

Methods of Bible Study

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Bible Study: Presuppositions, Principles, and Methods

1. Preamble

This statement is addressed to all members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church with the purpose of providing guidelines on how to study the Bible, both the trained biblical scholar and others.

Seventh-day Adventists recognize and appreciate the contributions of those biblical scholars throughout history who have developed useful and reliable methods of Bible study consistent with the claims and teachings of Scripture. Adventists are committed to the acceptance of biblical truth and are willing to follow it, using all methods of interpretation consistent with what Scripture says of itself. These are outlined in the presuppositions detailed below.

In recent decades the most prominent method in biblical studies has been known as the historical-critical method. Scholars who use this method, as classically formulated, operate on the basis of presuppositions which, prior to studying the biblical text, reject the reliability of accounts of miracles and other supernatural events narrated in the Bible. Even a modified use of this method that retains the principle of criticism which subordinates the Bible to human reason is unacceptable to Adventists.

The historical-critical method minimizes the need for faith in God and obedience to His commandments. In addition, because such a method de-emphasizes the divine element in the Bible as an inspired book (including its resultant unity) and depreciates or misunderstands apocalyptic prophecy and the eschatological portions of the Bible, we urge Adventist Bible students to avoid relying on the use of the presuppositions and the resultant deductions associated with the historical-critical method.

In contrast with the historical-critical method and presuppositions, we believe it to be helpful to set forth the principles of Bible study that are consistent with the teachings of the Scriptures themselves, that preserve their unity, and are based upon the premise that the Bible is the Word of God. Such an approach will lead us into a satisfying and rewarding experience with God.

2. Presuppositions Arising From the Claims of Scripture

a. Origin

(1) The Bible is the Word of God and is the primary and authoritative means by which He reveals Himself to human beings.

(2) The Holy Spirit inspired the Bible writers with thoughts, ideas, and objective information; in turn they expressed these in their own words. Therefore the Scriptures are an indivisible union of human and divine elements, neither of which should be emphasized to the neglect of the other (2 Peter 1:21; cf. *The Great Controversy*, v, vi).

(3) All Scripture is inspired by God and came through the work of the Holy Spirit. However, it did not come in a continuous chain of unbroken revelations. As the Holy Spirit communicated truth to the Bible writer, each wrote as he was moved by the Holy Spirit, emphasizing the aspect of the truth which he was led to stress. For this reason the student of the Bible will gain a rounded comprehension on any subject by recognizing that the Bible is its own best interpreter and when studied as a whole it depicts a consistent, harmonious truth (2 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 1:1, 2; cf. *Selected Messages*, Book 1, 19, 20; *The Great Controversy*, v, vi).

(4) Although it was given to those who lived in an ancient Near Eastern/Mediterranean context, the Bible transcends its cultural backgrounds to serve as God's Word for all cultural, racial, and situational contexts in all ages.

b. Authority

(1) The sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments are the clear, infallible revelation of God's will and His salvation. The Bible is the Word of God, and it alone is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested (2 Tim. 3:15, 17; Ps. 119:105; Prov. 30:5, 6; Isa. 8:20; John 17:17; 2 Thess. 3:14; Heb. 4:12).

(2) Scripture is an authentic, reliable record of history and God's acts in history. It provides the normative theological interpretation of those acts. The supernatural acts revealed in Scripture are historically true. For example, chapters 1-11 of Genesis are a factual account of historical events.

(3) The Bible is not like other books. It is an indivisible blend of the divine and the human. Its record of many details of secular history is integral to its overall purpose to convey salvation history. While at times there may be parallel procedures employed by Bible students to determine historical data, the usual techniques of historical research, based as they are on human presuppositions and focused on the human element, are inadequate for interpreting the Scriptures, which are a blend of the divine and human. Only a method that fully recognizes the indivisible nature of the Scriptures can avoid a distortion of its message.

