

Problems in  
BIBLE  
TRANSLATION

A study of certain principles of Bible translation  
and interpretation, together with an examination of  
several Bible texts in the light of these principles.



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## FOREWORD

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During 1953 a General Conference action brought into being a Committee on Bible Translations.

In its work this group gave much consideration to fundamental problems in Bible translation and exegesis. Careful examination was made of certain texts which are differently rendered in various versions.

This report of the findings of that committee is sent forth, not with any idea of finality, but rather in the hope that it may help the reader better to appreciate the principles involved in the work of translation, and that it may enable him more judiciously and effectively to apply these principles in his own study of the Holy Scriptures.

D. E. REBOK, *Secretary*  
*of the General Conference*

## *A SURVEY OF TRANSLATION PROBLEMS*

To use such a questionable reading in support of a doctrinal proposition is to weaken the argument.

Not all differences of reading are as easily settled. Many times several readings appear to have equal eligibility to being considered the original words of the writer. In such cases it is impossible to determine which reading preserves the original thought. Such instances give rise to one translator adopting one reading and another a different reading.

The translator, then, has before him a large array of materials: manuscripts in the original languages, ancient versions, quotations from early Christian writers, displaying literally thousands of differences, the majority of them minor, but some major. From among the variant readings of these "Bibles" (for that is what they represented to the people of their day) he must select the reading he believes to be that of the original writer.

### **II. THE PROBLEM OF ARRIVING AT THE PRECISE MEANING OF WORDS**

#### **The Problems of Lexicography**

The original languages of the Bible, though strictly speaking not dead languages, belong for practical purposes in such a category. There is a form of Hebrew spoken in Palestine today, but it is so far removed in time from the ancient Hebrew, and has been subject to so many modern influences, that its value in translating the ancient Hebrew is somewhat limited. Similarly, even though the Greek language is spoken in Greece today, it has changed so greatly in the intervening centuries that a knowledge of the modern language is of relatively little value in accurately understanding the meaning of New Testament words. This means that we have no living exponent of the Bible languages to consult with reference to the precise meaning of the original words of the Bible. The problem is thus greatly increased, and the way is opened for many differences of opinion.

To ascertain the meaning of words, the translator has available a number of valuable dictionaries of the ancient languages in which the editors have given careful and thorough consideration to every Bible word in the original tongues. But these works are by late authors who had no living representative of the languages to consult as is the case

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with a lexicographer of a modern language. The work is admittedly subjective in many of its aspects. Meanings are arrived at by carefully examining how the word is used in its many occurrences in the Bible and in literature other than the Bible. When a word occurs frequently it is possible by this process to deduce a fairly accurate definition. But the certainty of definition decreases as occurrences decrease. When a word occurs only once in the Scriptures (and there are many such instances) and no occurrences of it in other literature can be found, the lexicographer is able to present only a conjectural definition.

The lexicographer is, of course, aided by examining the ancient versions to see what meaning these early translators assigned to the various Bible words. Ancient commentaries, also paraphrases such as the Jewish Targums for the Old Testament and early Christian literature for the New Testament, show how the various words were interpreted in the period of these writings. However, these commentaries are often considerably removed in time from the composition of the Bible itself, so that the value of their authority to the lexicographer is limited.

Recent archeological discoveries have been of great help to the lexicographer by bringing to light literature contemporary with Bible times, written in the languages of the Bible or in languages closely related. Until these discoveries, such literature as far as the Old Testament was concerned was for practical purposes nonexistent. For the New Testament the writings of Greek classical authors were available for comparison, but the language of the New Testament was not written in the classical style of these authors or even in the literary style of the Hellenistic Greek of the first century A.D. It is now known that the language in which the New Testament was written was the common everyday language of the masses in the first century A.D. The archeologist's spade has unearthed thousands of papyrus fragments written in the dialect of the Greek found in the New Testament, and composed in the same period as the New Testament books. These papyri consist of business and personal correspondence. So valuable was the light thrown on the meaning of New Testament words that an entirely new work has been compiled, called *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated From the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* by Moulton and Milligan. Greek grammars were also revised on the basis of the new discoveries. The result is that the translator

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### The Problem of the Article

Considerable perplexity confronts the translator in attempting to convey to the English reader the force of the article or the force of the absence of it in the original languages. Both the Hebrew and the Greek employ definite articles, but neither uses the indefinite article. When a noun in either language is preceded by a definite article it is always definite and is, in most cases, appropriately translated by prefixing the article. When no article appears in the original languages the translator must decide by other considerations whether the noun is definite. Some of the ways in which Hebrew nouns are made definite are (1) by the definite article, (2) by certain usages of the construct case, (3) by a pronominal suffix, (4) by being proper nouns.

Similarly the Greek noun without the article may yet be definite by other syntactical considerations. When these are clearly indicated no problem exists. The translator simply supplies the article in his translation. But when the Hebrew and Greek nouns are clearly indeterminate, the translator is at a loss to know how to carry across into his translation the inherent significance of such nouns. The Greeks looked at a noun from two points of view: (1) identity, (2) quality. The first they indicated by the article; the latter, by the absence of it. There seems to be no way of transferring the qualitative idea of the anarthrous noun into modern languages. At best the translator must decide whether "the" or "a" better conveys the meaning. Unfortunately the qualitative force of the anarthrous noun is untranslatable.

