

# Why Is Interpretation Needed?



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Presuppositions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Translation and Interpretation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## The Bible and Culture

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Our Sinful and Fallen Nature

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Why Interpretation Is Important

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Discussion Questions:

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

## Losing Four Sons in Poland

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



## Tell the World (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists)

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## TOTAL MEMBER INVOLVEMENT TIME

### *What is Total Member Involvement?*

- ▶ Total Member Involvement (TMI) is a full-scale, world-church evangelistic thrust that involves every member, every church, every administrative entity, every type of public outreach ministry, as well as personal and institutional outreach.
- ▶ It is a calendar-driven, intentional soul-winning plan that discovers the needs of families, friends, and neighbors. Then it shares how God fulfills every need, resulting in church planting and church growth, with a focus on retaining, preaching, sharing, and discipling.

### HOW TO IMPLEMENT TMI TIME IN SABBATH SCHOOL

#### *Dedicate the first 15 minutes\* of each lesson to plan, pray and share:*

- ▶ **TMI IN-REACH:** Plan to visit, pray, care for missing or hurting members, and distribute territory assignments. Pray and discuss ways to minister to the needs of church families, inactive members, youth, women and men, and various ways to get the church family involved.
- ▶ **TMI OUT-REACH:** Pray and discuss ways of reaching your community, city, and world, fulfilling the Gospel Commission by sowing, reaping, and keeping. Involve all ministries in the church as you plan short-term and long-term soul-winning projects. TMI is about intentional acts of kindness. Here are some practical ways to become personally involved: 1. Develop the habit of finding needs in your community. 2. Make plans to address those needs. 3. Pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ **TMI UP-REACH:** Lesson Study. Encourage members to engage in individual Bible study—make study of the Bible in Sabbath School participatory. Study for transformation, not information.

TMI	Time	Explanation
Fellowship Outreach World Mission	15 min.*	Pray, plan, organize for action. Care for missing members. Schedule outreach.
Lesson Study	45 min.*	Involve everyone in the study of the lesson. Ask questions. Highlight key texts.
Lunch		Plan lunch for the class after worship. <b>THEN GO OUT AND REACH SOMEONE!</b>

*\*Adjust times as necessary.*