the plain reading of the text. Surprisingly, he took my question seriously, a tacit admission that he was indeed avoiding it. He spoke vaguely of life experiences that threatened his spiritual survival. His only hope, he believed, was to depend upon Scripture and the plain reading of the text.

Now the point of this article is to demonstrate that not a single word of Scripture escapes the interpretation process, a process that involves human reason. By God's grace, it will be "sanctified reason," a phrase frequently used by Ellen White. Guided by the Spirit, we use our minds more, not less. And by doing so, we do not put Scripture at risk. We enrich its value and make it more secure.

But to make all of that believable for ordinary believers, I want to move through four diverse steps, linked by a subtle logic. I conclude with a vivid example.

1. Community. Individualistic Western Christians often do not appreciate the church as a community of interpreters, working together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 15, for example, the first "General Conference" deleted one mandated Old Testament practice, circumcision, a mission-driven decision because of the influx of non-Jewish believers in the church. It also added a new one, a prohibition of food offered to idols, a response to a cultural threat posed by Roman emperor worship. Acts 15:28 is still our guiding star for such decisions: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (NRSV). Theirs was a Spirit-guided interpretation, an anguished one precisely because there was no clear "thus saith the Lord" to guide them.

The importance of such a community is suggested by Paul's "body of Christ" metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 and driven home by this striking statement from Ellen White: "So today the Lord does not impress all minds in the same way. Often through unusual experiences, under special circumstances, He gives to some Bible students views of truth that others do not grasp. It is possible for the most learned teacher to fall far short of teaching all that should be taught."⁵ In short, one mind cannot lead us to a plain reading of the text.

2. Canon. The study of "canon" is so tantalizing because Scripture scarcely illumines the process by which all the books of the Bible came together to form one "rule" or "norm." In the upper room after the resurrection, Jesus spoke of "the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44, NIV). Virtually all scholars agree that this verse indicates that the Old Testament (OT) canon was complete. Yet Scripture does not tell us how these books and only these ended up as the Word of God in the "canonical" sense. Other authoritative prophetic voices were inspired to speak for God: Elijah, Elisha, Gad, and Nathan. But their writings are not included in the canon.

The history of the New Testament (NT) canon is even more fascinating, for it gives us glimpses of arguments for and against the inclusion of such books as Hebrews and Revelation. Yet the first list of the 27 books in our canon, no more and no less, appears in an Easter letter sent out by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in 367 CE. That's more than 300 years after the resurrection.

The evidence is clear, however, that the church finally decided on a list of books for both Testaments. That gives us firm boundaries. Some passages in the canon may seem inconvenient. But they are in the Bible. Our goal is to find the plain reading of all canonical passages, even the ones we don't like.

Today's calls for the "plain reading" of Scripture are linked with the Fundamentalist reaction against the burgeoning critical impulses of the 19th century.

3. Anthropocentric (the Human) and Theocentric (the Divine) Perspectives. This pairing deserves special notice, because it often determines how one reads Scripture. If we remember that generalizations and categorizations are often helpful but also misleading, we can draw up a significant list of diverse but matched names that belong under the anthropocentric (H) and theocentric (D) headings:

Old Testament: Jeremiah (H); Ezekiel (D)
New Testament: James (H); Paul (D)
400 CE: Pelagius (H); Augustine (D)
1500s (Reformation): Arminius (H); Calvin (D)
1700s: Wesley (H); Whitefield (D)
1900s Adventism: Kenneth Wood (H); Desmond Ford (D)

C. S. Lewis, an astute nonaligned nonexpert, articulated the tension in this way when commenting on the distinctive roles for law and grace in connection with Philippians 2:12-13: “You will notice that Scripture just sails over the problem. ‘Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling’—pure Pelagianism. But why? ‘For it is God who worketh in you’—pure Augustinianism.”⁶

By contrast, the theocentric Augustine could not integrate human freedom with grace: “In trying to solve this question I made strenuous efforts on behalf of the preservation of the free choice of the human will, but the grace of God defeated me.”⁷

The tension between the human and the divine often looms large when we look at the interpretation of specific passages. Just how crucial this tension can be is illustrated by a comment in a practical guide to Bible study by two evangelical scholars, Gordon Fee (NT) and Douglas Stuart (OT), titled *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. While Fee and Stuart are less than helpful by not addressing the freedom with which the New Testament writers cite the Old Testament, they do candidly note how their students relate to the Arminian/Calvinist divide. After citing several passages on both sides of the question, they comment: “Indeed our experience as teachers is that students from these traditions seldom ask what these texts mean; they want to know ‘how to get around’ these texts!”⁸ In short, theological bias can yield more than one plain reading of the text.