For example, in the expression "God is love" (1 John 4:8), there is an article in the Greek with "God" but not with "love." If "love" also had the article, the force would be to make "God" and "love" identical, which, of course, is not true except in a figurative sense. Being without the article, "love," as an essential characteristic of God, is stressed. The sentence is equivalent to saying, "an important attribute of God is love." Similarly the expression "God is a Spirit" (John 4:24), in which "Spirit" is without the article in the Greek, emphasizes the thought that the Godhead is spirit and must be worshiped in the spiritual realm. In the expression "the Word was God" (John 1:1) the Greek has the article with "Word" but not with "God." If "God" also had the article, the effect of the statement would be to make God and the Word identical. That is not true, and the purpose of the writer was to distinguish between the two. He had already declared that the

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Word was *pros ton theon*, "actively associated with God" (the force of *pros* with the accusative indicating motion or activity). The force of *theos* without the article is to emphasize quality or nature, and the expression is equivalent to saying that the Word was divine.

An interesting case of the absence of the article in the Old Testament is found in Exodus 20:10 (see p. 138). In verses 8, 10, and 11 it is clearly pointed out which day is the Sabbath by the use of the article—the Sabbath, *the* seventh day. Then the commandment proceeds to emphasize the peculiar nature of the seventh day by calling it *shabbath*, that is, "rest." In contrast with the other six days of the week, which are working days, the seventh day is "Sabbath."

Unfortunately not all translations pay as close attention to the article as they should. Sometimes it has been omitted in the English when it is present in the original and should have been taken into account. For example, Matthew 5:6, translated literally, reads, "Blessed are those hungering and thirsting after *the* righteousness," not any righteousness, or a standard set up by themselves, but *the* righteousness that is the standard of the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matt. 6:33).

The 144,000 are not those who come out of merely a great tribulation, but, according to the Greek, "out of the tribulation, *the* great one," an obvious reference to the great time of trouble just preceding the second coming of Christ, graphically described in *The Great Controversy*, chapter 39.

On the other hand, the article is sometimes unfortunately placed in the translation when it is not there in the original. The statement in John 4:27 does not mean merely that the disciples marveled that Jesus spoke with the particular woman of the narrative, but they marveled that He spoke with *a* woman, that is, with any woman under the circumstances.

A striking illustration of the careful attention paid by Bible writers to the use of the article is found in Paul's discussion of law. As a typical example, the apostle uses the term "law" fifteen times in the discussion of Galatians, chapter 3. In the Greek it appears six times with the article and nine times without. In the English it appears fourteen times with the article and only once without. The question may fittingly be raised, Was Paul indiscriminate in his use of the article? This can hardly be admitted. He was doubtless fully aware of the force of the use and the nonuse of it. When he used the article he

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was pointing to a particular law and identifying it. When he omitted it he was looking at law from the standpoint of its function or quality. Some have naively contended that Paul used the article to refer to moral law, and omitted it when he referred to ceremonial law. Such a position is wholly untenable. However, even though the translator should scrupulously avoid inserting the article where it is absent in the Greek, he might even then not convey to the reader the force of its absence in the Greek. The careful distinction in shades of meaning are among the untranslatable riches of the Greek New Testament which cannot be transferred into a modern language. The translator does the best he can, choosing either the English definite or indefinite articles, the one that he thinks most nearly approaches what the original writer had in mind.

### The Problem of the Genitives

The genitive case in the Hebrew and the Greek is a specifying case and is used to express a number of relationships for which the English language employs other constructions. The English reserves the genitive to express largely possession, so much so, in fact, that it is designated the possessive case. If a genitive in the original is translated by the possessive case in the English, the significance of the original construction may be entirely lost. Translators are aware of this fact and many of them prefer to translate certain Hebrew or Greek genitives by constructions other than the genitive.

This method has an advantage in that it brings to light the possible meaning of many Bible phrases that would otherwise be lost. But it is also pregnant with danger, because the moment the translator selects one of the many possible meanings of a genitive and embodies it in the new translation, the rendering becomes interpretive. He may or may not be transmitting the idea of the author. A subjective element has entered in. If he has selected an interpretation that was not in the mind of the original writer, his translation becomes misleading. Because of this danger many translators have adhered to the principle of translating a genitive construction by the corresponding construction in the new language, thus carrying over the ambiguity and the possibility of misunderstanding that may arise from that source.

Observe the following illustrations of the uses of the genitive: The expression "the love of God" may mean either God's love for us or our

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"Let none think that there is no more knowledge for them to gain. The depth of human intellect may be measured; the works of human authors may be mastered; but the highest, deepest, broadest flight of the imagination cannot find out God. There is infinity beyond all that we can comprehend. We have seen only the glimmering of divine glory and of the infinitude of knowledge and wisdom; we have, as it were, been working on the surface of the mine, when rich golden ore is beneath the surface, to reward the one who will dig for it. The shaft must be sunk deeper and yet deeper in the mine, and the result will be glorious treasure. Through a correct faith, divine knowledge will become human knowledge."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 113.

"In searching the field and digging for the precious jewels of truth, hidden treasures are discerned. Unexpectedly we find precious ore that is to be gathered and treasured. And the search is to be continued. Hitherto very much of the treasure found has lain near the surface, and was easily obtained. When the search is properly conducted every effort is made to keep a pure understanding and heart. When the mind is kept open and is constantly searching the field of revelation, we shall find rich deposits of truth. Old truths will be revealed in new aspects, and truths will appear which have been overlooked in the search."—MS. 75, 1897; *Ministry*, June, 1953, p. 26.

