

How to Interpret Scripture Language, Text, and Context

Lesson #7 for May 16, 2020

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 31:26; 32:46-47; 1 Kings 3:6; Numbers 6:24-26; Genesis 1:26-27; 2:15-23; 15:1-5.

1. More than 6,000 languages are spoken among the world's billions. The complete Bible has been translated into more than 600 languages, with the New Testament or some portions translated into more than 2,500 other languages, as well. That's a lot of languages, for sure. But at the same time, it is still less than half of the known languages of the world.

An estimated 1.5 billion people do not have the full Bible translated into their first language. While there is still much work to be done, the efforts of Bible societies have ensured that six billion people can read Scripture.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Sabbath, May 9.

[Later Update:] The entire Bible has been translated into at least 636 languages and the New Testament into another 3,223 languages or more, so that 95 percent of the earth's population [who can read] can read the Word of God.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 93.‡
2. What a blessing we have that we can read the Scriptures in many different translations from different perspectives in English—about 1200 versions. What are we doing to help the 5% of people who still do not have even a portion of Scripture in their language?
3. Let us begin with some very basic questions: Why was the Bible given to us?
2 Timothy 3:16-17: ¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful [Footnote in the print edition has alternate wording saying: “Every scripture inspired by God is also useful”] for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living, ¹⁷so that the person who serves God may be fully qualified and equipped to do every kind of good deed.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., 2 Timothy 3:16–17). New York: American Bible Society. [Note that Ellen White wrote: “Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable....” in the introduction to *The Great Controversy** vii.1.]‡
4. God loves everyone. He needed a way to communicate His love and His will to all the people in the world. He chose to do that through the descendants of Abraham and placed them at a location which, at that point in time, was at the crossroads of the world. The first portions of Scripture to be written were written by Moses while in exile in Midian. An alphabetic form of writing had been invented just a short time earlier; as an adopted member of the ruling class in Egypt, certainly Moses was well educated and would have known how to write.
5. In New Testament times, the rise of Greek culture brought a new opportunity. Greek became the international language of the world in those days. It was possible for the disciples to speak Greek and write in Greek for the benefit of a very large majority of people.

“There were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.” [Acts 2:5, KJV*] During the dispersion the Jews had been

scattered to almost every part of the inhabited world, and in their exile they had learned to speak various languages. Many of these Jews were on this occasion in Jerusalem, attending the religious festivals then in progress. **Every known tongue was represented by those assembled. This diversity of languages would have been a great hindrance to the proclamation of the gospel; God therefore in a miraculous manner supplied the deficiency of the apostles. The Holy Spirit did for them that which [40] they could not have accomplished for themselves in a lifetime. They could now proclaim the truths of the gospel abroad, speaking with accuracy the languages of those for whom they were laboring. This miraculous gift was a strong evidence to the world that their commission bore the signet of Heaven. From this time forth the language of the disciples was pure, simple, and accurate, whether they spoke in their native tongue or in a foreign language.**—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 39.2.^{††}

6. While the disciples apparently could communicate in many languages, the written language that was read by the largest group of people then was Koine Greek or the common Greek of that time. And that was the language in which the New Testament was written.
7. Moses told the children of Israel that their very lives depended upon studying, learning, and practicing the directions and commandments of God’s people.

Deuteronomy 32:46-47: ⁴⁶He [Moses] said, “Make sure you obey all these commands that I have given you today. Repeat them to your children, so that they may faithfully obey all God’s teachings. ⁴⁷These teachings are not empty words; **they are your very life.** Obey them and you will live long in that land across the Jordan that you are about to occupy.”—*Good News Bible*.^{*††}

8. What are the challenges in translating the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek into a modern language? Every language has words in it with multiple, sometimes rich and deep meanings that cannot be directly translated into any other language with all those meanings attached. Notice how God’s mercy and kindness extend to all of His children in these passages. See 1 Kings 3:6; Psalm 57:3; Psalm 66:20; **143:8**; and **Micah 7:20**.
9. The Hebrew word *chesed* (*mercy*) is very rich in meanings. It is used to describe God’s love, lovingkindness, mercy, and covenant attitude toward His people. There are so many different meanings to that word that whole books have been written about it.
10. Another word with many, many important meanings is the Hebrew word *shalom*. See how it is used in the “priestly blessing.”