4. Hierarchy of Values: The Law Pyramid. If devout conservatives are going to make peace with

the idea of more than one plain reading of biblical passages, they will need a clear grasp of those things that never change as a first step toward recognizing the things that do. That means adopting a hierarchy of values, an enormous challenge for some. About half of my students seem to believe, perhaps at some subliminal level, that if God said it, it should apply to all people at all times and in all places. The popular slogan is: “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.”

I heartily affirm the first two statements but turn the last one on its head: “That doesn’t settle it at all!” What the Bible says provides us with illustrations, points of reference, which must be brought together with a recognition of an “underlying harmony,” to borrow a line from Ellen White, that undergirds a great diversity. All of that can sound overwhelming, but we must remind ourselves how simple it was for Jesus. He summarized his entire Bible with a crisp one-liner: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12, NRSV).

Jesus must always be our focal point. He is the one who unifies everything. That enables us to see the difference between those things that never change and those that do. Remarkably, a major step in that direction is laid out quite simply in Deuteronomy 4:13-14. According to verse 13, God spoke the Ten Commandments to all of the people, engraved them on two stone tablets, and called the result “covenant.” That never changes. Verse 14 records that God spoke the additional “statutes and ordinances” (note the change in vocabulary) just to Moses, not to all of the people. Finally, Deuteronomy 31:26 states that these additional laws were written in a book that was placed *beside* the ark, not in the ark where the tables of stone were kept. Thus we have a clear biblical basis for saying that the Ten Commandments never change, but the other laws do!

Where did I get such a radical idea? Once you see it, it is perfectly clear in Scripture. But I, for one, needed help seeing it. A classic quip is more true than I wish it were: “If I hadn’t believed it, I never would have seen it with my own eyes!” So for me, the key was a cluster of quotes from Ellen White’s *Patriarchs and Prophets*. The most fascinating one describes God’s progressive adaptation of law to human need:

“The minds of the people, blinded and debased by slavery and heathenism, were not prepared to appreciate fully the far-reaching principles of God’s ten precepts. That the obligations of the Decalogue might be more fully understood and enforced, additional precepts were given, illustrating and applying the principles of the Ten Commandments.”⁹

If you want to see an astonishing visual of the resulting law pyramid, stop by my office at Walla Walla University. Across from my office door, my colleagues have hung a framed, silk-screen poster of the law pyramid, published by Pacific Press in 1911. It’s all there: the one principle of love, further defined by the two great commands, further defined by the Ten Commandments. The date is significant: 1911, *before* the Fundamentalist movement exploded on the American scene. In short, Fundamentalism has robbed us of our true heritage. We must reclaim it, so that we can say with conviction: First, that some things never change—the One, the Two, and the Ten; second, that some things do change. And thus we would neutralize the potentially dangerous side effects of “inerrancy.”

5. An Example. Question: Can the plain reading of Scripture be destructive? Indeed, it can be. Both the gentle, free-will soul and the heavy-handed Calvinist are at risk, though for quite different reasons. Children and the young in faith are also vulnerable. But the principle of “adaptation” (noted above) can open a whole new world of meaning, at least for adults, and could prevent parents from using violent stories to damage their children. In time, the children can understand, but not at first. So choose your stories carefully.

My example focuses on the story of Achan in Joshua 7. A plain reading of the text requires a recognition of the difference between our Western individualistic thinking, rooted in the teachings of Jesus, and Old Testament “corporate thinking.” Given that radical difference, the story then illustrates with painful clarity the custom of *cherem* (“dedication to destruction”), which called for the annihilation of everything connected with the one who had “sinned” against that deeply rooted custom. In Joshua 7:11, God declares that Israel had violated “my covenant” by stealing and lying. God’s justice is consistent. He

expected Joshua and Achan to be faithful to their conscience, just as he expects us to be faithful to ours. Even if our conscience is distorted, it is still right to obey it.