"There are mines of truth yet to be discovered by the earnest seeker."—*Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 204.

"The words of God are the well-springs of life. As you seek unto those living springs, you will, through the Holy Spirit, be brought into communion with Christ. Familiar truths will present themselves to your mind in a new aspect; texts of Scripture will burst upon you with a new meaning, as a flash of light; you will see the relation of other truths to the work of redemption, and you will know that Christ is leading you; a divine Teacher is at your side."—*Mount of Blessing*, p. 36.

"In every age there is a new development of truth, a message of God to the people of that generation. The old truths are all essential; new truth is not independent of the old, but an unfolding of it. It is only as the old truths are understood that we can comprehend the new. . . . He who rejects or neglects the new, does not really possess the old. For him it loses its vital power, and becomes but a lifeless form."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 127, 128.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SOUND PRINCIPLES

Sound principles of interpretation consciously, conscientiously, and consistently followed are essential to the discovery of Bible truth. The inevitable alternative to personal acceptance of the limitations imposed by a code of sound principles is to accord every man the dubious privilege of interpreting Scripture as may seem right in his own eyes.

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In large measure the major doctrinal barricades that divide Christendom, as well as minor differences of opinion between brethren, are due to the uninhibited exercise of this privilege. Altogether too often Bible study has been conducted as if it were a game in which each player considers himself free to make up his own rules as the game progresses, or to play without rules if and when he chooses to do so.

Two pilots of equal experience, provided with identical flight instructions and in control of similar craft equipped with comparable navigational aids, may be expected to reach the same destination, though it be but a tiny coral atoll lost in the far reaches of the vast Pacific. But those who presume to launch out into the deeper things of God's Word without the requisite navigational aids will inevitably find themselves at sea, bound for an endless assortment of fantastic destinations. Electronic engineers and nuclear physicists must comply with the laws that operate in their respective fields of research if they would achieve valid results; likewise, those who set out in the pursuit of eternal truth must recognize and follow clearly defined principles. Sound principles are our safeguard against exegetical anarchy, our guarantee of the certainty of the things we believe, and our assurance of a united front as we press forward in the proclamation of the Advent message to all the world in this generation.

In any field the methods of study are largely determined by the nature and characteristics of the subject to be studied and by the qualifications and limitations of those participating in it. The principles by which Scripture is to be studied and explained are implicit, and often explicit, in the Scriptures themselves—that is, clearly illustrated if not specifically stated. The laws of interpretation are thus determined by the inspired Word itself. They are inherent in its very form and content. For this reason a statement of principles of interpretation requires for its basis a careful study of such matters as the nature, historical background, literary characteristics, languages, and transmission of Holy Writ. The formulation of a code of valid principles of Bible study is thus an objective procedure that must be conducted in accordance with its own inherent principles, and must conform to them. This is necessarily true because of the fact that the principles are themselves a part of the truth whose discovery they are designed to facilitate. A thorough understanding of the explicit statements of the Bible concerning itself, and of the principles implicit

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in its structure, is essential to any serious study of the truths revealed in it. Otherwise, various passages of Scripture are certain to be misunderstood and misinterpreted.

Of equal importance, the searcher for truth must bring certain emotional attitudes, qualities of mind, and technical skills to the quest for truth. These skills are the various techniques and procedures necessary to the gathering, analysis, and organization of evidence, and to reaching conclusions on the basis of that evidence. Also, man is at best finite and fallible, and must know how to work effectively with others in his quest for truth. Alone, no man is sufficient for these things. The following code of principles therefore considers these essential factors in the discovery of Bible truth as they relate to the research worker, to the Bible as a field for research, to research procedures, and to cooperative effort in the quest for truth.

### *Apply Sound Principles*

"The truths of the Bible have again become obscured by custom, tradition, and false doctrine. The erroneous teachings of popular theology have made thousands upon thousands of skeptics and infidels. There are errors and inconsistencies which many denounce as the teaching of the Bible that are really false interpretations of Scripture, adopted during the ages of papal darkness."—*Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 710.

"The most valuable teaching of the Bible is not gained by occasional or disconnected study. Its great system of truth is not so presented as to be discerned by the careless or hasty reader. Many of its treasures lie far beneath the surface, and can be obtained only by diligent research and continuous effort. The truths that go to make up a great whole must be searched out and gathered up 'here a little and there a little.'"—*Signs of the Times*, Sept. 19, 1906.

"Some portions of Scripture are, indeed, too plain to be misunderstood; but there are others whose meaning does not lie on the surface, to be seen at a glance; Scripture must be compared with Scripture. There must be careful research and patient reflection. And such study will be richly repaid. As the miner discovers veins of precious metal concealed beneath the surface of the earth, so will he who perseveringly searches the word of God as for hid treasure, find truths of great value, which are concealed from the view of the careless seeker."—*Review and Herald*, Oct. 9, 1883.

God calls for "a diligent study of the Scriptures, and a most critical examination of the positions which we hold. God would have all the bearings and positions of truth thoroughly and perseveringly searched, with prayer and fasting. Believers are not to rest in suppositions and ill-defined ideas of what constitutes truth."—*Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 40.

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no less importance are the qualities of open-mindedness, perspicacity, diligence, and patience.

The intellectual equipment of the Bible research worker should include:

*a.* Thorough acquaintance with the Scriptures and the Spirit of prophecy.

*b.* Mastery of his own language.

