



Reflections

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Transmission and Preservation of the Biblical Text

BY EKKEHARDT MUELLER

Some people have been perplexed by the difference in translation of various Bible texts as well as some additions or deletions of parts of verses in Scripture. In order to evaluate these claims we need to understand how biblical texts were preserved and transmitted. This brief overview intends to provide some basic concepts with which to respond to such irritations. Given space constraints, the present study addresses the issue from the perspective of the New Testament.

At the outset we should keep in mind that the NT documents were written in a brief period of a few decades instead of more than a millennium, as was the case with the Old Testament. We also do not have autographs but only copies, which were preserved in papyrus and animal skins (parchment). The NT books had to be copied not only because the material used for writing was deteriorating but also because Christianity grew and the churches needed the writings of the New Testament.

Categories of Manuscripts

Almost six thousand NT manuscripts are currently available. In addition, there are also translations in ancient languages—such as Syriac, Latin, Coptic, Armenian, and Ethiopic—and references to Scripture in the church fathers.¹ The number of Greek manuscripts grows as new documents are discovered. These NT manuscripts come to us in four categories:²

Papyri. They are in uncial script (uppercase letters). Only about one hundred of the papyri have been preserved and found. Most of them come from Egypt where the dry climate is conducive to longer preservation. “These manuscripts are early (second to eighth centuries AD). And most of them have been dis-

covered in the past hundred years. Only nine of the papyri were discovered before the year 1900.”³

Uncials. These are manuscripts written on animal skins, using only uppercase letters. They date from the third to the tenth century AD. About three hundred uncials have been found so far. Only one has the complete text of the New Testament.

Minuscules. These manuscripts use lowercase Greek in a cursive script. There are about 2,850 of them. They date from the ninth century AD onward until printing replaced manual copying of the manuscripts.

Lectionaries. These are manuscripts arranged to reflect the liturgical year and provide passages for daily reading. They can be uncials or minuscules. They are the least important group among the four, although there are about 2,400 of them.

Text Families

Scholars have grouped the large number of manuscripts into three major text types or families. This is not an ironclad decision, but similarities between manuscripts allow for their classification. Although in the past various text families have been suggested,⁴ manuscripts today are classified as *Majority text*, *Alexandrian text*, and the *Western text*.

Majority Text. Majority text is also called the Byzantine text. Lectionaries as well as a large number of minuscules are of this text type. The so-called *Textus Receptus* was derived from this family of manuscripts, but the *Textus Receptus* is not identical with the Majority text. This is important to know because oftentimes the two are taken to be identical. About eighty percent of the manuscripts of the New Testament belong to the Majority text. The earliest members of this family come from the fourth century AD, but most manuscripts are a thousand years or more later than the original manuscripts. They are characterized by “smoothness, conflation (combining two variant readings to form a new reading not exactly identical with either of the two source readings), harmonization of the text (making parallel passages agree), and its liturgically motivated readings.”⁵ This text type dominated Eastern Christianity and was the text of the Orthodox Church that remained with the Greek language, while the Roman

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Church choose Latin. The Orthodox Church also adopted the LXX for the Old Testament, including a number of apocrypha that are not found in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament.

While some Christians treasure the Majority text, others consider it inferior to the other text types. The reason is because this family consists of many late documents and only very few are found among the early manuscripts. This text type is not found in the papyri before the fourth century or in the Ante-Nicene Fathers, and its style is inferior to other manuscripts. K. Aland, whose NT text is an eclectic text and not based on the Majority text, still tries to strike a balance. This text type cannot just be ignored but must be considered as other types are. He writes, “In fact, the ‘Majority text’ . . . may yet prove to hold a multiple significance for the history of the text.”⁶ On the other hand, it should not be assumed that the manuscripts of the Majority text do not differ from one another. “Admittedly no adequate history has yet been written of the Byzantine text—a text which is in no sense a monolithic mass because its manuscripts share the same range of variation characteristic of all Greek New Testament manuscripts.” In other words, the manuscripts of this text family have some common ground, and yet each one is distinct from the other.

Western Text. This type is the least clearly defined. It comes from around AD 200. It is “reflected in the earliest Christian writers in Palestine and Asia Minor... The Western text type tends to be a full text and is especially important where it agrees with one of the other two text types.”⁷ It is, for instance, represented in the Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis also called D.⁸

Alexandrian Text Type. This text type is typically found in the oldest manuscripts, even as early as the second century. It is also called the Egyptian Text or the Neutral Text.⁹ Aland says “its reading tend to be more difficult (thus best accounting for the existence of the variants in other text types) and shorter. Most textual critics believe that this text type, as represented in the early uncials (the one later called Vaticanus and Sinaiticus) and the early papyri, is the best text now extant.”¹⁰ Codex Alexandrinus is part Byzantine and part Alexandrian.¹¹

The question has been raised about why we have so many copies of the Byzantine Text. Because of the sheer number of manuscripts people may be tempted to go by quantity rather than quality. Here are possible answers: (1) Christianity started out with more or less one common language—Greek. The early church fathers still wrote in Greek. However, the later patristic authors switched to Latin. Jerome had already completed his translation into Latin in AD 405, which became the Vulgate.¹² But there were earlier versions or manuscripts too. As Latin became the language of the West, Greek manuscripts became less important. However, the Eastern Church stayed with Greek and consequently produced hundreds of documents. (2) Aland suggests that during Diocletian’s persecution Christians were forced to burn all holy books. This led to a lack of biblical manuscripts. However, soon after Diocletian, the age of Constantine began with a marked change for Christianity that became the official state religion. Therefore, there was suddenly a huge demand for NT manuscripts. Bishops started copying houses. “The exegetical school of Antioch, where students of Origen’s theology and Arians maintained a well-organized center, provided bishops for many dioceses throughout the East... Each of these bishops took with him to his diocese the text he was familiar with,

that of Lucian (i.e., the Koine text), and in this way it rapidly became very widely disseminated even in the fourth century.”¹³ The Koine text is the later Byzantine text. (3) The growth of Islam in Northern Africa hindered the spread of Christianity and even managed to get Christianity mostly extinct in these territories. Bauder suggests that “Muslims often burned Christian manuscripts when they could find them.”¹⁴ This may explain the predominance of manuscripts of the Byzantine text type.

Textual Problems

Variant readings have crept into manuscripts. For some sincere Christians



Reflections

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this may sound very disappointing since, at first glance, it might cast doubt on the reliability of the biblical text. However, this is not the case as argued below.

Although we have a large number of variants, the Bible is better attested than any other book of antiquity. In the vast majority of cases, variant readings are inconsequential. For example, sometimes we find the particle “and” while in other cases it is omitted (Rev 4:10); the apostle speaks about “we” and “you” and in some manuscripts he includes himself with the believers, while in others he does not (1 John 1:4). Most variants arose while copying manuscripts. These variants do not change the theology of the Bible.