Numbers 6:24-26: ²⁴ May the LORD bless you and take care of you;

²⁵ May the LORD be kind and gracious to you;

²⁶ May the LORD look on you with favour and give you peace.—*Good News Bible*.^{*}

Compare Job 3:26; Psalm 29:11; Isaiah 9:6; and Isaiah 32:17.

11. The basic meaning of the Hebrew word *shalom* is peace. But, it can be used as a greeting as in *Shabbat shalom*. One of the reasons why some of these words have so many different uses and meanings is that the entire vocabulary in ancient Hebrew was quite limited.

Therefore, many words were used for multiple purposes and, thus, assumed multiple meanings.

12. What can we learn from the repetition, word patterns, and special meanings from the Hebrew of the Old Testament? The original Hebrew contains no punctuation marks. Considering the limited number of words and the lack of punctuation, the writers using the language structure developed other ways to communicate ideas.
13. Read Genesis 1:26-27 and Isaiah 6:1-3. One of the very important ways in which Hebrew writers could emphasize a certain attribute—of God particularly—was by **repeating the word three times**. So, in Genesis we see that the word *God created* is repeated three times.
Genesis 1:26-27: ²⁶ Then God said, “And now **we will make** human beings; they will be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds, and all animals, domestic and wild, large and small.” ²⁷ So **God created** human beings, making them to be like himself. **He created** them male and female.—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}
14. The Hebrew word for *create* was only used when referring to God and implies creating something out of nothing.
15. In Isaiah 6:3, (*GNB**) we see the word *holy* repeated three times as: “Holy, holy, holy!” When Isaiah saw that vision of God in the temple, he was overwhelmed with the holiness of God and, thus, repeated it three times as had the angels.
16. Read Daniel 3:1-18. In these verses we notice that the idea that Nebuchadnezzar had *set up* an idol for men to worship is repeated 10 times in the *New King James Version*. Thus, he was trying to contrast his worship with the worship of the true God. The words *set up* are obviously used for emphasis.
17. **It is always true that words have a context.** There is the context of the immediate sentence and the larger context of the passage or story in which that word was used. And finally, the largest context is the book in which it was written and even the entire great controversy as portrayed in all of Scripture.
18. It is interesting to note that the word *Adam* can mean *mankind* or it can be the name for an individual. See Genesis 1:27; 2:7; 2:15-23. The word *Adam* in Genesis 1:27 includes all of humanity, male and female. But, in Genesis 2:7, the individual father of our race was called *Adam* when he was formed out of the clumps of clay of the ground, which in Hebrew is *Adamah*. [Notice the play on words.] Thus, *Adam* can mean humanity; but, it can also be the name of the father of our race. In the New Testament as recorded in Romans 5:12-18, we see the father of our race who brought sin into the world contrasted with the *second Adam* who brought salvation to the world.
19. While there are apparently two different creation accounts, one in Genesis 1 and the other in Genesis 2, they can be easily integrated into one marvelous whole. What a contrast that is to the notions of most scientists in our day in which billions of years were required for the creation of man, and they say that man’s existence came about by pure chance!
20. Even the books of the Bible need to be understood in their context. A careful look at some of the smaller books in the Old Testament led one of my fellow students to suggest that we have not only “key texts” and “key passages” but also “key books.” The more we know about an individual writer and the world in which he lived, the easier and better we can understand

what he wrote. While many books in the Bible tell us who the author is, there are also many books in the Old Testament for which we do not have a known author.

