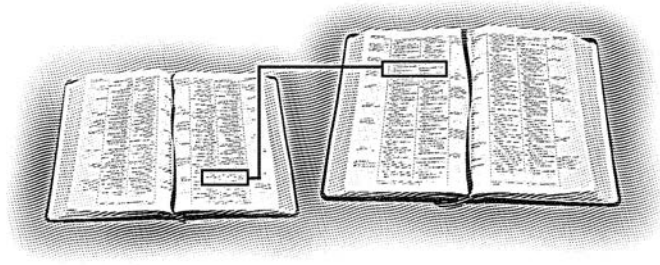


Language, Text, *and* Context



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Deut. 32:46, 47; 1 Kings 3:6; Num. 6:24–26; Gen. 1:26, 27; Gen. 2:15–23; Gen. 15:1–5.*

Memory Text: “Take this Book of the Law, and put it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there as a witness against you” (*Deuteronomy 31:26, NKJV*).

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

An estimated 1.5 billion people do not have the full Bible translated into their first language. While there is still much work to be done, the efforts of Bible societies have ensured that six billion people can read Scripture.

And what a blessing to be among those who do have the Bible in their own language! We often take it for granted, forgetting that not only do many not have the Bible but also that for centuries in Europe, the Bible was purposely kept away from the masses. Thanks to the printing press and the Reformation, that is no longer the case. Those of us who do indeed have the Bible continue to look at how we can, filled with the Spirit, learn to study the Word and come to know the Lord revealed in its pages.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 16.

Understanding the Scriptures

Read 2 Timothy 3:16, 17. For what purpose was the Bible given to us?

The Bible was written as a witness to God's work in history, His plan for redeeming the fallen race of humanity, and to instruct us in all ways of righteousness. The Lord chose to do this in human language, making His thoughts and ideas visible through human words. In redeeming Israel from Egypt, God chose a specific nation to convey His message to all peoples. He allowed that nation to communicate His Word through their language, Hebrew (and a few portions in Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew).

The rise of Greek culture brought a new opportunity, allowing the New Testament to be communicated through the universal language of Greek, which was widely spoken in that part of the world at that time. (In fact, there was even a Greek translation of the Old Testament, as well.) This "universal" language enabled the apostles and early church to spread the message far and wide with new missionary zeal after the death of Christ. Later, the apostle John "bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw" (*Rev. 1:2, NKJV*). In this way, the Bible indicates the continuity of this inspired "witness" and "testimony" from the first writer of Scripture to the last.

Read Deuteronomy 32:46, 47. Why was it so important for the children of Israel to obey "all the words of this law" (*Deut. 32:46*), the Torah, or "instruction"? How does God's Word "prolong" our days? What might that mean in our context today?

Some people not only have the Bible translated into their native language but even have various versions of it in their own language. Others might have only one version, if even that. But regardless of what you have, the key point is to cherish it as the Word of God and, most important, to obey what it teaches.

Why is it never "a futile thing" (*Deut. 32:47, NKJV*) to obey the Word of God and to teach it to your children, as well?

Words and Their Meanings

In every language there are words that are so rich and deep in meaning that they are difficult to translate adequately with a single word into another language. Such words require a wide study of their usage in the Bible to understand the breadth of meaning.

Read 1 Kings 3:6, Psalm 57:3, Psalm 66:20, Psalm 143:8, and Micah 7:20. How do God’s mercy and kindness extend toward His created beings?

The Hebrew word *chesed* (mercy) is one of the richest and most profound words in the Old Testament. It describes God’s love, loving-kindness, mercy, and covenant attitude toward His people. In these few passages, we have seen Him show “ ‘great mercy [*chesed*] to Your servant David . . . ; You have continued this great kindness [*chesed*] for him’ ” (1 Kings 3:6, NKJV). He “shall send forth His mercy [*chesed*] and His truth” (Ps. 57:3, NKJV). Concerning Israel, He will “give truth to Jacob and mercy [*chesed*] to Abraham” (Mic. 7:20, NKJV). Entire books have been written on the word *chesed*, trying to capture the depth of God’s mercy and love toward us.