In a few cases, slight theological modifications have been introduced, but these manuscripts stand out as odd. Why is this so? At the end of the first and during the second centuries the well-known heretic Marcion created his own biblical canon based on the idea that the God of love of the New Testament has nothing to do with the presumed terrible creator God of the Old Testament. Therefore, he purged some NT books of OT references and eliminated others from his canon. Why do we know that he was wrong? Because of the overwhelming witness of the NT manuscripts. No biblical doctrine is changed because of variants in the manuscripts. By the way, biblical doctrines are normally based not on only one biblical text but are often spread throughout the Bible.¹⁵ Even if one text had been miscopied, the error would be rectified by the others. Aland summarizes well:

When identifying the text type of a manuscript it is all too easy to overlook the fact that the Byzantine Imperial text and the Alexandrian Egyptian text, to take two examples that in theory are diametrically opposed to each other, actually exhibit a remarkable degree of agreement, perhaps as much as 80 percent! Textual critics themselves, and New Testament specialists even more so, not to mention laypersons, tend to be fascinated by differences and to forget how many of them may be due to chance or to normal scribal tendencies, and how rarely significant variants occur – yielding to the common danger of failing to see the forest for the trees.¹⁶

While we have to wrestle with the question of which variant is better and reflects more faithfully the original text, we must not get discouraged. God’s word is reliable. D. A. Carson writes, “Nothing we believe to be doctrinally true, and nothing we are commanded to do, is in any way jeopardized by the variants. This is true for any textual tradition. The interpretation of individual passages may well be called in question; but never is a doctrine affected.”¹⁷ What are the causes for variants in

the manuscripts that we can identify? There are unintentional changes and rarely intentional changes.¹⁸

The unintentional changes are caused by the following scribal lapses: (1) *Scriptio continua*: the uncial manuscripts leave no space between words, leading to confusion and, in the worst-case scenario, to a reading other than the one meant by the author. (2) *Confusion of letters*: Some letters look similar. If they are not written very distinctly or if something happened to the manuscript, the scribe may confuse them. (3) *Dittography and haplography*: by mistake the copyist repeats one or more letter or syllable, or inadvertently omits a letter or a sequence of letters. (4) *Fatigue*: the scribe confuses cases or other things especially when copying continuous script. (5) *Homoioteleuton and homoiarcton*: when words or phrases begin with similar groups of letters, it is easy for the eye to move directly from one group to the other and omit material. (6) *Itacisms*: this is the danger of homonyms being misinterpreted, especially when copying is done from dictation. (7) *Problem of punctuation*: Continuous script does not contain punctuation. A comma or a period in the wrong place can make a great difference (see Luke 23:43). (8) *Change of a single letter*: In Luke 2:14 some manuscripts have an additional sigma on the term *eudokia*. This changes the translation from “On earth peace, good will to men” to “On earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.”

The intentional changes are more challenging. However, we should not have the worst-case scenario in mind right away. Sometimes the scribe was wrestling with a text that does not seem to make much sense; in some cases the original language is so difficult that people try to improve it in order to make sense. Here are intentional changes: (1) *Explanatory supplement*: The scribe is not satisfied to read “the disciples” so he writes “his disciples.” Instead of “he said” the scribe adds “the Lord.” Sometimes devotion is expressed with these additions. “Jesus” becomes “Jesus Christ” and finally “the Lord Jesus Christ.” (2) *More stylistically polished*: the language and grammar is improved. (3) *Harmonizations*: the copyist may find differences between parallel texts and try to soften them. (4) *Use of synonyms*: The scribe replaces words and/or changes the word order. In contrast to the Hebrews, Greeks had sanctity for the content and not the letter—which would then allow for changes in the text. (5) *Tenacity of a reading*: once a reading occurs it will persist no matter what happens. (6) *Mixed or conflated readings*: a scribe familiar with two different readings will combine them. (7) *Major disturbances in the NT text*: They can be caused through theological or pastoral motives. But “major disturbance in the transmission of the New Testament text can always be identified with confidence.”¹⁹ This is due to the other unaffected manuscripts.

We can assume that God guards His Word,²⁰ otherwise His plan of salvation would be spoiled and humans would not be saved. It does not help to have Scripture given under inspiration, and then to allow it to be disfigured and destroyed through human activity. But this safeguarding does not mean that God would not allow for variants in manuscripts. The Bible has both a divine and a human side. Nevertheless, God helps us understand His Word and He does not leave us alone where it is crucial. However, we should not expect that God would bestow special protection upon one manuscript or one family of manuscripts. As E. Glenny says, “it is better to say that He has preserved His Word in and through the thousands of extant manuscripts, and that those who seek truth must compare those manuscripts to determine the correct reading when the manuscripts differ.”²¹

Here is what Ellen G. White says on this subject:

Some look to us gravely and say, “Don’t you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?” This is all probable, and the mind that is so narrow that it will hesitate and stumble over this possibility or probability would be just as ready to stumble over the mysteries of the Inspired Word, because their feeble minds cannot see through the purposes of God. Yes, they would just as easily stumble over plain facts that the common mind will accept, and discern the Divine, and to which God’s utterance is plain and beautiful, full of marrow and fatness. All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth.

God committed the preparation of His divinely inspired Word to finite man. This Word, arranged into books, the Old and New Testaments, is the guidebook to the inhabitants of a fallen world, bequeathed to them that, by studying and obeying the directions, not one soul would lose its way to heaven. . . .

The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language. Jesus, in order to reach man where he is, took humanity. The Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect. Different meanings are expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea. The Bible was given for practical purposes. . . .

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is

that of humanity. . . . The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.²²

Editions of the Greek New Testament

The conflict these days relates to the major Greek texts and which ones to accept or reject. The issue becomes more loaded when no mediating position is allowed for and the proponents become overly dogmatic concerning the absolute reliability of a certain text family. The danger is also to turn probabilities into certainties and judge those taking different positions. W. Pickering has intensively dealt with this issue and clearly favors the *Textus Receptus*.²³ He writes, “If the Scriptures have not been preserved then the doctrine of inspiration is a purely academic matter with no relevance for us today. If we do not have the inspired Words or do not know precisely which they be, then the doctrine of Inspiration is inapplicable.”²⁴ This is not completely unproblematic because his narrow understanding of inspiration seems to lead him to a specific understanding of God’s preservation of Scripture, which in turn leads him to a specific group of documents. “I believe in the verbal plenary inspiration of the Autographs. I believe that God has providentially preserved the original wording of the text down to our day, and that it is possible for us to know precisely what it is (though due to our carelessness and laziness we do not, at this moment).”²⁵ Yet he affirms “against all the assaults of corruption the traditional text.”²⁶ We will look at three texts, the Eclectic text, the Majority text, and the *Textus Receptus*.

Eclectic Text. This Greek text is not based on one manuscript and not on one family of texts. Rather it uses all text types. It is the Greek text commonly used by NT scholars, either in the Nestle-Aland twenty-eighth edition of the *Novum Testamentum Graece* or in the fourth edition of the United Bible Societies’ *Greek New Testament*.²⁷ Both texts are the same, but the apparatus differs in both editions. Decisions on which reading to choose are based on external and internal evidence. This text favors, to some extent, the earlier manuscripts. It differs from the Westcott and Hort text insofar that it is not restricted to the Alexandrian text type but allows other text types to provide input. For instance, the NASB and the NIV are based on the Eclectic Text.

Majority Text. *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text*, edited by Zane C. Hodges and Arthur L. Farstad, was published in 1982.²⁸ It is assumed that a reading is genuine if it is overwhelmingly attested by the manuscripts. “However, the Majority text type is not always united. In fact, there are five distinct strands of manuscripts in this text type, and the manuscripts of this text type often differ on individual readings.”²⁹ The

Majority Text differs from the Eclectic Text in more than 6,500 places. But it differs also from the *Textus Receptus* in about 1,800 places. “No translation is based on the Majority Text.”³⁰

Aland seems to suggest that with the later NT manuscripts the influence of the church as a structuring agent has increased and that before the fourth century there was more freedom. Therefore, one has to expect more uniformity from the fourth century onward:

Major revisions of Greek manuscripts must certainly have occurred toward the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth century. In neither of these instances was the primary motivation of the revision philological. It was prompted rather by ecclesiastical theological interests. . . . The text of the early period of the third/fourth century was, then in effect, a text not yet channeled into types, because until the beginning of the fourth century the churches still lacked the institutional organization required to produce one.³¹

Textus Receptus. In 1633, this title was given to the text originally published by Erasmus of Rotterdam, a Catholic priest and humanist. This text was edited a number of times by him as well as by others. The first edition rested only on seven manuscripts and was quickly thrown together. The manuscripts were late, coming from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries. None of them contained the entire New Testament. For Revelation he had only one manuscript that he edited. Occasionally, he introduced words from the Latin into the Greek text. Under pressure he also included the *Comma Johanneum* (addition in 1 John 5:7) into the Greek text, which according to his and our conviction did not belong there.