21. For example, scholars believe that 1&2 Samuel were written by some of the prophets in David's day. On the other hand, 1&2 Kings were probably put together by Jeremiah and 1&2 Chronicles by Ezra. But, the books do not tell us that.
22. Read Genesis 15:1-5 and 22:17-18. It is very interesting to notice what Ellen White said about the writing of Genesis and Job.

As the years rolled on, and he [Moses] wandered with his flocks in solitary places, pondering upon the oppressed condition of his people, he recounted the dealings of God with his fathers and the promises that were the heritage of the chosen nation, and his prayers for Israel ascended by day and by night. Heavenly angels shed their light around him. **Here, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he wrote the book of Genesis.**—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets** 251.1.^{†‡}

The long years spent amid desert solitudes were not lost. **Not only was Moses gaining a preparation for the great work before him, but during this time, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he wrote the book of Genesis and also the book of Job,** which would be read with the deepest interest by the people of God until the close of time.—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*,* February 19, 1880, par. 14.[†] Compare *SDABC*, vol. 3, 1140.3.

23. What do you think motivated Moses, trained as a prince of Egypt, to write those books while out in the Midianite desert herding sheep? This was before he had been called to his major life's work as a leader of Israel. Did he initially write them for the benefit of his two sons? One preacher suggested that for the first 40 years of his life, Moses thought that he was "Mister Somebody." For the next 40 years, he learned that he was nobody. For the last 40 years of his life, God made him really somebody. What did he write with and on?
24. **While Genesis has been attacked incessantly by critics, we believe and have more and more evidence to support the idea that creation, the flood, the division of peoples into different languages, the history of the descendants of Abraham, etc. are historical accounts of actual events.**
25. For many, many years even after the days of the apostles, portions or complete sections of the Bible were unavailable to the ordinary person. Even if they saw a portion, they could not read it. But in the late 14th century, John Wycliffe determined that the Bible should be written in a language, which we now call *Middle English*, that could be understood by the ordinary people of his day. His translation, however, was from the Latin Vulgate which was itself a translation from the original languages done by Jerome in the late 4th century. Thus, it was influenced by the fact that it was translated by a Catholic and copied for about 1000 years by Catholics. Nevertheless, it was a huge step forward for English-speaking people.

While he was sequestered in the Wartburg Castle (1521–22) Luther began to translate the New Testament from Greek into German in order to make it more accessible to all the people of the "Holy Roman Empire of the German nation." **He translated from the Greek text, using Erasmus' second edition (1519) of the Greek New Testament, known as the *Textus Receptus*. Luther did not translate directly from the Latin Vulgate translation, which was the**

Latin translation officially used by the Roman Catholic Church.

—https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luther_Bible#Luther's_New_Testament_translation.*†§ [i.e., “Luther Bible” on Wikipedia.org]†

26. To accommodate those who wanted to read the Bible in the original language and who had learned to read Koine Greek, Erasmus searched out any Greek manuscripts that he could find in the churches of Europe and put together a Greek language printing of the New Testament. Luther used Erasmus’s second edition from which to translate his German Bible. Many years later, the King James translation committee used Erasmus’s third edition.

In His word, God has committed to men the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience.... Yet the fact that God has revealed His will to men through His word, has not rendered needless the continued presence and guiding of the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, the Spirit was promised by our Saviour, to open the word to His servants, to illuminate and apply its teachings. And since it was the Spirit of God that inspired the Bible, it is impossible that the teaching of the Spirit should ever be contrary to that of the word.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy** vii.1-2 (Introduction).