But children in Western cultures think in individualistic terms. We make matters worse by imposing our individualistic morality via the plain reading of a text that is closer to our way of thinking, thus avoiding the plain reading of the difficult passage. Note this explanation of Joshua 7 in the Adult Sabbath School Lessons guide: “Deuteronomy 24:16 states that children shall not be put to death because of their father’s sins. Thus we can assume that Achan’s family were accomplices in the crime. Either they helped pilfer the goods or hide them. It seems that all kept Achan’s deed a secret.”¹⁰

But let us note the plain reading of the text in Joshua 7: Even the animals were put to death, according to the rules of *cherem*. Was Fido deserving of death because he did not bark? Nonsense. No questions were asked of children or animals. Achan’s children, whether age 6 or 16, could not have saved their lives by reporting their father’s sin to Joshua. And there was no “church sale” of the valuables. Everything was burned. Everything. And Israel stoned the whole family.¹¹

If interpreted in terms of individualism, the story tempts us to say frightening things about God. But read in the light of the culture, it reveals not a God with a short fuse, but one of great patience. And all of that requires the “plain reading” of the text. The whole text. Every word in the Bible is interpreted by human beings. So let us take our task seriously, staying in touch with God and with each other. 🏠

¹ “Francis of Assisi,” a 1961 film, is based on the 1949 novel *The Joyful Beggar* by the British Roman Catholic author Louis de Wohl.

² Gregory the Great (540-604, pope from 590), cited in the preface to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., p. v.

³ The Scott-Stevens contrast is cited by Robert Atwan and Laurance Wieder, editors, *Chapters into Verse: Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible* (Oxford, 1993), vol. 1, p. 5.

⁴ *Christianity Today*, Feb. 4, 1983, p. 10. Kantzer earned a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1942 and a Master of Sacred Theology degree in 1943, both from Faith Theological Seminary. His Harvard PhD was awarded in 1950.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1913), pp. 432-433.

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BACK IN MY CHILDHOOD, I REMEMBER playing the game of “fold-over story.” Player One would write someone’s name at the top of a piece of paper, then fold it back so that the next player couldn’t see it. Player Two would write the first sentence of a fictional story, fold the paper back, hand it to Player Three, and so on. The payoff, of course, came when the last player unfolded the paper and read the entire story out loud. With absolutely no context provided during its creation, the tale was a giggly mish-mash.

milk, *and* drawn from the breasts. **For precept *must be*** upon precept, precept upon precept; Line upon line, line upon line; Here a little, *and* there a little” (Isa. 28:9-10, KJV).

Does Isaiah 28 teach that “line upon line, here a little, there a little” is a valid method of Bible interpretation? To answer this question—even before looking at the context—it’s necessary to eliminate the italicized “must be” in verse 10. This phrase, arbitrarily supplied by the KJV translators, gives

Part of these interpreters’ assigned responsibilities seems to be to dispense true justice. Yet they evidently have not been doing this, because Isaiah promises that the Lord will eventually restore the balance by not only replacing their “crown of pride” with his own “crown of glory and a diadem of beauty” (verse 5), but by providing “a spirit of justice” (verse 6) and “[making] justice the measuring line” (verse 17).

After verse 8’s metaphorical but stomach-wrenching description of the

“LINE UPON LINE” —A VALID EXEGETICAL PRINCIPLE?

BY MAYLAN SCHURCH

Of course, no thoughtful Bible student, teacher, or pastor would use this hermeneutical principle to create a lesson or sermon. Yet I’ve heard some people come perilously close while imagining they were expounding Bible truth, burrowing through online Bible study resources, or fabricating linguistic connections among verses while blissfully ignoring those verses’ original contexts.

This bias away from “context-first-and-foremost” is understandable if the interpreter places primary emphasis on a hermeneutical principle I believe to have been wrongly drawn from Isaiah 28. (The italics below are in the text, but the bolding is mine.)

“Whom shall he teach knowledge? And whom shall he make to understand doctrine? *Them that are* weaned from the

a totally unwarranted imperative force, and modern versions—from at least the American Standard Version onward—omit the phrase, though the New King James Version retains it.