As already mentioned, the *Textus Receptus* differs in many places from the Majority Text and is based on only a few manuscripts instead of hundreds and thousands. It has produced Greek readings that were not present before 1516. The *Textus Receptus* was also edited by Stephanus, Beza, and the Elzevirs. But the development in the *Textus Receptus* from Erasmus to Stephanus to Beza to the Elzevirs makes inadmissible the claim of inspiration or perfect preservation for the *Textus Receptus*. The history of the *Textus Receptus* leaves no doubt that its text has changed many times. This is a major problem for those who would claim that it exactly represents the originals.³²

In addition, the King James Version was not only based on the *Textus Receptus* but also on other manuscripts, and it underwent revisions so that the present KJV differs substantially from the 1611 edition. There-

fore, the claim that the KJV as a translation is inspired and yet has errors that should be changed is embarrassing for KJV-adherents. The next question would be: “If it has been changed, which edition is the inspired edition?”³³ Glenny even claims that the modern *Textus Receptus* is also a sort of an eclectic text.³⁴ It is markedly different from the original editions.

How do Bible Scholars Deal with the Different Readings? Our study so far has shown what some of the issues are with regard to NT manuscripts. Here so-called textual criticism comes in to help with a solution of the problems. Textual criticism is distinct from what Ellen G. White rejects and calls “higher criticism.”³⁵ Glenny defines textual criticism this way:

Textual criticism . . . is the study of the copies and translations of any written composition of which the autograph (the original) is unknown for the purpose of determining as closely as possible the original text.³⁶

Modern Translations

Next, the question arises as to which translation(s) one should choose. Which is the best translation? This question is not easy to answer. It depends on circumstances and purpose.

In this regard, we have to think in broader terms. Many people may not have an option. They may have to live with the only translation available in their native language. There may not even be a translation in their language at all. We can assume that even in the twenty-first century many people would be happy to have any Bible at all. So the question about which version to choose is one that affluent people of industrialized nations can ask, having at their fingertips a variety of Bibles. Taking into consideration this broader context may help us see a little clearer what the issues are. To tell someone who has just one Bible that their Bible may not be good enough or, even worse, that it has to be rejected—as some concerned church members may say—would be cruel and possibly rob them of their only hope. While we acknowledge that some translations are better than others, under certain circumstances we should be happy to have any Bible. This puts the initial question in perspective, teaching us to not be dogmatic about this question.

For those living in affluent nations with several options for a Bible translation, the questions may be about which version to use and how the versions differ. We will approach the question of how the versions differ first.

First, they differ with regard to the Greek text of the New Testament on which they are based. There are two major options. One can go for the *Textus Receptus* and disregard or reject all other manuscripts or one

can choose a Greek text that is eclectic and based on more than one text type. In the second case there are more options for translations to choose from. Opting for the *Textus Receptus* to presumably have a pure text is questionable. As shown above, the *Textus Receptus* is based on a limited number of manuscripts and ignores the thousands of manuscripts that the compiler of that text—Erasmus of Rotterdam—did not have at his disposal but that we have today. It also relies on late manuscripts only. Furthermore, the text is not purer since variants are also found in the *Textus Receptus*. Indeed, it went through a number of revisions which should not have been the case, if it were so pure and the only inspired text.³⁷ It is not wrong to have a preference for the *Textus Receptus*. What is wrong is to despise and accuse those who use a translation other than KJV or NKJV.

Second, translations differ with regard to their underlying translation theory. Translation is always a difficult task. And because a translation process can never be perfect, theology students have to study Greek and Hebrew. While the good translators have the “goal to produce the most accurate rendering of the original text,”³⁸ the task is momentous. There is the issue of how to translate poetry and idioms, and how to deal with terms that are wider or narrower in the source language or the receptor language. Does accuracy mean faithfulness to wording and grammar or to content? Sometimes it is an “either or,” and not a “both and.” Furthermore, “must one be most concerned with a word-for-word translation . . . ? Or, does one show greater sensitivity to the receptor language, converting the meaning of the source text into forms . . . that the receptor or reader will more readily understand?”³⁹

Bibles are sometimes distinguished into formal equivalent versions, paraphrases, and dynamic or functional equivalent versions. We will exclude from further discussion the paraphrases because oftentimes they are not real translations but a reformulation of a former translation into the modern language without returning to Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. They are free renderings of the original and therefore also quite open to the interpretation of the respective author.

Formal equivalent versions are quite literal and attempt to preserve word order, sentence structure, and grammar of the original language. Furthermore, the translator tries to translate a term always with the same word in the document. If words are added, they are normally shown in italics. A formal equivalence approach is basically a word-for-word translation theory. Although in modern translation theory this is normally no longer sought for, formal equivalence theory has a place in Christianity, because interpretation is dependent on precise wording. However, a word-for-word translation

can become wooden and at times even unintelligible and therefore has its limitations.

The dynamic equivalence translation attempts to remedy this situation, to reveal the intended meaning of the author. The goal is to allow the reader to come to a better understanding, and read more quickly. Translators following this approach may, for instance, translate nouns with verbs. They may provide a definition rather than a word that is not understood (“propitiation,” “reconciliation,” “flesh”), and may use inclusive language. The possibility to influence the interpretation of a translated passage is certainly higher and the translator must exercise care. Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses and therefore may be both needed. RSV, NASB, ESV, and NKJV belong to the formal equivalent versions. The NIV falls between the formal equivalent translations and the dynamic equivalent versions are represented by the TEV, CEV, and NLT.

So which version to choose? For serious study a formal equivalent translation should be used. Oftentimes this would be the NASB or ESV. For devotional reading the NIV is a good choice. Milliman suggests:

The people whom Christians hope to reach today—the unchurched person, the post-Christian individual, the child, the homeless person—need a Bible that is free of difficult theological jargon, strings of dependent clauses, and college-level vocabulary. Yet they also need one that conveys accurately the meaning of the original. . . . Paraphrases also have a place in the Christian’s library. These are excellent tools for introducing inquiring people to the Bible. . . . In addition, many seasoned believers have had the words of Scripture confront them in a new and fresh way with a paraphrase, or even with a dynamic equivalent translation. . . . Does such a thing as an “all-purpose” Bible exist? Probably not. The NIV might provide the best balance between the literal and dynamic equivalent translation method. . . . Whichever version(s) you choose to own, pick up your Bible and read it! Read it, meditate on it, and memorize it. It is a lamp to your feet and light for your path; it is more precious than gold and sweeter than honey. In it alone, with unmistakable clarity, you will find Him, whom to know is life eternal.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Scripture is the Word of God coming to us in a human garment so that we can understand what God wants to communicate to us. While we do not deny the challenges and difficulties, we do not solely focus on them.

We see the larger picture. We are amazed by the wonderful attestation and transmission of the divine message.

We marvel when we see the harmony and unity in God's Word. And we follow Jesus our Lord, who lived by the Word of God and who challenged us to know our Bible.



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¹ For more information, see Bruce Manning Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 67–92.

² Cf. Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament, Volume 2: History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1987), 21–31.

³ W. Edward Glenny, “The New Testament Text and the Version Debate” in *One Bible Only? Examining Claims for the King James Bible*, eds. Roy E. Beacham and Kevin T. Bauder (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 76. For the importance of the papyri, see Eldon Jay Epp, “The Significance of the Papyri for Determining the Nature of the New Testament Text in the Second Century: A Dynamic View of Textual Transmission,” in *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Origins, Recensions, Text, and Transmission*, ed. William L. Petersen (Notre Dame, MI: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 71–103.

⁴ E.g., the Caesarean Text; see Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism, 3rd edition* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981), 29; and Christopher Tuckett, *Reading the New Testament: Methods of Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 24–25.

⁵ Glenny, 78.

⁶ Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 146.

⁷ Glenny, 78.

⁸ Soulen, 211

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ Glenny, 79.

¹¹ Aland, 50, states, “The same question is raised by Codex Alexandrinus (A). Its text in the Gospels is quite poor (differing only slightly from the Majority text). But beginning with Acts its quality changes remarkably: In Acts it is comparable to B and N., while in Revelation it is superior to N. and even p47.”

¹² Soulen, 209–210.