Read Numbers 6:24–26, Job 3:26, Psalm 29:11, Isaiah 9:6, and Isaiah 32:17. In these passages, what is the “peace” or *shalom* talked about in them?

The Hebrew word *shalom* is often translated as “peace.” But the meaning of the word is much deeper and broader than this. It can be translated as “wholeness, completeness, and well-being.” God’s blessing and graciousness keep us in a state of *shalom*, which is a gift from God (Num. 6:24–26). By contrast, Job’s experience of trouble produces a situation where he is “ ‘not at ease’ ” (NKJV) nor is he “ ‘quiet,’ ” for he lacks *shalom*. In this hectic world, it is a profound blessing to welcome the Sabbath day with the words *Shabbat shalom*, for our communion with God provides the ultimate peace and wholeness that our lives desire.

In whatever language we speak and read—even without knowing the original meaning of these words—how can we experience the reality of what these words mean to the best of our understanding?

Repetition, Word Patterns, and Meaning

In Hebrew thought, there are a number of ways to express ideas that reinforce meaning and emphasize the importance of concepts. Unlike European languages, Hebrew contains no punctuation marks in the original language, so the language structure developed other ways to communicate such ideas.

Read Genesis 1:26, 27 and Isaiah 6:1–3. What words are repeated in these passages? How are these repeated words enhanced by different concepts that are introduced through repetition?

One of the ways that the Hebrew writer could emphasize a certain attribute of God was by repeating it three times. As the Creation account comes to the apex of God’s creative work, the text emphasized the unique importance of created humanity. The term *bara*’, “to create,” always has only God as its subject. That is, it is only God that has the power to create without being dependent on preexisting matter. Here the text describes the creation of man: “So God *created* man in His own image; in the image of God He *created* him; male and female He *created* them” (*Gen. 1:27, NKJV; emphasis supplied*). Notice the threefold repetition of the word “create.” Moses, thus, emphasized that human beings are created by God and that they are created in *His* image, as well. These truths were his emphasis.

In Isaiah’s vision and call, the seraphim repeat the words “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts” (*Isa. 6:3*). The emphasis is on the holiness of an awesome God whose presence fills the temple. We also see this holiness through the words of Isaiah, as he stands in the presence of the Almighty: “Woe is me, for I am undone!” (*Isa. 6:5, NKJV*). Even a prophet like Isaiah, confronted with the holiness and character of God, cringed at his own unworthiness. Thus, even here, long before we have Paul’s exposition on human sinfulness and the need of a Savior (*Romans 1–3*), we can see the Bible giving expression to the fallen nature of humanity, even in a “good” person such as Isaiah.

In Daniel 3, we have a repetition (with variations) of the phrase “the image which Nebuchadnezzar set up” (*Dan. 3:1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 12, 14, 15, 18, NKJV*). This phrase, or variations of it, is repeated 10 times in the chapter to contrast Nebuchadnezzar’s action in defiance of the image God revealed to him through Daniel (*Dan. 2:31–45*). The emphasis here is on humanity’s seeking to make itself into a god to be worshiped, in contrast to the only true God, the only One worthy of worship.

Texts and Contexts

Words in Scripture always occur in a context. They do not stand by themselves. A word has its immediate context within a sentence, and it is this unit that needs to be understood first. Then there is the wider context of the overall unit in which the sentence occurs. This may be a section of writing, a chapter, or a series of chapters. It is essential to understand as well as possible the context of words and sentences in order not to arrive at erroneous conclusions.

Compare Genesis 1:27 with Genesis 2:7. Then read Genesis 2:15–23. How can we understand from these different passages and contexts the definition of *adam*, the Hebrew word for “man”?