(4) Human reason is subject to the Bible, not equal to or above it. Presuppositions regarding the Scriptures must be in harmony with the claims of the Scriptures and subject to correction by them (1 Cor. 2:1-6). God intends that human reason be used

to its fullest extent, but within the context and under the authority of His Word rather than independent of it.

(5) The revelation of God in all nature, when properly understood, is in harmony with the written Word, and is to be interpreted in the light of Scripture.

3. Principles for Approaching the Interpretation of Scripture

a. The Spirit enables the believer to accept, understand, and apply the Bible to one's own life as he seeks divine power to render obedience to all scriptural requirements and to appropriate personally all Bible promises. Only those following the light already received can hope to receive further illumination of the Spirit (John 16:13, 14; 1 Cor. 2:10-14).

b. Scripture cannot be correctly interpreted without the aid of the Holy Spirit, for it is the Spirit who enables the believer to understand and apply Scripture. Therefore, any study of the Word should commence with a request for the Spirit's guidance and illumination.

c. Those who come to the study of the Word must do so with faith, in the humble spirit of a learner who seeks to hear what the Bible is saying. They must be willing to submit all presuppositions, opinions, and the conclusions of reason to the judgment and correction of the Word itself. With this attitude the Bible student may come directly to the Word, and with careful study may come to an understanding of the essentials of salvation apart from any human explanations, however helpful. The biblical message becomes meaningful to such a person.

d. The investigation of Scripture must be characterized by a sincere desire to discover and obey God's will and word rather than to seek support or evidence for preconceived ideas.

4. Methods of Bible Study

a. Select a Bible version for study that is faithful to the meaning contained in languages in which the Bible originally was written, giving preference to translations done by a broad group of scholars and published by a general publisher above translations sponsored by a particular denomination or narrowly focused group.

Exercise care not to build major doctrinal points on one Bible translation or version. Trained biblical scholars will use the Greek and Hebrew texts, enabling them to examine variant readings of ancient Bible manuscripts as well.

b. Choose a definite plan of study, avoiding haphazard and aimless approaches. Study plans such as the following are suggested:

- (1) Book-by-book analysis of the message
- (2) Verse-by-verse method

(3) Study that seeks a biblical solution to a specific life problem, biblical satisfaction for a specific need, or a biblical answer to a specific question

(4) Topical study (faith, love, second coming, and others)

(5) Word study

(6) Biographical study

c. Seek to grasp the simple, most obvious meaning of the biblical passage being studied.

d. Seek to discover the underlying major themes of Scripture as found in individual texts, passages, and books. Two basic, related themes run throughout Scripture: (1) The person and work of Jesus Christ; and (2) the great controversy perspective involving the authority of God's Word, the fall of man, the first and second advents of Christ, the exoneration of God and His law, and the restoration of the divine plan for the universe. These themes are to be drawn from the totality of Scripture and not imposed on it.

e. Recognize that the Bible is its own interpreter and that the meaning of words, texts, and passages is best determined by diligently comparing scripture with scripture.

f. Study the context of the passage under consideration by relating it to the sentences and paragraphs immediately preceding and following it. Try to relate the ideas of the passage to the line of thought of the entire Bible book.

g. As far as possible ascertain the historical circumstances in which the passage was written by the biblical writers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

h. Determine the literary type the author is using. Some biblical material is composed of parables, proverbs, allegories, psalms, and apocalyptic prophecies. Since many biblical writers presented much of their material as poetry, it is helpful to use a version of the Bible that presents this material in poetic style, for passages employing imagery are not to be interpreted in the same manner as prose.

i. Recognize that a given biblical text may not conform in every detail to present-day literary categories. Be cautious not to force these categories in interpreting the meaning of the biblical text. It is a human tendency to find what one is looking for, even when the author did not intend such.

j. Take note of grammar and sentence construction in order to discover the author's meaning. Study the key words of the passage by comparing their use in other parts of the Bible by means of a concordance and with the help of biblical lexicons and dictionaries.

k. In connection with the study of the biblical text, explore the historical and cultural factors. Archaeology, anthropology, and history may contribute to understanding the meaning of the text.