¹³ Aland, 65; cf. Koester, 41.

¹⁴ Kevin T. Bauder, “Frequently Asked Questions in the Translation Controversy,” in *One Bible Only? Examining Claims for the King James Bible*, eds. Roy E. Beacham and Kevin T. Bauder (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 109.

¹⁵ Glenny, 125.

¹⁶ Aland, 28.

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 56.

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, 2–294.

¹⁹ Aland, 295.

²⁰ This may be indirectly indicated in texts such as Rev 22:18, 19.

²¹ Glenny, 109.

²² Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958)1:16, 20.

²³ Wilbur N. Pickering, *The Identity of the New Testament Text* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1977)

²⁴ Wilbur N. Pickering, “An Evaluation of the Contribution of John William Burgeon to New Testament Criticism,” Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968, 88.

²⁵ Pickering, *The Identity of the New Testament Text*, 143.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁷ United Bible Societies, *Greek New Testament*, 4th edition (New York: American Bible Society, 1993) and Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

²⁸ Zane C. Hodges and Arthur L. Farstad, *The Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Publishers, 1982).

²⁹ Glenny, 81.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Aland, 50–51, 64.

³² Glenny, 86.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 474.

³⁶ Glenny, 76.

³⁷ See Robert W. Milliman, “Translation Theory and Twentieth-Century Versions,” in *One Bible Only? Examining Claims for the King James Bible*, eds. Roy E. Beacham and Kevin T. Bauder (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 135–136.

³⁸ Milliman, 137.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 149–150.

Hermeneutics and Scripture in the Twenty-First Century

BY CLINTON WAHLEN

Significant changes in the scholarly approach to Scripture have taken place over the past several decades. The historical-critical method, which dominated biblical interpretation in the twentieth century, while still employed, is far less influential compared to literary and reader-focused methods. These newer approaches have been widely adopted even among conservative biblical scholars because they often emphasize the unity of the text in its received form. On the other hand, all of these methods *as classically defined* employ a critical approach to the text, which is defined by the “Methods of Bible Study” document approved by the 1986 Annual Council as an approach that “subordinates the Bible to human reason.”¹

It is helpful for us to be very familiar with this important document, as it details the presuppositions, principles, and methods for interpreting the Bible widely accepted and employed by Seventh-day Adventist scholars. It is also unique in serving as a kind of officially

adopted explanation of the Church's First Fundamental Belief, "The Holy Scriptures."² Because of its importance, we will first summarize some salient points before describing and evaluating more critical approaches to the Bible. Finally, we will briefly look at the role of culture and its impact on interpretation and draw some conclusions.

The "Methods of Bible Study" Document

"Methods of Bible Study" represents a succinct statement of the principles of biblical interpretation accepted by Seventh-day Adventists. Historically as a church, we have insisted on the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*—that our beliefs and practices must be determined "by Scripture alone."³ Even our hermeneutical principles have been intentionally derived from observing how the writers of the Bible themselves use Scripture.⁴ Among these are the following:

Regarding the Origin of Scripture:

- "The Scriptures are an indivisible union of human and divine elements, neither of which should be emphasized to the neglect of the other."
- "The Bible is its own best interpreter and when studied as a whole it depicts a consistent, harmonious truth."
- "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."⁵

Regarding the Authority of Scripture:

- "Scripture is an authentic, reliable record of history and God's acts in history."
- The Bible's "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."
- "Human reason is subject to the Bible, not equal to or above it."⁶

One of the most important principles for arriving at a correct interpretation of Scripture is directly related to the attitude with which we come to the task: "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 pre-

suppositions, opinions, and the conclusions of reason to the judgment and correction of the Word itself." Further, "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."⁷

As its name implies, most of the "Methods of Bible Study" document is devoted to delineating appropriate guidelines for the exegetical study of Scripture. "Exegesis," derived from two Greek words (*ek* and *hēgeomai*) means "to lead out" from the text its inherent meaning. By contrast, "eisegesis" means to read one's own ideas into the text rather than allowing Scripture itself to determine the meaning.

For those unfamiliar with the original languages, the choice of which Bible translation to study is an important one. There are three main types of versions: (1) formal equivalence or word-for-word translation; (2) dynamic equivalence or phrase-by-phrase translation; and (3) paraphrase, which attempts to reflect the meaning of a text with different words. Among modern English translations, examples of formal equivalence include the New King James Version, the New American Standard Bible, and the English Standard Version; examples of dynamic equivalence include the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, and the New American Bible; paraphrases include the Living Bible, the Message, and the Good News Bible.⁸ Since the "Methods of Bible Study" document recommends choosing a version "faithful to the meaning" of the original languages,⁹ the best choice for Bible study would be from among the formal equivalence translations.

Other important points regarding how to study the Bible include:

- "Seek to grasp the simple, most obvious meaning of the biblical passage being studied."
- "Recognize that the Bible is its own best interpreter and that the meaning of words, texts, and passages is best determined by diligently comparing scripture with scripture."
- "Study the context of the passage under consideration by relating it to the sentences and paragraphs immediately preceding and following it."
- "As far as possible ascertain the historical circumstances in which the passage was written."
- "Determine the literary type the author is using," because specific principles may apply.
- "Take note of grammar and sentence construction in order to discover the author's meaning."
- "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.”

- Ellen G. White’s “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.”
- “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.”
- More specific guidelines are given for interpreting prophecy, both apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic.
- Parallel accounts should be closely compared, examining them first to ensure that they refer to the same historical event rather than to the same or similar sayings or happenings on different occasions.
- Recognizing that the Scriptures “were addressed to peoples of Eastern cultures and expressed in their thought patterns” is “indispensible for understanding” statements such as the Lord “hardened” Pharaoh’s heart (Exod 9:12), “an evil spirit from God” (1 Sam 16:15), the imprecatory psalms, and the “three days and three nights” of Jonah typifying Christ’s death (Matt 12:40).
- The Scriptures also “record that God accepted persons whose experiences and statements were not in harmony with the spiritual principles of the Bible as a whole.” Examples include “the use of alcohol, polygamy, divorce, and slavery.” God is at work to restore fallen humanity to the divine ideal. The Bible is “the unfolding of God’s revelation” to human beings, with Christ Himself as “the ultimate revelation of God’s character to humanity” (Heb 1:1–3). “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).”
- Finally, “make application of the text.” Biblical passages of local significance still “contain timeless principles applicable to every age and culture.”¹⁰

The document concludes with this important warning: “Even Christian scholars who accept the divine-human nature of Scripture, but whose methodological approach-

es 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.”¹¹

Another way of “emptying the biblical message” is through what could be described as “minimalizing” the text—that is, reducing its content to a minimum so as to make Scripture’s meaning acceptable to the mind of the interpreter. The most obvious example of this in recent times is the minimalizing of the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 down to the bare statement of Genesis 1:1 so that the account only tells us *who* created the heavens and the earth, but not *how* that creation took place. Another example is the assertion that Daniel 8:14 describes God’s judgment on the little horn, not the judgment of God’s people (which is supposedly found only in Daniel 7), so that the content of Daniel 7 and 8 is effectively minimalized down to Daniel 7 alone.¹² Taking a New Testament example of this hermeneutic, the historicity of Acts has been questioned and its speeches considered merely Luke’s invention, effectively minimalizing the entire book to little if any historical value. One final example: some, by defining ordination narrowly in terms of the laying-on of hands, reduce the relevant New Testament material to as little as two verses (Acts 6:6; 13:3). Then even these can be explained away, minimalizing Scripture entirely on this issue, so that the practice of ordination really begins later in church history. Other examples could be given with a similar result: the process of minimalizing reduces the voice of Scripture on a given topic, thereby freeing interpreters to ignore the text and place their interpretations above the text.