The Context

Isaiah 28:1-15 begins with an eight-verse “woe” upon “the drunkards of Ephraim,” who verse 7 suggests are inebriated priests and prophets who “err in vision” and “stumble in judgment.” Yet they are the ones who are charged with the responsibility of interpreting and communicating God’s words to the people. Twice their drunkenness is linked with the phrase “the crown of pride” (verses 1, 3), which signals that their impaired judgment makes them contemptuous of those they consider their inferiors.

results of these proud drunkards’ work, verse 9 begins by asking: “Whom will he teach knowledge? And whom will he make to understand the message?”

A few recent versions—taking into account the context, in which Isaiah expresses frustration at the leaders’ unwillingness to understand God’s warnings—actually put these words into the mouths of the drunken priests.¹ *The Message* takes what many translators consider the passage’s satirical intent to its ultimate conclusion, having the priests say to their detractors: “Is that so? And who do you think you are to teach us? Who are you to lord it over us? We’re not babies in diapers to be talked down to by such as you—‘Da, da, da, da, blah, blah, blah, blah. That’s a good little girl, that’s a good little boy.’”

Other recent versions put verses 9 and 10 in the mouth of Isaiah, but they still use them to refer to the drunken priests. For example, the Contemporary English Version (CEV) says: “You drunken leaders are like babies! How can you possibly understand or teach the Lord’s message? You don’t even listen—all you hear is senseless sound after senseless sound.” Other versions, such as the English Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, and even the New

AS ISAIAH 28 SEEMS TO DEMONSTRATE, “LINE UPON LINE” CAN BE DANGEROUS IN THE WRONG HANDS.

King James Version, simply put quotation marks around verses 9 and 10 without signaling who is speaking.

The Hebrew phrases themselves don’t provide much help: *tzav latzav, qaw laqaw*. William Holladay’s *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, based on the lexical work of Koehler and Baumgartner, defines both *tzav* and *qaw* as syllables “mimicking prophetic speech,”² and states that these verses are the only occurrences of these words in the Old Testament. Most literal-leaning modern versions stay with “precept upon precept, line upon line.”

To sum up, whatever the words *tzav latzav, qaw laqaw* meant in their original context, at no point does Isaiah 28 signal that its author’s intent was to prescribe “line upon line” as a principle of Bible

teaching. One possibility might be that the drunken leaders might be using those words to scornfully mimic the utterances of God’s true prophets who are rebuking them. Another possibility is that these leaders actually prefer—and use—a haphazard “line upon line” hermeneutic, which enables them to manipulate Scripture to their own ends.

In any event, “line upon line” does them no good. Verse 13 shows that “line upon line” actually becomes their undoing. From the ESV: “And the word of the LORD will be to them precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little, that they may go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.”³

Embedded between those two “line upon line” verses is the heart-cry of a God who cares, who pleads to the leaders to remember their mission: Give rest to the weary (verse 12)—something that the leaders had not been doing. If it’s the case that these leaders have been befuddling the people with a manipulative use of God’s Word, then God will turn this manipulation against them.


A Valid Hermeneutical Principle?

Even though some New Testament writers seem to apply this principle—often combining half-verses from one Old Testament passage with half-verses from another,⁴ it is safer to interpret Scripture with a thoroughly context-based approach.

As Isaiah 28 seems to demonstrate, “line upon line” can be dangerous in the wrong hands. (It’s like the old accounting adage: “Figures don’t lie, but liars can figure.”) If these drunken priests were indeed manipulating Scripture, they were doing so in a way that got between the people and the rest that God wanted for them, which was promised by Jesus in Matthew 11:28. And Satan himself

misapplied a “line” when he quoted selectively from Psalm 91:11-12 to Jesus in the wilderness.

Jesus, interestingly, did not come teaching the legalistic, line-upon-line, rabbi-rule-upon-rabbi-rule hermeneutic that would later produce the Mishnah and then the Talmud. Instead, he insisted that a true relationship with his Father began with the Spirit’s work on the inside, then worked its way to the outside in ethical and moral behavior. And he directly attacked the rabbinic hermeneutic by rebuking its proponents about its dangers in Matthew 15:6: “So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.” The rabbis wanted to impose rule upon rule, but Jesus wants to give us rest.