*c.* A working knowledge of Biblical languages, or at least facility in the use of tools available for those not proficient in the use of these languages.

*d.* A working knowledge of ancient history, chronology, and archeology; acquaintance with the areas of history related to Bible prophecy.

*e.* Information relative to the transmission of the Bible, and to the relative value of the major texts, manuscripts, and versions.

*f.* Acquaintance with standard source materials such as Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, concordances, atlases, and commentaries, with works on history and archeology, and with classical and standard Jewish and Christian literature.

*g.* The ability to evaluate source materials.

*h.* Knowledge of and the ability to apply sound principles of research to Bible study.

Full appreciation of the beauty, emphasis, and meaning of Scripture is possible only when it is studied in the languages in which it was written, for much is inevitably lost in the process of translation. Many questions can be answered and many problems solved only by reference to the Bible in its original tongues. Facility in the use of Greek and Hebrew brings the meaning of Scripture into far sharper focus than the use of all the translations ever made. Those unfamiliar with Greek and Hebrew, however, may in large measure avail themselves of the benefits that accrue from their use by learning to make intelligent and skillful use of special tools prepared for those not proficient in these languages. Here, as in all other areas where his own information may be limited, the careful student of Scripture will appreciate and avail himself of the assistance of those who have become competent in these fields.

“Who is sufficient for these things?” Only he who in humbleness of heart dedicates his mental faculties to the Author of truth, to the pursuit

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"He [Satan] desired to enter into the divine counsels and purposes, from which he was excluded by his own inability, as a created being, to comprehend the wisdom of the Infinite One."—*Ibid.*, p. 702.

"Diligent study of the Scriptures imparts 'a breadth of mind, a nobility of character, and a stability of purpose.' Ministers who do not apply themselves to the study of the Scriptures 'are lacking in essential qualities of mind and character.'"—*Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 460.

"Let the youth seek to grasp these God-given truths, and their minds will expand and grow strong in the effort."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 42.

### Beware of Pride and Preconceived Opinion

"The sin that is most nearly hopeless and incurable is pride of opinion, self-conceit. This stands in the way of all growth."—*Testimonies*, vol. 7, pp. 199, 200.

"Men, compassed with human infirmities, affected in a greater or less degree by surrounding influences, and having hereditary and cultivated tendencies which are far from making them wise or heavenly-minded undertake to arraign the word of God. . . . Finite beings, with their narrow, short-sighted views, feel themselves competent to criticize the Scriptures."—*Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 709.

"Some understand the statements of the Scriptures to suit their own particular minds and cases. Prepossessions, prejudices, and passions have a strong influence to darken the understanding and confuse the mind even in reading the words of Holy Writ."—MS. 24, 1886; *The Testimony of Jesus*, p. 17.

"If you search the Scriptures to vindicate your own opinions, you will never reach the truth. Search in order to learn what the Lord says. If conviction comes as you search, if you see that your cherished opinions are not in harmony with the truth, do not misinterpret the truth in order to suit your own belief, but accept the light given."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 112.

"The student of the word should not make his opinions a center around which truth is to revolve. He should not search for the purpose of finding texts of Scripture that he can construe to prove his theories; for this is wresting the Scriptures to his own destruction. The Bible student must empty himself of every prejudice, lay his own ideas at the door of investigation, and with humble, subdued heart, with self hid in Christ, with earnest prayer, he should seek wisdom from God."—*Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 463.

"The minds of men are fixed, sealed against the entrance of light, because they had decided it was a dangerous error removing the 'old landmarks' when it was not moving a peg of the old landmarks, but they had perverted ideas of what constituted the old landmarks."—*Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 30.

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### THE BIBLE AS A FIELD FOR RESEARCH

#### Its Nature, Authority, and Purpose

The Creator of all things is the Author of all truth. Truth is that which may be known of the character, will, and ways of God. The Bible is a unique revelation of divine truth, and constitutes the Christian's only rule of faith and conduct, an unerring and infallible transcript of the will of God for man. Its purpose is to qualify men to cooperate more intelligently with Him by leading them to salvation in Jesus Christ. The Spirit of prophecy is an inspired commentary on the Bible. All else is of value only to the extent that it reflects accurately what Inspiration has revealed. He who comes to a study of Scripture to ascertain its teachings must recognize its absolute authority.

In spite of the differences in background, training, and other personal characteristics of the various writers, the Bible is nevertheless the product of one Author, of one infinite Mind. Through the ages the unfolding of truth has been progressive. Under the effective supervision of the Holy Spirit the Bible thus grew into a perfect whole, an organic unit, each part of which is complementary to the others, and without which the others would be incomplete. That which binds all parts of the Bible together, and in the light of which every part must be interpreted, is Jesus Christ at work to save man. All Scripture testifies of Him.

#### *Recognize the Supreme Authority of the Scriptures*

"This Word . . . 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."—MS. 16, 1888; *The Testimony of Jesus*, p. 13.

"In His word, God has committed to men the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience."—*The Great Controversy*, Introduction, p. vii.

Christ "pointed to the Scriptures as of unquestionable authority, and we should do the same. The Bible is to be presented as the Word of the infinite God, as the end of all controversy and the foundation of all faith."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 39.

"Human reason bows before the majesty of divine revelation."—*Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 700.

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"The whole Bible is a manifestation of Christ."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 390.