Critical Methods for Interpreting Scripture

While biblical studies methods have been somewhat in flux in recent decades, there are two basic approaches to Scripture: (1) a critical approach that emphasizes the human element in Scripture and subordinates the Bible to human reason, and (2) a biblical approach that derives its presuppositions and principles for interpreting Scripture by studying how the inspired writers of the Bible approached and interpreted the canonical writings. This biblical approach has already been described to some extent, based on the “Methods of Bible Study” document. We will look at it further once we have considered methods that take a more critical approach to Scripture and their impact on biblical interpretation.

Presuppositions of Critical Methods

In contrast to a biblical approach, critical methods employ several presuppositions foreign to the notion of Scripture as the embodiment of divinely inspired truth. Common to all critical methods, of course, is the principle of criticism.¹³ Based on the process of “methodologi-

cal doubt” articulated by Rene Descartes, the principle of criticism subjects every assertion to rigorous testing and verification by accepted methods of scientific investigation before it can be accepted and leaves open the possibility of correction or revision of the assertion in light of new evidence or arguments.¹⁴ A second presupposition, and closely connected to the first, is the supremacy of reason and the priority of the secular sciences.¹⁵ Literary approaches to the text, rather than rejecting this fundamental stance of historical criticism and the results derived from it, generally build upon them.¹⁶

In addition to these, the historical-critical method also utilizes presuppositions specifically connected with the process of historical investigation: (1) *Principle of analogy*. This principle postulates that “historical knowledge is possible because all events are similar in principle. We must assume that the laws of nature in biblical times were the same as now.”¹⁷ Closely related to this is the principle of correlation whereby “the phenomena of history are inter-related and inter-dependent and no event can be isolated from the sequence of historical cause and effect.”¹⁸ (2) *Separation of divine and human elements*. The principle of analogy correlated with a closed continuum of cause and effect excludes *a priori* any supernatural activity, filtering out the divine elements and leaving behind the human history and processes accessible to the historical researcher.¹⁹ Only those parts of the Bible that can be scientifically substantiated from history and experience are to be accepted as true. For example, the historical-critical approach would conclude that since no one walks on water today, Jesus could not have walked on water; His healings may merely have relieved psychosomatic illnesses, and so on. (3) *Evolution of religious thought*. While not so blatantly articulated, an important presupposition underlying the critical analysis and reconstruction of biblical materials is the presumed development of religious thought from primitive to more sophisticated ideas.²⁰

Reader-Response Criticism

In contrast to the historical-critical method, reader-response criticism finds meaning *through* the text rather than *in* the text. Based on Hans-Georg Gadamer (and Martin Buber’s conception of revelation as encounter), reader-response criticism centers on the reader and speaks of two horizons: of the author and of the reader. The text represents a filtered reflection of the ideas and horizon of the author. Readers do not have access to the text directly inasmuch as they receive the text through their own filter of ideas or horizon.²¹ The horizons of the author and reader are different, separated by widely different times, locations, cultures, and histories. This gap cannot be bridged completely, but some degree of

understanding is possible through a “fusion of horizons” whereby the meaning of the text becomes actualized in the reader.²²

Reader-response criticism, rather than pursuing truth based on the evidence of what the text is actually saying, focuses on “truthfulness” which needs no demonstration since it depends only on what is understood and defined by the individual reader as true.²³ As a result, meaning is not so much provided by the text as by the individual reader. The focus of such methods is on the reader of the text rather than the text itself; “meaning [is] uncovered in an experience of the reader.”²⁴ Thus, like the historical-critical method, reader-response criticism places the interpreter above the text as the ultimate determiner of meaning.

Impact of Critical Methods on Biblical Interpretation

Both the historical-critical method and reader-response criticism have had a devastating impact on biblical interpretation. The historical-critical method reduces the Bible as the Word of God to merely a human word, shaped by the same historical processes that have shaped other great examples of literature. It also prioritizes information gathered from surrounding religions and cultures as the norms for understanding the Bible. The entire procedure, which dissects the various biblical books into their many literary strands and traditions, leaves the Bible as a fragmented book rather than the harmonious and unified revelation of God.

Reader-response criticism, while focusing on the unity and coherence of the various biblical books, disconnects the Bible from history and removes biblical interpretation from the realm of consistency and certainty. As a result, even contradictory interpretations may be equally valid as long as they are based on an intelligent and coherent reading of the text. Changing the focus from the text itself to the reader of the text has opened the door to a variety of agenda-driven interpretations including Marxist, feminist, and various ethnic readings of Scripture.

In contrast to reader-centered approaches, a biblical approach is text-centered, along the lines described by E. D. Hirsch.²⁵ According to Hirsch, “meaning” adheres within the text itself, based on what the author meant to say by the linguistic signs employed. Because meaning is based on the text, it is retained in the text and is as unchanging as the text itself. “Significance,” on the other hand, refers to the application of the text. It implies a relationship between the meaning of the text and a person and situation in the present. Therefore, while the meaning of the text does not change, its significance may change as the needs and situations change. It is the task of interpretation to identify the meaning of the text through the process of exegesis using the biblically based method described above and then to apply that

meaning to the present.

Applying Biblical Hermeneutics in the Twenty-First Century

One of the clearest passages of Scripture dealing with the hermeneutical principles we have been discussing is Luke 24, which describes two disciples returning home to Emmaus after observing the Passover in Jerusalem. Jesus approaches them and initiates a conversation with them by asking them what they were discussing. The disciples rattle off in quick succession a number of facts:

- Jesus was a prophet mighty in word and deed (v. 19).
- The Jewish leaders delivered Him to the Romans to be crucified (v. 20).
- “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (v. 21).
- The third day, the empty tomb, the women’s story (vs. 21–23).
- The women’s story was confirmed, the empty tomb, no trace of Jesus (v. 24).

Everything these two disciples said was true. They were incontrovertible facts. They could be empirically established. They had facts of history and lines of evidence but, instead of all this leading them to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, it only led them to doubt. Why? What kept the disciples from believing? In addition to the facts, they also held certain presuppositions. The truth of Jesus as the Messiah was in conflict with their established ideas.

Crucial Role of Presuppositions

Two key presuppositions combined with a deduction from the facts of history related to Jesus of Nazareth led these disciples to a logical conclusion. The first presupposition is clear from the fact that they “were hoping” (*ēlpizomen*) that Jesus was the one who “was about to deliver Israel” (*mellōn lytrousthai*). In other words, they expected the Messiah to liberate them from the Romans.²⁶ Their second presupposition was closely related to the first: by definition, the Messiah would not fail (Ps 2; cf. Isa 42:4). Based on these two presuppositions and the fact that Jesus was crucified by the Romans, the disciples reached the logical conclusion: Jesus could not be the Messiah. Upon closer examination, the text itself reveals their hermeneutical errors:

- Their understanding was not based on *all* that the prophets had said.
- Apparently, the problem was not that they had not *read* it all, but that they did not *believe* it all (v. 25).
- Jesus Himself had explained several times that He would die, but the disciples did not believe it (vs. 5–8; cf. 9:22, 43–45; 18:31–34).
- The “third day” should have been an evidence

for faith (v. 21; cf. vs. 22, 23, 11).

Even though these disciples believed the Scriptures, they did not allow themselves to correct their wrong presuppositions and, as a result, they came to wrong conclusions. So Jesus corrected their mistakes and showed them some of the important principles for correct interpretation already discussed.

There is nothing wrong with presuppositions in themselves, as long as they are biblical. The problem with the disciples was that their presuppositions were not entirely biblical. They were based in part on a limited study and grasp of the Scriptures, but also on popular misconceptions. Some of these misconceptions were closely related to Jewish thinking and culture, which raises the issue of how culture and meaning relate and the potential impact of culture on interpretation.

Culture and Interpretation

As pointed out above, the biblical text contains many cultural elements. When these are recognized in the text, how are they to be treated? Can cultural *forms* be separated from the *meaning* conveyed by them? If so, how might that impact interpretation?

The Bible teaches universal truths through a variety of cultural forms, some of which are universal and others that are not. If both form and meaning are universal, then the interpretation is unaffected by culture and there is a *direct* application across times and cultures. If, on the other hand, a universal meaning is clothed in a temporary cultural form, then interpretation must take this into account and the application will be *indirect*. Cultural forms are frequent in Scripture. In order to determine how to decide which are universal and which are not, it will be helpful to look at some examples.