We have already seen that the repetition of the term *bara’* in Genesis 1:27 indicates an emphasis on the creation of man. Now we see that man is defined within the context of this verse as “male and female.” This means that the Hebrew term *adam* is to be understood *in this passage* as a reference generically to humanity.

However, in Genesis 2:7 the same term *adam* is used to refer to the forming of Adam out of the dust of the “ground” (in Hebrew *adamah*—notice the play on words). Here only the male, Adam, is referred to, for Eve is not created until later and in an entirely different manner. Thus, in each passage, even within the context of two chapters, we see a differentiation between the definition of *adam* as “humanity” (*Gen. 1:27*) and the man Adam (*Gen. 2:7*). That Adam is a person is later affirmed in the genealogies (*Gen. 5:1–5, 1 Chron. 1:1, Luke 3:38*) and in reference to Jesus, who becomes the “second Adam” (*Rom. 5:12–14*).

Just as the word *Adam* occurs in a specific text, so the context of the creation of Adam and Eve is found in the larger Creation account as seen in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. This is what is meant by a larger unit. The unit informs the interpreter of additional themes, ideas, and developments. Genesis 2:4–25 has sometimes been called the second Creation account, but in fact there is only a difference in emphasis (see next week). In both accounts, though, we are shown the definitive origins of humanity.

As we can see, man and woman—humanity—are the direct creations of God. What does this tell us about how foolish the “wisdom of this world” (*1 Cor. 1:20*) truly is by teaching us that we arose from mere chance?

Books and Their Messages

The largest units in Scripture are books of the Bible. Biblical books were written for different purposes and in different settings. Some served as prophetic messages; others were compilations, such as the Psalms. There are historical books, such as 1 and 2 Kings, and there are letters to various churches, such as those written by Paul and others.

As we seek to understand a book's meaning and message, it is important to begin with authorship and setting. Many books of the Bible are assigned authors. The first five books of the Old Testament are identified as having been authored by Moses (*Josh. 8:31, 32; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Kings 14:6; 2 Kings 21:8; Ezra 6:18; Neh. 13:1; Dan. 9:11–13; Mal. 4:4*). This is confirmed by Jesus (*Mark 12:26; John 5:46, 47; John 7:19*) and the apostles (*Acts 3:22, Rom. 10:5*). In other cases, some biblical authors are not identified. (For example, the authors of the books Esther and Ruth as well as the authors of many of the historical books, such as Samuel and Chronicles, are not identified.)

Read Genesis 15:1–5 and Genesis 22:17, 18. What significance is it to us that Moses wrote the book of Genesis?

Exodus through Deuteronomy were written by Moses after, of course, the Exodus. But because Genesis is foundational as a history of God's acts from Creation to the patriarchal period, it is logical that this book was written before the Exodus.

“As the years rolled on, and he [Moses] wandered with his flocks in solitary places, pondering upon the oppressed condition of his people, he recounted the dealings of God with his fathers and the promises that were the heritage of the chosen nation, and his prayers for Israel ascended by day and by night. Heavenly angels shed their light around him. Here, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he wrote the book of Genesis.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 251.

With the book of Genesis, we are told not only about our origins but about the plan of salvation, or the means by which God will redeem fallen humanity. This plan becomes even more apparent with the covenant that God makes with Abraham, which involves His promise to establish through him a great nation to be made up of “ ‘descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore’ ” (*Gen. 22:17, NKJV*).

What other great truths have we been taught through the book of Genesis, truths about which we might otherwise not know? What does this teach us about how important the Word of God is to our faith?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “John Wycliffe,” pp. 79–96; “Luther Before the Diet,” pp. 145–170, in *The Great Controversy*; also read section 4.a.–j. from the document “Methods of Bible Study,” which can be found at the following link: www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/bible-interpretation-hermeneutics/methods-bible-study.