Seminaries with a high view of Scripture rightly train pastors to avoid topical preaching, in which texts are gathered from many sources to support an assertion, in favor of expository preaching, which attempts to draw concepts and applications directly from intact Bible passages such as chapters, taking primary cues from the original author’s actual flow of thought. I am convinced that this is the safest and humblest way to approach the complex Word of God. 

¹ Examples include The Good News Translation and The International Children’s Bible.

² William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 304, 315.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this article are from the ESV.

⁴ Such as in Romans 3:10-18 and Hebrews 1:5-12, as well as Jesus’ Emmaus-walk exposition of Bible statements about himself.

CONTRIBUTORS



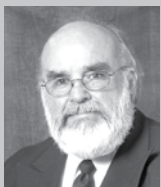
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Hemmings *continued from page 23*

against plagiarism in the 1980s.

Thanks to the continued efforts since the Reformation, we now know that the Bible did not fall from the sky but came from the Earth out of genuine human struggles. We know that the Bible is a sacred literary masterpiece whose profound message and meaning is diminished by proof-text methodology. Literalistic interpretation⁷ does not necessarily render to Scripture the respect due it and may, in fact, have brought disrepute upon the Bible. The Bible is a complex body of sacred literature that demands sober-minded, responsible attention if it is to be truly respected for the marvelous miracle of grace that it is, and appropriated with the integrity that it deserves.

Once we move beyond proof-texting, we can more accurately represent the Bible as the great paradigm of divine grace couched in human history and arising out of human struggles. Out of those struggles—love and grace mingled in the text with hatred, cruelty, and injustice—the voice of God tries

to be heard. An appropriate contextual approach allows us to hear that still, small voice above the noise of human traditions and preconceptions. 

¹ Origen, *On First Principles*, 4:1:6, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), p. 265.

² Luther protests that there is nothing recondite in Scripture. He goes on to say that “many passages in scripture are obscure and hard to elucidate, but that is due not to the exalted nature of the subject, but to our linguistic and grammatical ignorance; and it does not prevent in any way our knowing all the contents of the Scripture.” See John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 172.

³ Origen believed that only those with higher rational powers could understand obscure passages in Scripture. See “Homily XXVII on Numbers,” in Origen, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

⁴ Raymond F. Cottrell, “A Guide to Reliable Interpretation: Determining the Meaning of Scripture,” in *The Welcome Table: Setting a Place for Ordained Women*, eds. Patricia A. Habada and Rebecca Frost Brillhart (Langley Park, MD: TEAMPress, 1995), p. 83.

⁵ See Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages, Book 1* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958), p. 21.

⁶ Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, ed. Gene M. Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 87.

⁷ It needs to be clearly stated that literal rendering is not consistently possible. There must be honest discussion about why some readings may be literal, and some not.

Thompson *continued from page 43*

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1964), pp. 49-50.

⁷ Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford, 1986), p. 117, citing *Retractationes* ii.1 (addressed to Simplicianus of Milan).

⁸ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, 1993, 2003), p. 74.

⁹ White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1890], p. 310. For a full listing of the sequence of Ellen White quotes, see Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991), pp. 135-136. Also, *Escape from the Flames* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), pp. 129-130.

¹⁰ *Joshua: Entering God's Rest*, Adult Sabbath School Lessons, Teachers Edition, April, May, June 1995, p. 82.

¹¹ For further discussion, see Alden Thompson, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (Gonzalez, FL: Energion, 2011), pp. 107-120.

EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY

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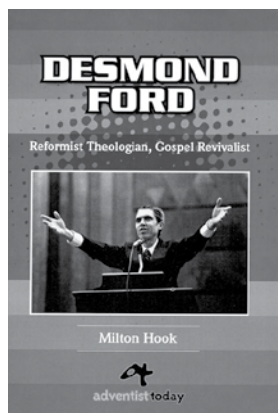


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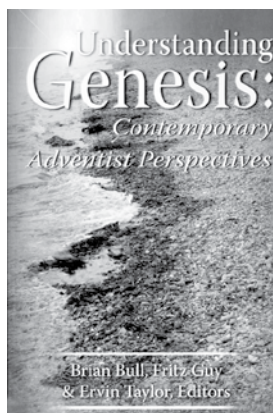
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