- *Sabbath*. In the case of the weekly Sabbath, form and meaning are both universal. Several lines of biblical evidence make this clear: first, the Sabbath appears as part of the creation narrative (Gen 2:2, 3), before the entrance of sin and before the later diversification of languages and cultures. Second, as Jesus makes clear, the Sabbath was created specifically *for* human beings—it is the only thing God made after their creation—and, as Lord of the Sabbath, He explained by precept and example how it is to be kept (Mark 2:27, 28). Other sabbath days were instituted only at Sinai in connection with the temple and its rituals (Lev 23).²⁷
- *Circumcision*. The first mention of circumcision is in connection with Abraham, who was given instructions that he, all his male descendants, and even servants he might purchase be circumcised as a sign of the covenant God had made with him (Gen 17:10–14), a sign that

was later codified as a requirement of all male Israelites and any non-Israelite who wished to eat the Passover (Lev 12:3; Exod 12:43–49). A number of passages explain the deeper meaning of circumcision as signifying a right covenant relationship—that is, loving God with all one’s heart and soul and no longer being stiff-necked (Deut 30:6; 10:6; cf. Rom 2:28, 29). Like the presence of the temple, circumcision was no guarantee of God’s favor without this right relationship (Jer 4:4; cf. 21:10–12; 22:5). In fact, the time would come when God would treat the circumcised like the uncircumcised (Jer 9:25; cf. 1 Cor 7:18, 19), apparently pointing to circumcision no longer serving as a sign of the covenant. This is confirmed by the New Testament when God instructs Peter by means of a symbolic vision that he should not make any distinction between believers who are circumcised Jews and those who are uncircumcised Gentiles, because God cleanses both on the basis of faith, evidencing it through the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10, 11; 15:7–11) and symbolized by baptism (Col 2:11–13).²⁸

- *Jew-Gentile Table Fellowship.* Peter’s vision depicted a mixture of clean and unclean animals. When God commanded the apostle to kill and eat, Peter’s answer (“I have never eaten anything common or unclean”) reflects underlying Jewish scruples over purity in connection with food and people. The word used by Peter (“common,” *koinon*) is a Jewish technical term referring to clean animals of doubtful purity, here questionable because of being mixed together with animals that were classified as unclean (Lev 11; Deut 14). Through the providential circumstances God arranged, Peter grasps the meaning of the vision: “just as the animals were to be reckoned as clean despite being mixed with the unclean, so Cornelius should be considered ‘clean’ despite his remaining uncircumcised.”²⁹ Therefore, Peter should have no qualms about eating with believing Gentiles (Acts 10:28).
- *Food Offered to Idols.* If believing Jews and Gentiles could eat together, what about food that may have been offered to idols? The apostolic decree, based on the laws of Israel pertaining to Gentiles living among them (Acts 15:29; cf. Lev 17, 18),³⁰ stipulated that believing Gentiles would not eat such food. Paul, in affirming this requirement, clarifies its application based on whether or not there

was an idolatrous intention (1 Cor 8–10): “(1) Jesus-believers were not to eat food in a pagan cultic context; and (2) Outside of a pagan cultic context, indeterminate food was permitted while known idol-food was forbidden.

Paul’s approach to idol-food was consistent with the apostolic decree, but it was a more contextualized application of the principle.”³¹ In other words, the apostolic decree, based on levitical law applicable to Gentiles, was applied in a new setting to address issues not clearly answered by the decree.

- *Baptism.* The Christian ordinance of baptism derives from a Jewish cultural form of self-immersion in water for purification from ceremonial defilement (*baptizō*).³² Because Christian baptism may be culturally offensive in certain contexts, some suggest that an alternate form is necessary.³³ The meaning, however, is inseparable from the form, which transcends the meaning of circumcision in being egalitarian and symbolic of the believer’s being washed from sin, identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and acceptance of Him as Savior (Rom 6). Furthermore, the command is given in a universal setting (“all nations,” Matt 28:19). Therefore, the form is universal and unchanging. In this case, the offense results not simply from a clash of cultures but from a clash of *convictions* of two religious cultures, Christianity and Islam.
- *Slavery.* God did not create human beings to live in slavery. He redeemed Israel from slavery and provided legal protections so that no Israelite would ever be sold into perpetual servitude. However, provision was made for a person unable to pay his debts to work off his or her indebtedness through six years of indentured service (Exod 21:2–6). Even so, these servants had legal protections: they were to be treated fairly, given rest from their labors on Sabbath (Exod 20:10), and set free after fulfilling their term of service. No such provision for servants existed in the church. Through Christ’s sacrifice the door of salvation is open to everyone—rich and poor, slave and free, male and female (Gal 3:28)—and through God’s grace we are all free moral agents. New Testament references to slavery are to the circumstances that existed under Roman law, which both Jews and Christians had to put up with even though “from the beginning it was not so” (cf. Matt 19:3–8). Therefore, Christians

are instructed to treat slaves, in the home and in the church, with compassion as fellow servants of Christ (1 Cor 7:22, 23) because, as believers, we are all slaves, with Christ as our one Master (Eph 6:5–9; Col 3:22–4:1). In the Lord, then, no one is really a slave, but a sister or a brother (Phil 16).

Conclusion

Scholarly study of the Bible is still largely dominated by critical approaches that elevate the human above the divine and subordinate God's Word to the conclusions reached on the basis of hermeneutical principles foreign to Scripture. Even the more recent literary approaches, while focusing on the unity of the book or writing being studied, fall short of a truly biblical approach because they are based on these critical presuppositions. In fact, they often intentionally bring to the study of Scripture ideologies and agendas that hinder rather than help the hearing of God's Word. Barriers to understanding include fact-based investigations divorced from faith, preconceived but wrong ideas left unexamined, and a failure to hear and believe all that God has said.

The Bible writers' handling of Scripture reveals the method we should use in its interpretation, which includes acceptance of the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice and as a trustworthy, clear, and harmonious revelation of God; Scripture as its own best interpreter; and manifesting a humble, Spirit-guided approach in its study. Only thus may we be in the position to reach correct conclusions regarding the meaning of biblical passages and appropriately apply them to our present context.

Historical and cultural elements found in the Bible must be recognized and understood. Scripture teaches universal truths through a variety of forms. Some of these forms are universal and unchanging, such as the Sabbath and baptism. Others, like circumcision, are cultural and therefore of potentially more limited application. Even in the case of circumcision, however, the spiritual significance of its symbolism continues to be relevant for Christians. Unfortunately, some give the impression that there are many examples of forms and ideas in Scripture that are based on cultural mores rather than enduring biblical values. There are actually very few examples of this kind in the New Testament—head coverings (1 Cor 11:3–16), the holy kiss (Rom. 16:16)—and even in these cases, the principles underlying these forms (decorum in worship and warmly greeting fellow Christians) still apply. Interpreters should be extremely cautious in concluding that a given cultural form in Scripture pertains only to a given time or place. In fact, there would appear to be no secure basis to reach such conclusions in the absence of clear inspired indicators

within the horizon of Scripture itself that such is the case because, through divine foresight, its horizon extends far beyond that of the human author to accomplish God's purposes until the end of time (Isa 55:11).



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¹ “Methods of Bible Study Committee (GCC-A)—Report,” *Adventist Review*, January 22, 1987, 18–20, <http://adventist.org/beliefs/other-documents/other-doc4.html>, accessed February 10, 2013. The document was approved by the Annual Council, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, October 12, 1986.

² This fundamental belief states: “The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history. (2 Peter 1:20, 21; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Ps. 119:105; Prov. 30:5, 6; Isa. 8:20; John 17:17; 1 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 4:12.)”; voted at the 1980 General Conference session; <http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/fundamental/index.html>, accessed February 10, 2013.