“In His word, God has committed to men the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience. . . . Yet the fact that God has revealed His will to men through His word, has not rendered needless the continued presence and guiding of the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, the Spirit was promised by our Saviour, to open the word to His servants, to illuminate and apply its teachings. And since it was the Spirit of God that inspired the Bible, it is impossible that the teaching of the Spirit should ever be contrary to that of the word.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 9.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Regardless of how many translations of the Bible exist in your language, what can you do to make the most of what you have? How can you learn to cherish the Bible as the Word of God and to seek, by faith, to obey what it teaches?
- 2 Think about the difference between what the Word of God teaches about human origins (that we were created by God on the sixth day of Creation) and what humanity itself, under the name of “science,” teaches, which is that we evolved over billions of years. What should this vast contrast between the two tell us about how important it is to stick to what the Bible teaches, and how far off humanity can get when it veers away from the Word of God and what it plainly teaches?
- 3 What Bible tools, if any, are available to you that can help you better understand the Bible? And even if you don’t have any extra tools, how can you learn to apply some of the lessons learned this week about how to interpret the Bible?
- 4 The children of Israel were told to teach their own children the great truths committed to them and to retell the stories about God’s leading in their lives (*Deut. 4:9*). Putting aside the obvious benefit of passing the faith on, what is it about the teaching and the telling of stories about God’s leading in our lives that tends to increase our own faith? That is, why is sharing biblical truth with others beneficial to ourselves, as well?

Key Texts: Deut. 32:46, 47; 1 Kings 3:6; Num. 6:24–26; Gen. 1:26, 27; Gen. 2:15–23; Gen. 15:1–5.

Part I: Overview

Words have power. They can rouse a people from the oppression of slavery to a faithful life of deliverance. Joshua urged the people, “ ‘Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD’ ” (*Josh. 24:15, NKJV*). Words also can be devastating and be used to destroy and deceive. When Satan tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden, he insinuated doubt: “ ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat of any tree of the garden”? ’ ” (*Gen. 3:1, RSV*). Words can be accusatory and judgmental, and they can be soothing and kind, bringing healing to the soul.

God chose to communicate the history of His creation, the Fall, the plan of Redemption, the promise of restoration, and the Second Coming to the world through prophets and writers. They wrote in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—languages that are often quite different from the ones we learned from childhood. The entire Bible has been translated into at least 636 languages and the New Testament into another 3,223 languages or more so that 95 percent of the earth’s population can read the Word of God. In this week’s lesson, we will be discussing how interpreting the words, phrases, and narratives of Scripture within their original contexts helps us more fully understand God’s message for us today.

Part II: Commentary

Scripture

It is important that we understand that meaning derives from the smallest parts of language, the individual word itself, and expands to the context of a sentence, a narrative, and finally a book. The word *dabar* in Hebrew is very rich in meaning, for it can signify a “word,” “thing,” or even “prophecy.” For this reason, it is important to study the larger context of words and how they may be used in the Bible. The Hebrew words *chesed* (mercy) and *shalom* (peace) are examples of the kinds of words that have a wide semantic range and can be understood more deeply if studied from the entire context of Scripture. In other cases, there are biblical teachings (doctrines) or ideas that are best understood by studying a cluster of words with similar meanings that together give a full range of understanding.

One such teaching that benefits from an approach like this is the biblical concept of the remnant.

Illustration

The Seventh-day Adventist Church identifies itself as the remnant church of Bible prophecy. It has been called forth as a movement in this end time to proclaim the three angels' messages with clarity. The remnant church proclaims the Sabbath as the seal that will distinguish a commandment-keeping people who have the faith of Jesus (*Rev. 14:12*). Their ability to keep the commandments can only come through the merits and power of Christ, as shown by His example to overcome and inherit the crown of life (*John 16:32, 33; 1 John 4:4; 1 John 5:4, 5; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; Rev. 3:5, 12, 21*). This claim to be the remnant, however, seems rather exclusivist and arrogant in our modern setting. How can we know that God has a remnant?