### *Recognize the Spirit of Prophecy as an Inspired Commentary on the Scriptures*

"The written testimonies are not to give new light, but to impress vividly upon the heart the truths of inspiration already revealed. Man's duty to God and to his fellow man has been distinctly specified in God's word; yet but few of you are obedient to the light given. Additional truth is not brought out; but God has through the Testimonies simplified the great truths already given."—*Testimonies*, vol. 2, p. 605.

### *Avoid the Temptation to Be Wise Above What Is Written*

"It is presumption to indulge in suppositions and theories regarding matters that the Lord has not revealed. . . . We are not to search into matters on which God has been silent. When questions arise upon which we are uncertain, let us ask, What saith the Scripture? And if the Scripture is silent upon the question at issue, let it not be made the subject of discussion. Let those who wish for something new, seek for that newness of life resulting from the new birth."—*Gospel Workers*, p. 314.

"The revelation of Himself that God has given in His word is for our study. This we may seek to understand. But beyond this we are not to penetrate."—*Testimonies*, vol. 8, p. 279.

"There are men who strive to be original, who are wise above what is written, therefore their wisdom is foolishness."—MS. 16, 1888; *The Testimony of Jesus*, p. 12.

"Do not mix with your teaching human suppositions and conjectures."—MS. 44, 1904; Elmshaven Leaflets, "Preach the Word," vol. 2, no. 1, p. 5.

### **Its Historical Background and Literary Characteristics**

The Scriptures represent, in part, a revelation of truth to which man could not otherwise attain, and in part, a record of God's paternal dealings with men as individuals and as groups, and of their response to Him. But all was "written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." Generally speaking, such parts of Scripture as constitute a direct revelation from God were addressed to His people then living and adapted to their understanding and needs. These, together with parts that constitute an account of God's dealings with His people and of their response to His leading, were recorded for the benefit of future generations.

In order properly to understand and evaluate the Sacred Writings we need to convey our thinking to the time, environment, and circum-

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stances under which the messages were originally given and the records made. To become acquainted with the Bible writers, with their character, personality, temperament, background, and status in life, and with their characteristic modes of thought and expression is of great value to an understanding of what they wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We need to ascertain what they, and the Holy Spirit through them, intended to be understood in the light of the influences under which they lived, worked, and wrote; also, the contemporary geographical, climatic, economic, social, political, and religious circumstances, and the prevailing thought of the time. We need also to know something of the people to whom the messages were originally addressed, of their condition and needs, and of the specific purpose of the messages addressed to them. We must avoid the fallacy of inadvertently attempting to transport the writer and his record to our own day. In considering each statement we need to be aware of the person by whom and to whom it was originally spoken, and to ascertain its original sense in terms of the circumstances under which it was spoken or written. Having done so, we are prepared to make a valid interpretation of the Sacred Record in terms of our needs, and to understand and appreciate its message for us today.

At best, human language is an imperfect vehicle for the expression of human thought, and even more so as a medium for communicating infinite truth. Accordingly, every word and expression of Scripture must be weighed with care lest the thought it was intended to convey be lost or marred. No language has exactly one word or expression, and only one, for each distinct idea. Most words have more than one meaning, and most meanings may be expressed by more than one word. Furthermore, the impression made on one mind by a certain word or expression may differ considerably from that made on another mind of different temperament, education, habits of thought, and experience. Care must therefore be taken to understand the language of the Bible in terms of what it meant to those who used it. An honest and sincere desire for truth and attention to the details of the form in which the thoughts of Scripture are expressed will bring us close enough, for all practical purposes, to the truths it was designed to convey.

A more detailed consideration of certain fundamental literary characteristics of the Bible—its diction, syntax, style, imagery, and

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context—appears in the section, “The Technique of Textual Study” beginning on page 106.

### *Study the Words of Scripture in Their Historical Setting*

“Understanding what the words of Jesus meant to those who heard them, we may discern in them a new vividness and beauty, and may also gather for ourselves their deeper lessons.”—*Mount of Blessing*, p. 10.

### *Recognize the Limitations of Human Language*

“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 stamps of minds are different. All do not understand expressions and statements alike.”—MS. 24, 1886; *The Testimony of Jesus*, p. 17.

“The Lord speaks to human beings in imperfect speech, in order that the degenerate senses, the dull, earthly perception, of earthly beings may comprehend His words. Thus is shown God’s condescension. He meets fallen human beings where they are. The Bible, perfect as it is in its simplicity, does not answer to the great ideas of God; for infinite ideas cannot be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought. Instead of the expressions of the Bible being exaggerated, as many people suppose, the strong expressions break down before the magnificence of the thought, though the divine penman selected the most expressive language through which to convey the truths of higher education. Sinful beings can only bear to look upon a shadow of the brightness of heaven’s glory.”—E. G. White letter 121, 1901.

“God has been pleased to communicate His truth to the world by human agencies, and He Himself, by His Holy Spirit, qualified men and enabled them to do this work. He guided the mind in the selection of what to speak and what to write. The treasure was intrusted to earthen vessels, yet it is, none the less, from Heaven. The testimony is conveyed through the imperfect expression of human language, yet it is the testimony of God; and the obedient, believing child of God beholds in it the glory of a divine power, full of grace and truth.”—*The Great Controversy*, Introduction, p. vi.

### *Discover the Individual Characteristics of the Various Writers*

“The Bible points to God as its author; yet it was written by human hands; and in the varied style of its different books it presents the characteristics of the several writers. . . .