³ GC 243 refers to “the great Protestant principle that ‘the Bible and the Bible only’ is the rule of faith and practice.” Ellen G. White, RH, January 10, 1888, par. 11–12: “Had the Bible been received as the voice of God to man, as the book of books, as the one infallible rule of faith and practice, we would not have seen the law of Heaven made void, and the swelling tide of iniquity devouring our land. As men wander away from the truth into skepticism, everything becomes uncertain and unreal. No thorough conviction takes hold of the soul. No faith is exercised in the Scripture as the revelation of God to men. There is nothing authoritative in its commands, nothing terrifying in its warnings, nothing inspiring in its promises. To the skeptic it is meaningless and contradictory.” GC 595: “Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain ‘Thus saith the Lord’ in its support.”

⁴ See Richard M. Davidson, “Interpreting Scripture According to Scripture,” *Perspective Digest* 17/2, <http://www.perspectivedigest.org/article/69/archives/17-2/interpreting-scripture-according-to-scripture>, accessed February 10, 2013; Gerhard F. Hasel, *Biblical Interpretation Today* (Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1985), 100–111; George W. Reid, ed., *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2006); Alberto R. Timm, “Ellen White's Prophetic Ministry and the *Sola Scriptura* Principle,” in *The Gift of Prophecy in Scripture and History*, forthcoming.

⁵ “Methods of Bible Study,” 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*; cf. Ellen G. White, “Search the Scriptures,” *Review and Herald*, July 26, 1892, 465: “Many give the words of Scripture a meaning that suits their own opinions, and they mislead themselves and deceive others by their misinterpretations of God's word. As we take up the study of God's word, we should do so with humble hearts. All selfishness, all love of originality, should be laid aside. Long-cherished opinions must not be regarded as infallible.”

⁸The New Revised Standard Version is classified as dynamic equivalence because its widespread use of gender-neutral language departs from the word-for-word approach of its precursor, while the Good News Bible is classified as a paraphrase because it takes the principle of dynamic equivalence to an extreme.

⁹“Methods of Bible Study,” p. 19.

¹⁰Ibid., 19–20.

¹¹Ibid., 20.

¹²That Daniel 8:14 involves a judgment of the people of God is based on several lines of evidence, including the parallelism between Daniel 7 and 8 which enables them to shed light on each other and the use of Day of Atonement imagery in Daniel 8 (on which, see Martin Pröbstle, *Where God And I Meet: The Sanctuary* [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013], Kindle edition, location 2069-2096).

¹³The practice of textual criticism, which analyzes the various manuscripts of the Bible in order to identify the form of the text closest to what the original Bible author wrote is compatible with a biblical approach. It is therefore sometimes called “lower criticism” to distinguish it from other critical methods. See Francis D. Nichol, ed., “‘Lower’ and ‘Higher’ Biblical Criticism,” *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7 vols. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1953–1957), 5:134–189.

¹⁴John J. Collins, “Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?” in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*, eds. William Henry Propp, Baruch Halpern, and David Noel Freedman (Winona Lake, ID: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 2, 7.

¹⁵Cf. Edgar V. McKnight, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1988), 45, speaking specifically of the historical-critical method: “The basic postulate is that of human reason and the supremacy of reason as the ultimate criterion for truth.”

¹⁶E.g., *ibid.*: “The same linguistic and literary principles at work in the case of literary masterpieces are at work in the case of biblical writings” (105); “A literary approach to the Bible [by an “intelligent reader,” 106]... allows—even requires—a view of the text as both an ancient document with original meaning and a living message with contemporary significance” (107).

¹⁷Collins, 2, adding to the principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation, the principle of autonomy: “Neither church nor

state can prescribe for the scholar which conclusions should be reached.”

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1977), 11, 17–18. For a critique of Maier’s own proposals, see Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1977), 66–71.

²⁰An example of this principle in connection with reconstructions of the development of the Ten Commandments is given in Hasel, 91–92.

²¹Cf. McKnight, 141.

²²Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975); Gadamer’s German term for “fusion of horizons” is *Horizontverschmelzung*.

²³Ibid., 265. Similar is Stuhlmacher’s “Hermeneutics of Consent” (83–87), on which see Hasel, 81.

²⁴McKnight, 267.

²⁵E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

²⁶On the use of *lutroō* in the sense of liberation, see BDAG 606.2, citing Ps 118:134 as well as 1 Macc 4:11 and *Ps.Sol.* 8:30; 9:1.

²⁷Further, see Roy Gane, *The NIV Application Commentary: Leviticus, Numbers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 391–395.

²⁸Further see Clinton Wahlen, “Peter’s Vision and Conflicting Definitions of Purity,” *NTS* 51 (2005): 505–18.

²⁹Ibid., 515. See also *idem*, “Did Jesus Make All Foods Clean?” in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, ed. Gerhard Pfandl (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 301–304.

³⁰Wahlen, “Peter’s Vision,” 518.

³¹David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, WUNT 2/304 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 108, cf. 206.

³²The verb is used in middle and passive forms respectively in Mark 7:4; Luke 11:38.

³³For a discussion, see Phil Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism: Contemporary Approaches to Contextualization*, 2nd edition (Waynesboro, GA: Gabriel Publishing, 2003), 203–208.

SCRIPTURE APPLIED

Lessons from Daniel 3

BY EKKEHARDT MUELLER

In Daniel 2 we encountered a visual image that describes the future history of the world as a sequence of kingdoms. Daniel 3 also focuses on an image, but this time it is not an image revealed by God but an image erected by Nebuchadnezzar. This image brings about a crisis.

I. Discussion of the Chapter

1. The Image and Worship

vs. 1–7 *What are the differences between the image in Daniel 2 and the image in Daniel 3?*

Daniel 2

- Shown in a dream
- Revelation of God
- Prediction about the future
- Made of different materials
- God as highest authority
- Not related to worship

Daniel 3

- Real image
- Initiative of the king
- Wishful thinking about the future
- Made of pure gold
- The king as highest authority

- Worship of the image

Daniel 2 indicates that Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom is the golden head. However, it seems that the king was not content to be the golden head. The entire image had to be made of gold to suggest that his kingdom would be glorious, perpetual, and not followed by an inferior empire. In light of his statement in Daniel 2:47, his action in Daniel 3 must be understood as rebellion against God and hubris.

vs. 2, 3

The dignitaries of the kingdom are summoned. Daniel and his friends belonged to the government officials (Dan 3:12), but Daniel himself was not present when the events took place. He may have been on some kind of mission for the king.

vs. 4–6

What would worship of the image express?

- Recognition of the king as supreme lord and submission to him
- Recognition of the king as a kind of god
- Denial of the true God
- Rejection of the first and second commandments of the Decalogue
- Recognition of the Babylonian gods as superior to other gods and the true God

v. 6

Why is the death penalty for the case of disobedience to the king's command announced right away?

- Disobedience is a sign of disloyalty and rebellion and is suppressed immediately in totalitarian regimes.
- Toleration of disobedience would endanger the absolute authority of the king.
- The unity of the empire would be jeopardized.

v. 7

The multitudes worship the image. However, truth is not necessarily found with the majority. It requires courage and strength of character to not join the questionable or wrong decisions of the masses and go against the tide.

2. The Accusation

vs. 8–12

Daniel's friends are accused of disloyalty. There seems to be some sort of jealousy among their accusers and even an indirect criticism of the king's former action to put foreigners, prisoners of war, into governmental positions. The issue is brought directly to the king, and it is before the king that the three friends have to answer and defend themselves. *How are they described by their enemies?*

- They are Jews, foreigners of a different

religion, and therefore people of suspicion.

- In spite of their position (Dan 2:49) they refuse to obey orders and are disloyal. They are also ungrateful to their royal benefactor.
- They are opposed to the king and his gods.