l. Seventh-day Adventists believe that God inspired Ellen G. White. Therefore, her expositions on any given Bible passage offer an inspired guide to the meaning of texts without exhausting their meaning or preempting the task of exegesis (for example, see *Evangelism*, 256; *The Great Controversy*, 193, 595; *Testimonies*, vol. 5, pp. 665, 682, 707-708; *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 33-35).

m. After studying as outlined above, turn to various commentaries and secondary helps such as scholarly works to see how others have dealt with the passage. Then carefully evaluate the different viewpoints expressed from the standpoint of Scripture as a whole.

n. In interpreting prophecy keep in mind that:

(1) The Bible claims God's power to predict the future (Isa 46:10).

(2) Prophecy has a moral purpose. It was not written merely to satisfy curiosity about the future. Some of the purposes of prophecy are to strengthen faith (John 14:29) and to promote holy living and readiness for the Advent (Matt 24:44; Rev 22:7, 10, 11).

(3) The focus of much prophecy is on Christ (both His first and second advents), the church, and the end-time.

(4) The norms for interpreting prophecy are found within the Bible itself: The Bible notes time prophecies and their historical fulfillments; the New Testament cites specific fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah; and the Old Testament itself presents individuals and events as types of the Messiah.

(5) In the New Testament application of Old Testament prophecies, some literal names become spiritual: for example, Israel represents the church, Babylon apostate religion, etc.

(6) There are two general types of prophetic writings: nonapocalyptic prophecy as found in Isaiah and Jeremiah, and apocalyptic prophecy as found in Daniel and the Revelation. These differing types have different characteristics:

(i) Nonapocalyptic prophecy addresses God's people; apocalyptic is more universal in scope.

(ii) Nonapocalyptic prophecy often is conditional in nature, setting forth to God's people the alternatives of blessing for obedience and curses for disobedience; apocalyptic emphasizes the sovereignty of God and His control over history.

(iii) Nonapocalyptic prophecy often leaps from the local crisis to the end-time day of the Lord; apocalyptic prophecy presents the course of history from the time of the prophet to the end of the world.

(iv) Time prophecies in nonapocalyptic prophecy generally are long, for example, 400 years of Israel's servitude (Gen. 15:13) and 70 years of Babylonian captivity (Jer. 25:12). Time prophecies in apocalyptic prophecy generally are phrased in short terms, for example, 10 days (Rev. 2:10) or 42 months (Rev. 13:5). Apocalyptic time periods stand symbolically for longer periods of actual time.

(7) Apocalyptic prophecy is highly symbolic and should be interpreted accordingly. In interpreting symbols, the following methods may be used:

(i) Look for interpretations (explicit or implicit) within the passage itself (for example, Dan. 8:20, 21; Rev. 1:20).

(ii) Look for interpretations elsewhere in the book or in other writings by the same author.

(iii) Using a concordance, study the use of symbols in other parts of Scripture.

(iv) A study of ancient Near Eastern documents may throw light on the meaning of symbols, although scriptural use may alter those meanings.

(8) The literary structure of a book often is an aid to interpreting it. The parallel nature of Daniel's prophecies is an example.

o. Parallel accounts in Scripture sometimes present differences in detail and emphasis (for example, cf. Matt 21:33, 34; Mark 12:1-11; and Luke 20:9-18; or 2 Kings 18-20 with 2 Chron. 32). When studying such passages, first examine them carefully to be sure that the parallels actually are referring to the same historical event. For example, many of Jesus' parables may have been given on different occasions to different audiences and with different wording.

In cases where there appear to be differences in parallel accounts, one should recognize that the total message of the Bible is the synthesis of all of its parts. Each book or writer communicates that which the Spirit has led him to write. Each makes his own special contribution to the richness, diversity, and variety of Scripture (*The Great Controversy*, v, vi). The reader must allow each Bible writer to emerge and be heard while at the same time recognizing the basic unity of the divine self-disclosure.