27. As a Bible-believing Christian, you can ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in determining God’s thoughts and incorporating them into your life whether you speak a language that is widely translated and have numerous translations of the Bible available to you or if you speak a language in which you have only one translation available. What other tools might be available to you to help you understand the Bible better? Are you prepared to respond to those who believe the lies perpetrated by modern critics?
28. Are we as Seventh-day Adventist, Bible-believing Christians faithfully teaching our children as recommended in Deuteronomy 4:9?
29. Words can be powerfully used for good or for evil. Speaking through the serpent, Satan managed to convince Eve to take the fruit.
30. A second problem is that in some countries only a relatively small percentage of the population can read anything. How do you suppose God plans to reach them?
31. Seventh-day Adventists have claimed to be a remnant people. This comes from our reading of Revelation 12:17. There will be a small group of people living on this earth at the very end who will stand firm for the teachings that they have gained from God’s Word. The idea of a remnant might seem exclusivist and even arrogant in our day. But, God has always picked a special group of people to represent Him to the world. See John 16:32-33; 1 John 4:4; 5:4-5; Revelation 2:7,11,17,26; and 3:5,12,21.
32. In fact, the idea of *the remnant* can be found throughout Scripture. One common word for *remnant* is *sh’ār* which occurs with its variations 226 times in the Old Testament. It refers to God’s special people or simply “His people.” But, there are many other words that imply different aspects of the remnant: *pālat*, *mālat*, *yāthar*, *sārid*, and *’aharīt*. If one were to study all of these words, s/he would find that *remnant* can be used in several ways: (1) The historical remnant; (2) A faithful remnant; or finally, (3) The eschatological (last-day) remnant.
33. In the last 200 years of human history, two great discoveries or breakthroughs have added

a great deal to our understanding of Scriptures. The first was the **decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics** by Jean Champollion in 1822 as he was working on the Rosetta Stone. This unlocked all the ancient hieroglyphic writings from Egypt. Many of the geographical places mentioned in the Bible which we had no definite information about are mentioned in hieroglyphics. Second, we learned that there are **many Egyptian “loanwords” taken into Hebrew and the books of Moses**. We learn, for example, that the word *tevah*, the word translated *ark*, is derived from the Egyptian word meaning “box,” “chest,” or “coffer.” As we know, this word is used for Noah’s ark, and it was also used for that basket in which baby Moses was placed in the river.

34. The name for Egypt used in the Bible is *Mitzraim*. This is a compound word taken from Egypt where the word for Egypt was *msr*; the word indicates two lands: Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. The phrase *outstretched arm*, used to describe the protection of God, was a common Egyptian expression of strength.

All of these discoveries point to the conclusion that the first books of the Bible were written during the Exodus generation and that the author was intimately acquainted with Egypt, its customs, and history. Moses certainly would have had the education and background necessary to write the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy, as the Bible often affirms.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 95.

35. Another discovery that has enormous implications for our understanding of Scripture is the fact that the **invention of the alphabet**, originally derived from Egyptian hieroglyphics, took place in the Sinai Peninsula about a century before the Exodus. Thus, when Moses wrote, he could communicate in a language which was much more precise than either cuneiform from Mesopotamia or hieroglyphics from Egypt. God’s timing was and is perfect.
36. When God chose to create man in His image, the immediate context of Genesis 1 indicates that both *Elohim* (God) in His majestic plurality and *Ruach Elohim*, “the spirit of God,” were involved in the creative work. (Genesis 1:1-2) John 1:1-3 makes it very clear that Jesus Christ was also involved. Thus, humanity was created in/by a Relationship and for relationships in order that they might be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. (Genesis 1:28, NKJV)
37. So, what additional helps have you found useful in studying the Bible? Today, we have available extensive concordances such as *Strong’s* and *Young’s*. Those were not available to the founders of our church. They had simple concordances, and they were guided by the Holy Spirit. Review the story of William Miller.
38. Have you experienced the guidance of the Holy Spirit as you have studied Scripture? If you import your own ideas into the Scripture as you read it, does that make you your own “holy spirit”?
39. Do these brief descriptions of a few words from the Hebrew with broad meanings help you to understand something of God’s purpose in giving us the Bible? It should help us to understand the challenges for translators of the Bible.

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