“Written in different ages, by men who differed widely in rank and occupation, and in mental and spiritual endowments, the books of the

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Bible present a wide contrast in style, as well as a diversity in the nature of the subjects unfolded. Different forms of expression are employed by different writers; often the same truth is more strikingly presented by one than by another."—*Ibid.*, Introduction, pp. v, vi.

### Its Languages and Transmission

Through the ages a divine hand has preserved the Bible from destruction, and the transmission of its message through the hands of copyists and translators, against alteration in all respects essential to salvation. We confidently affirm that the Scriptures as they read today are, for every honest seeker after truth and for all practical purposes, an adequate and unerring guide to salvation in Christ Jesus. See chapter 1, "The Transmission and Preservation of the Bible Text."

In value and authority the long-lost original autographs of Scripture, of course, are supreme. Next to these are the best manuscripts in the original languages, as collated in the composite Hebrew or Greek texts from which the various translations have been made. Translations differ in value according to the texts and manuscripts used, to the principles of interpretation followed, to the competence of the translators—to their training, experience, freedom from bias, and attitude toward the Bible as the Word of God—and to the number participating in the work of translation.

Providence has not seen fit to work a continuing miracle to preserve the text of the Bible from errors by copyists and, in some cases, from changes made by supposedly learned men. This is evident from the fact that no two of the thousands of extant ancient manuscripts and texts of the Bible agree throughout, and from many thousands of variant readings that consist, for the most part, in differences in spelling, diction, and phraseology. Occasionally, also, there are additions or omissions of words, phrases, and even longer passages. Often there is no means of determining which reading is the more reliable, though comparison of variants in at least the major texts, manuscripts, and ancient versions generally results in making the original reading at least reasonably certain. Although we cannot always be positive as to the exact original words of a given passage of Scripture, the Greek or Hebrew text of the Bible in its present form is verily the Word of God, handed down from century to century without loss or essential alteration.

There are, as well, certain problems of transmission related to translation. In many cases obscure Hebrew words and idioms have

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Greek Scriptures have been preserved through the ages by a miracle of God.”—E. G. White letter 32, 1899.

### *Be Alert for Errors in Copying, Editing, and Translating*

“I saw that God had especially guarded the Bible, yet when copies of it were few, learned men had in some instances changed the words, thinking that they were making it more plain, when in reality they were mystifying that which was plain, by causing it to lean to their established views, which were governed by tradition. But I saw that the word of God, as a whole, is a perfect chain, one portion linking into and explaining another. True seekers for truth need not err.”—*Early Writings*, pp. 220-221.

“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. . . . 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.”—MS. 16, 1888; *The Testimony of Jesus*, pp. 12, 13.

We should not “lament that these difficulties exist, but accept them as permitted by the wisdom of God.” The Bible “is plain on every point essential to the salvation of the soul.”—*Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 706.

“There are many things apparently difficult or obscure which God will make plain and simple to those who thus seek an understanding of them.”—*Ibid.*, p. 704.

### **Its Predictive Element**

Prophecy is a special revelation of the divine will, and consists essentially of counsel, reproof, and warning. The element of prediction in prophecy is designed to afford a view of the things of time in the light of eternity, to alert the church for effective action at appropriate times, to facilitate personal preparation for the final crisis, to vindicate God and leave man without excuse on the day of judgment, and to attest the validity of prophecy as a whole. History and predictive prophecy being complementary, the student of prophecy must be an equally diligent student of history. A clear concept of the Christian philosophy of history, a true historical perspective, a general understanding of the entire scope of history, with emphasis upon the history of Bible times and other areas touched upon by prophecy, are vital to the valid interpretation of both history and prophecy.

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The hand of God is to be found in all history, guiding particularly the affairs of those nations whose career most directly affects the accomplishment of His eternal purpose. Only when nations directly affect the outworking of His purpose are they given a prominent place in prophecy. At times God takes the initiative in history, ordaining a certain course of events; again, He takes the defensive, permitting evil to run its course more or less unhindered; eventually, He interposes to bring the course of evil to a halt.

History may not be used to interpret prophecy; that is, historical events may not be considered the fulfillment of prophecy simply because they seem to fit the requirements of a given prediction. Rather, Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture; that is, the fundamental nature of the prophecy and its fulfillment must be determined first. Only then may the specific fulfillment of prophecy be sought in history. Isolated historical events may never be forced into a preconceived pattern of interpretation. Rather, objective inquiry is to be made with respect to the details of prophecy and to the materials of history which seem to be related to it. Time factors of prophecy are often basic to a correct interpretation, and may usually be determined on the basis of internal evidence within the prophecy itself. The interpretation of yet unfulfilled prophecy must be limited to the clear, specific statements of Inspiration. In view of the fact that current events ever loom large in contemporary thinking, caution is necessary lest they be mistaken for the fulfillment of certain predictions, particularly of those which tend to be obscure.

Predictions of weal and woe to occur prior to the close of probation are usually conditional in nature, due to the operation of man's power of choice; those following that event are contingent upon the will of God alone and are therefore unconditional in nature. Most prophetic messages were originally designed to meet the specific needs of God's people at the time they were given, but in the providence of God they have been recorded and preserved, and may be of equal or even greater value to the church today. Due to history repeating itself, in principle—similar causes producing similar results—and to the substitution of spiritual for literal Israel in the divine plan, many prophecies have a dual application, that is, a primary one to literal Israel and another, based upon it, to spiritual Israel. Many Old Testament predictions made conditionally to literal Israel will either not be fulfilled at all because

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the requisite conditions were never met, or are to be fulfilled in principle, though not necessarily in all details, to spiritual Israel only. The fulfillment of some prophecies has been progressive, with a partial fulfillment at one time, and one or more successive and increasingly more complete and meaningful fulfillments at later times.