When parallel passages seem to indicate discrepancy or contradiction, look for the underlying harmony. Keep in mind that dissimilarities may be due to minor errors of copyists (*Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 16), or may be the result of differing emphases and choice of materials of various authors who wrote under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit for different audiences under different circumstances (*Selected Messages*, Book 1, pp. 21, 22; *The Great Controversy*, vi).

It may prove impossible to reconcile minor dissimilarities in detail which may be irrelevant to the main and clear message of the passage. In some cases judgment may have to be suspended until more information and better evidence are available to resolve a seeming discrepancy.

p. The Scriptures were written for the practical purpose of revealing the will of God to the human family. However, in order not to misconstrue certain kinds of statements, it is important to recognize that they were addressed to peoples of Eastern cultures and expressed in their thought patterns.

Expressions such as "the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh" (Ex. 9:12) or "an evil spirit from God . . ." (1 Sam 16:15), the imprecatory psalms, or the "three days and three nights" of Jonah as compared with Christ's death (Matt. 12:40), commonly are misunderstood because they are interpreted today from a different viewpoint.

A background knowledge of Near Eastern culture is indispensable for understanding such expressions. 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.

Another aspect of Scripture that troubles the modern mind is the divine command to Israel to engage in war and execute entire nations. Israel originally was organized as a theocracy, a civil government through which God ruled directly (Gen. 18:25). Such a theocratic state was unique. It no longer exists and cannot be regarded as a direct model for Christian practice.

The Scriptures record that God accepted persons whose experiences and statements were not in harmony with the spiritual principles of the Bible as a whole. For example, we may cite incidents relating to the use of alcohol, polygamy, divorce, and slavery. Although condemnation of such deeply ingrained social customs is not explicit, God did not necessarily endorse or approve all that He permitted and bore with in the lives of the patriarchs and in Israel. Jesus made this clear in His statement with regard to divorce (Matt 19:4-6, 8).

The spirit of the Scriptures is one of restoration. God works patiently to elevate fallen humanity from the depths of sin to the divine ideal. Consequently, we must not accept as models the actions of sinful men as recorded in the Bible.

The Scriptures represent the unfolding of God's revelation to man. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, for example, enlarges and expands certain Old Testament concepts. Christ Himself is the ultimate revelation of God's character to humanity (Heb. 1:1-3).

While there is an overarching unity in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and while all Scripture is equally inspired, God chose to reveal Himself to and through human individuals and to meet them where they were in terms of spiritual and intellectual endowments. God Himself does not change, but He progressively unfolded His revelation to men as they were able to grasp it (John 16:12; *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 945; *Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 21). Every experience or statement of Scripture is a divinely inspired record, but not every statement or experience is necessarily normative for Christian behavior today. Both the spirit and the letter of Scripture must be understood (1 Cor. 10:6-13; *The Desire of Ages*, 150; *Testimonies*, vol. 4, pp. 10-12).

q. As the final goal, make application of the text. Ask such questions as, "What is the message and purpose God intends to convey through Scripture?" "What meaning does this text have for me?" "How does it apply to my situation and circumstances today?" In doing so, recognize that although many biblical passages had local significance, nonetheless they contain timeless principles applicable to every age and culture.

5. Conclusion

In the "Introduction" to *The Great Controversy* Ellen G. White wrote:

The Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." John 1:14. (p. vi)

As it is impossible for those who do not accept Christ's divinity to understand the purpose of His incarnation, it is also impossible for those who see the Bible merely as a human book to understand its message, however careful and rigorous their methods.

Even Christian scholars who accept the divine-human nature of Scripture, but whose methodological approaches cause them to dwell largely on its human aspects, risk emptying the biblical message of its power by relegating it to the background while concentrating on the medium. They forget that medium and message are inseparable and that the medium without the message is as an empty shell that cannot address the vital spiritual needs of humankind.

A committed Christian will use only those methods that are able to do full justice to the dual, inseparable nature of Scripture, enhance his ability to understand and apply its message, and strengthen faith.

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