3. Dialogue with Nebuchadnezzar

vs. 13–15 *How is the King described?*

- Extreme furiousness
- Serious intimidations
- Nevertheless willingness to grant a second chance
- Pride and a feeling of superiority with regard to the God of the Hebrews
- Challenging the true God
- Disbelief that God would be able to save the three friends. It seems that in his opinion his gods are more powerful than Yahweh.
- Lust for power: immediate death penalty for alleged rebellion

vs. 16–18 *What about Daniel's friends impresses us?*

- Calmness and equanimity
- Courage and boldness
- Faithfulness to their God
- Readiness to die for their convictions
- Faith in the omnipotence of God
- Submission to God's will, no matter what it may mean
- Their understanding of God does not claim that believers are exempt of evil and challenges, or that God is obligated to save them from all danger. They do not believe they should let go of God in case He does not intervene. They do not believe in a kind of contract between God and them in the sense of "What you will do to me, I will do to you," or "I am giving so that you will give." Rather they have a personal relationship of trust and love with the Lord.

4. Execution of the Verdict

vs. 19–22

In his wrath the king orders the execution of his verdict. In this process his best warriors die. His order to heat the furnace seven times hotter may have been given to prevent the God of the Hebrews from saving His people. The furnace may have been one of the many kilns used in Babylon.

5. The Phenomenon in the Fiery Furnace

vs. 23–25

A phenomenon happens: although the soldiers outside the furnace are burnt, the three men

inside the furnace do not die but freely walk around in the fire, and a fourth person joins them. His appearance is described as a son of the gods or the Son of God (vs. 28, 29 suggest the second option). God intervenes and saves His faithful servants. Early church fathers already understood this fourth person as Jesus Christ. The king is stunned.

6. Nebuchadnezzar's Reaction

vs. 26–30 *What are the consequences of this miracle?*

- The three men are released from their “prison.”
- The king no longer finds fault with their refusal to worship the image.
- He appreciates the faithfulness of the three men, including their unwillingness to compromise.
- Recognizing God as the only true God who can save in such a marvelous way, he issues a command against blasphemy. His knowledge of God increases.
- The three men are promoted.

II. Application

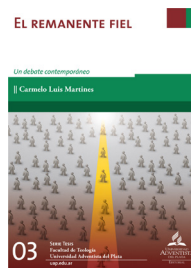
- As it was in the past, so it still is today: The Son of God saves us (v. 25). He makes us His children, if we allow Him.
- Because we are saved and belong to God as Daniel's three friends did, we are faithful (vs. 17, 18). We are obedient in great and small matters. This may not always be easy, but Jesus will help us and will allow us to experience His interventions. Obedience and faithfulness are a sign of love (John 14:15, 21; 15:10).
- Daniel 3 forms the background of Rev 13:11–18. In the last days of world history, this obedience and faithfulness will be needed again. The issue will also be worship: worship of the dragon, the sea beast, or the image of the beast (Rev 13:4, 8, 15) versus worship of God (Rev 14:7). The faithful people of God will be dedicated to Jesus and keep God's commandments, especially the Ten Commandments (Rev 14:12). We want to be part of them.
- Following Jesus does not exclude suffering and, in some cases, even death (Dan 3:18). We should not have illusions. While Christian faith offers us a new and better quality of life, it is not an insurance against distress and suffering in this world.
- However, there will be final salvation. We are waiting for God's kingdom to come. There will be the resurrection of the dead and eternal life without suffering and death (Rev 21:3, 4). Daniel also knew

about this kingdom of God (Dan 2:44). We are looking forward to it.

Conclusion

There is salvation. There is hope beyond death (see Dan 12:13). Even if the entire world is ruined and destroyed, this is not the end. There is hope beyond the “end.”

BOOK NOTES



Carmelo Luis Martínez, *El remanente fiel: Un debate contemporáneo* (The Faithful Remnant: A Contemporary Debate), (Libertador San Martín, Argentina: Editorial Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2014), xii+249 pages, ISBN: 978-987-1378-30-2. Paperback, US\$20.00.

Carmelo L. Martínez (PhD., River Plate Adventist University, Argentina) serves as systematic theology professor and research secretary of the theology faculty and postgraduate academic secretary in the same faculty. This work is adapted from his doctoral dissertation defended in 2002 under the title “El concepto de remanente en la Iglesia Adventista del Séptima: Razones subyacentes en el debate contemporáneo” (“The Remnant Concept in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Underlying Reasons in the Contemporary Debate”). Having a bibliographical-historical, systematic-descriptive, and analytical-evaluative character (7, 8); it consists of six chapters—besides its extensive bibliography and authors index—that are presented as follows:

The first and last chapters coherently introduce and conclude the work. The first chapter presents the background of the problem that some Adventist circles have with the remnant concept and set the limitations of the study. The last chapter, in turn, offers an overview, conclusions, and recommendations for further studies.

The second chapter, “El ‘remanente’ en las Escrituras” (“The ‘Remnant’ in the Scriptures”) surveys the theme in the Old Testament, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran documents, and rabbinic literature. Then it reviews Revelation 12:17, a key verse that has given Adventists their identity (42–44).

The third chapter, “El ‘remanente’ según los pioneros de la Iglesia Adventista” (“The ‘Remnant’ according to the SDA Pioneers”), focuses on three key objectives: (1) to ascertain the biblical concepts of “remnant” held by the Adventist pioneers; (2) to examine how they understood it; and (3) to specify their reasons or theological starting points (51). This is done through a historical

review of the Millerite movement, the Adventist pioneers and the important role played by Ellen G. White in defining the “remnant” (63–69).

The fourth chapter, “Razones teológicas subyacentes en las posiciones tradicional y de desarrollo con respecto al ‘remanente’” (“Underlying Reasons in Traditional Theological Positions and of Development Regarding the ‘Remnant’”), is divided into two parts. The first reiterates “the position of the pioneers on the remnant” (76), and also shows the linkage of the remnant with the prophetic gift—that is, White’s ministry (81, 84). The analysis of the second position argues that “since the 1950s, Adventist theology is in a situation of tension” (126), given some critical trends to review our distinctive doctrines. Additionally, Martines is clear in stating that both positions do not disagree because the development position has “the merit of extending its biblical basis for understanding the remnant’s nature and mission beyond the mere proof texts used by the traditional position” (129).

The fifth chapter, “El ‘remanente’ y las razones Teológicas que fundamentan las posiciones de cambio y de rechazo” (“The ‘Remnant’ and Theological Reasons Underlying the Shift and Rejection Positions”), is also divided into two. The first part exposes leading exponents who support the shift position—Jack W. Provonsha, Charles W. Teel, Roy Branson, Charles Scriven, Bruce Moyer, Stephan Paul Mitchell, and Michael Pearson—showing that “there is an underlying theological reason in all of the authors’ proposals for the position change, namely, a hermeneutic approach based

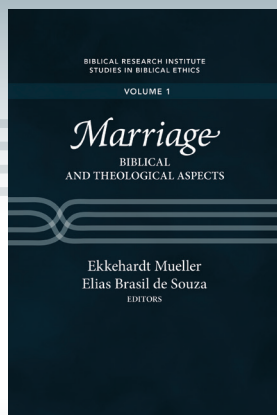
on the historical-critical method to investigate the Bible and the socio-political resources to critique and evaluate Adventism” (163). In the second part, Martines considers three of the most prominent exponents who support the idea of rejecting the Seventh-day Adventist Church as the remnant: Daniel G. Smith, Ingemar Lindén Daily, and Steven Gerald (164). Again, Martines evaluates the arguments of each and concludes that the authors who do not recognize the distinctiveness of the Adventist Church do so on the basis of hermeneutical methods hostile to the Bible such as the historical-critical method and historical and social studies (173).

Martines should be commended for an excellent job exploring the concept of “remnant” from the beginnings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to the present day. Further, the summaries presented in each chapter allow readers to compare the different viewpoints on the remnant. Such comparison indicates that the traditional view of the Adventist Church as the end-time remnant has been questioned in some Adventist circles, given the hermeneutical approach adopted by the critics (177, 184).

Any person committed to the Church’s message and mission—laypersons, church administrators, and Bible teachers—have a lot to gain by reading this important study. For now, the work is only in Spanish, but soon an English translation will be available, extending its influence to a wider audience.

Marling Alomia and Joel Iparraquirre,
Peruvian Union University

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