It is necessary to ascertain the prophetic perspective of the New Testament writers. In general, Old Testament prophecy must first be understood in its primary application to literal Israel before the validity of a derived application to spiritual Israel may be established. Only where Inspiration so indicates may such derived applications be made with certainty; where Inspiration is silent, it is well to reserve judgment. New Testament prophecy is often based on historical or prophetic parallels in the Old Testament, either stated or implied, and is usually clarified by comparison with them. See chapter 8, "Application of Old Testament Prophecies to New Testament and Later Times."

### *Watch for Fulfilling Prophecy*

"The New Testament is only the advancement and unfolding of the Old."—*Testimonies*, vol. 6, p. 392.

"There are in the Scriptures some things which are hard to be understood. . . . We may not, in this life, be able to explain the meaning of every passage of Scripture; but there are no vital points of practical truth that will be clouded in mystery. When the time shall come, in the providence of God, for the world to be tested upon the truth for that time, minds will be exercised by His Spirit to search the Scriptures."—*Testimonies*, vol. 2, p. 692.

### *Be Cautious in the Interpretation of Unfulfilled Prophecy*

Prophecies made in the long ago are to be read and understood when the time for their fulfillment approaches. Matt. 24:15; John 13:19; 14:29; 16:4.

"As we near the close of this world's history, the prophecies relating to the last days especially demand our study."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 133.

"The Scriptures are a chart pointing out every waymark on the heavenward journey, and we need not guess at anything."—*The Great Controversy*, p. 598.

"This book [Revelation] is indeed a revelation given for the especial benefit of those who should live in the last days, to guide them in ascertaining their true position and their duty."—*Early Writings*, p. 231.

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### *Be Alert for Conditional Prophecy*

Predictions of weal and woe are conditional upon human reaction to them. Jer. 17:24, 27; 18:6-8; 26:13; Rev. 2:5.

## BIBLICAL RESEARCH PROCEDURES

### General Research Procedures

Research procedures generally followed in the solving of problems apply also to the study of the Bible. In terms of Bible study these procedures may be stated as follows:

a. Make a preliminary survey of the problem, analyzing and defining it. Define significant terms. Set up specific objectives and formulate a balanced, tentative, general procedure for reaching these objectives.

b. Patiently gather all available relevant data, referring to all sources of information that bear upon the problem. Source materials are to be carefully evaluated, as to whether they are primary or secondary, as to the writer's competence with respect to his subject, as to the personal, group, and contemporary limitations to which he was subject, and as to the degree to which bias may have affected his point of view.

c. Make an analysis of the data gathered. Examine and compare it carefully, eliminating what is irrelevant. Determine whether adequate information has been gathered to solve the problem.

d. Make a systematic organization of the data gathered. Look for new relationships between previously known facts and the data gathered. Allow adequate time for reflection and comparison. Make a tentative summary of information gathered, and formulate tentative conclusions.

e. Review the procedure followed thus far, for validity. Are the principles sound upon which each step in the process was based? How certain are the conclusions? Test the tentative conclusions by comparing them with known truth, with the context and general tenor of Scripture, and by submitting them to qualified individuals for review, criticism, and counsel.

f. Make a formal summary of the results of study. State the problem, outline the procedure followed, define terms. Present the data gathered in logical order, with each step in the process clearly stated and its

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relationship to each of the others made apparent. Summarize the evidence and state conclusions.

g. Submit this formal summary to those appointed to review and to give counsel with respect to Biblical research projects.

*Make a Thorough Investigation of Everything Thought to Be Truth*

"We are living in perilous times, and it does not become us to accept everything claimed to be truth without examining it thoroughly."—*Review and Herald*, Dec. 20, 1892.

"Very many teachers are content with a supposition in regard to the truth. They have crude ideas, and are content with a surface work in searching for truth, taking for granted that they have all that is essential. They take the sayings of others for truth, being too indolent to put themselves to diligent, earnest labor, represented in the Word as digging for hidden treasure."—*Review and Herald*, July 12, 1898.

"Thoughtful investigation and earnest, taxing study are required in order for this word to be understood. There are truths in the word which, like veins of precious ore, are hidden beneath the surface. The hidden treasure is discovered as it is searched for, as a miner searches for gold and silver."—*Testimonies*, vol. 8, p. 157.

### The Technique of Textual Study

The following steps suggest a procedure for interpreting a given passage of Scripture:

a. DICTION.—It is desirable to begin the study of any passage of Scripture by selecting its significant words and ascertaining as nearly as possible the meaning the writer intended them to convey. Using lexicons and concordances, trace their etymology, their original and derived, general and specific, literal and figurative meanings. Compare derivatives, cognate words in related languages, and synonyms.

Though of great value and help, lexicon definitions are not necessarily definitive, and may not always reflect the true meanings of words. The actual usage of a word by the various Bible writers generally provides the best analysis of its meaning. At times, particularly with Hebrew words, this may call for an analysis of each instance of the use of a word throughout the Bible. Compare, also, the various ways in which the word has been translated in different versions, both ancient and modern. Determine, tentatively, the precise sense in which the significant words of the passage are used, awaiting results of the study of other aspects of the problem.

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Three characteristics of the language of the New Testament are of particular importance. First, the New Testament was written in Koine Greek, the common language of the people, and classical word definitions (as reflected in English translations made more than fifty years ago) often prove erroneous and misleading. Second, the writers of the New Testament were Jews, who thought in Hebrew and wrote with the background of the Old Testament in their minds. It is therefore important to compare New Testament words and expressions with their Old Testament equivalents. Third, the early church adopted many Greek words to which it gave distinctly Christian meanings.

b. SYNTAX.—Following a discriminating study of the significant words of a passage, attention should next be given to its grammatical import, to the relationship of the words to each other as indicated by their form and their position in the sentence. Special attention must be given to such things as the tense, gender, and number of verbs, to the case endings of nouns and adjectives, to connectives, to the presence or absence of the definite article, to idiomatic expressions, to word order, and to the logical relationship between phrases, clauses, and sentences. It is important to recognize digressions, parentheses, hendiadys, anacolutha, words in apposition, and transitions in thought. A study of diction and syntax affords a knowledge of what the writer actually stated.

c. STYLE.—The literary style often has an important bearing upon interpretation. Special principles apply to the interpretation of poetry and prose, history and prophecy, literal and figurative language. Attention should be given to individual characteristics of the writer. Note whether he follows logical, chronological, or some other order in the development of his subject. Is he diffuse, graphic, or abstract?

d. IMAGERY.—Figures of speech and idiomatic expressions are to be understood in terms of what they meant to those who used them. When such figures as the metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, irony, hyperbole, and paronomasia are used, care must be taken to ascertain the meaning of the thing or idea on which the figure is based, before interpreting the figure of speech.

The language of Scripture is to be understood literally unless the context makes it evident that symbols are being used, or unless a literal explanation involves manifest contradiction or absurdity. The

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interpretation of symbols and figures must be clearly established on the authority of Scripture itself and in terms of then contemporary modes of thought and expression. The interpretation of figures and symbols requires a clear concept of the nature of the things on which the figures are based. No symbol may be interpreted in such a way as to set it at variance with the plain, literal teachings of Scripture. It is important to ascertain the central truth each parable or type is designed to teach, and to avoid attempting to assign every detail of the narrative or type a particular meaning. Subordinate details of a symbol or parable must be understood in harmony with the meaning of its central truth; again, they may prove to be merely incidental and thus of no particular significance.

*e. CONTEXT.*—Every statement of Scripture must be considered in relation to its immediate context, to the entire passage of which it forms a part, and to related passages throughout Scripture. In particular, attention should be given to relationships between teachings in the Old and New Testaments, to the historical background of the statements, and to the objectives of the writer and the line of thought by which he achieves them. Consideration of the nature and organization of a given passage as a whole must precede detailed study of its component parts, in order that each part may be understood in relation to the others, and thus to the whole. Detailed explanations often follow brief summaries. Care must be exercised in determining continuity and transitions in sequence. Chapter and verse divisions are often arbitrary, and there is danger lest continuity be lost in passing from one to the next.

When one inspired writer quotes another or alludes to what he has written, particularly when New Testament writers refer to the Old, they may do so (1) by way of direct comment and exegesis, (2) by way of analogy, or (3) by way of borrowing phraseology to state a new truth. In the latter two instances care should be taken not to make of the quotation or allusion an interpretation of the original statement. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit later Bible writers at times read into earlier statements of Inspiration meaning which would not otherwise be apparent, and of which the original writers themselves may have been unaware. Seeming discrepancy between two inspired statements is usually due to the misinterpretation of either or both.

Belief in the unity of Scripture requires that the statements of one writer be understood in harmony with what all other writers have said

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on the same subject. It is a fallacy to attempt to determine the meaning of an isolated statement, and then require other inspired statements on the subject to be interpreted in harmony with it. Rather, ascertain all that the same writer and other writers have said on the subject before drawing conclusions. Scripture must be compared with scripture; Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture.

f. SPIRIT OF PROPHECY.—Survey Spirit of prophecy comment on the text and on the subject in question. Determine the relevance of Spirit of prophecy statements to the problem. Where the language of Scripture is quoted, ascertain whether it is used by way of exegesis or direct comment on the text, by way of analogy, or by way of borrowing the language of the text for use in a new setting.

g. COMMENTARY.—Refer to what other writers have said on the subject, in Bible commentaries, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and atlases. Refer to special works and to other sources of information on the subject. Bring a fine sense of discrimination to the study of all uninspired materials, for the wisest and most devout men may err. All that is of human origin must stand or fall on the basis of its inherent merits as tested by Inspiration. Ascertain whether the findings of archeology and history cast light on the passage in question.

### Make the Bible Its Own Expositor

“The student should learn to view the word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts.”—*Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 462.

“The Bible is its own expositor. One passage will prove to be a key that will unlock other passages, and in this way light will be shed upon the hidden meaning of the word. By comparing different texts treating on the same subject, viewing their bearing on every side, the true meaning of the Scriptures will be made evident.”—*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 187.

“He [Judas] would introduce texts of Scripture that had no connection with the truths Christ was presenting. These texts, separated from their connection, perplexed the disciples, and increased the discouragement that was constantly pressing upon them. Yet all this was done by Judas in such a way as to make it appear that he was conscientious.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 719.

### Adhere Closely to the Literal Interpretation of Scripture

“Others, who have an active imagination, seize upon the figures and symbols of Holy Writ, interpret to suit their fancy, with little regard