The remnant idea is found throughout Scripture. One of the words for “remnant” is *sh'ār*, which in its various derivatives occurs 226 times in the Old Testament. The noun form *sh'ār* can designate the “remnant” of Israel (*Isa. 10:20*) or “his people” (*Isa. 11:11, 16; Isa. 28:5*). In this case, the text indicates this is a remnant chosen by God. Isaiah 4:2–6 and Isaiah 6:13 further describe a remnant that has gone through a purifying fire of divine judgment and comes out as a holy people. Other Hebrew words that describe the remnant also can be studied and include terms such as *pālat*, *mālat*, *yāthar*, *sārid*, and *'aḥarīt*. These terms must be studied in their contexts too. Anyone can do this with a good concordance. A study of this type reveals that the Bible describes the concept of a “remnant” in several ways: (1) The “historical remnant” are like those in Isaiah 1:4–9 who are the survivors of a catastrophe. (2) The “faithful remnant” are those who remain faithful to God and who carry all of the promises of God’s people. (3) Finally, the “eschatological remnant” are those who go through the tribulations of the end time and emerge victorious on the great day of the Lord to receive His kingdom. In Revelation, the dragon is enraged at the woman and makes war with the “remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (*Rev. 12:17*). The rich nature of each of these terms in their contexts add to the others until, within the whole context of the Bible, the concept emerges with clarity, and the student begins to understand the entirety of the idea of “remnant.”—Gerhard F. Hasel, *Understanding the Living Word of God* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1980), pp. 113–116.

Illustration

Two discoveries or breakthroughs in recent times have helped us understand the origin of the Bible. The Egyptian language, written in hiero-

glyphics, was deciphered in 1822 by Jean Champollion. This discovery unlocked the long-lost secrets of one of the oldest civilizations and allowed us to compare the ancient Egyptian texts with the text of the Bible. Several interesting contributions emerged over time: (1) Many of the geographical places mentioned in the Bible were recorded by the Egyptians who regularly campaigned into, and traded with, Canaan. A great deal of correspondence and accuracy was found between the names and locations mentioned in Egypt and those mentioned in the Bible. (2) There were numerous Egyptian loanwords found particularly in the first five books of the Pentateuch. Scholars have documented a number of loanwords, such as *tevah*, the word for “ark,” which derives from the Egyptian word meaning “box,” “chest,” or “coffer.” This word is used of both Noah’s ark and the ark in which Moses was placed as a baby. The name for Egypt used in the Bible is *Mitzraim*. This name is a dual word in Hebrew that comes from Egyptian *msr*, the word for Egypt. The dual ending indicates the “two lands” of Upper and Lower Egypt. Egyptian idioms also are used. The phrase “outstretched arm,” used to describe the protection of God, is a common Egyptian expression of strength. Egyptian titles, as well as manners and customs of speech, were used by the author. Finally, there are a number of Egyptian personal names that appear. All of these discoveries point to the conclusion that the first books of the Bible were written during the Exodus generation and that the author was intimately acquainted with Egypt, its customs, and history. Moses certainly would have had the education and background necessary to write the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy, as the Bible often affirms.

Another discovery relates to the original writing of Scripture by Moses. The invention of the alphabet, which was derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs, took place in the Sinai Peninsula about a century before the Exodus. This major breakthrough in communication simplified writing and made literacy possible for the common people. Moses, then, could have written not in complicated Egyptian hieroglyphs but in the simplified proto-Canaanite alphabet that would eventually develop into Hebrew. God’s timing is always perfect for placing His message in the hands of His people.

Scripture

Other concepts and words in the Bible are entirely unique. In the Creation account more emphasis is placed on the creation of humanity than on any other element or creature. Humanity is placed at the apex of Creation. It is the work of the triune Godhead as They proclaim Their intention, “Let us make man in our image” (*Gen. 1:26*). This verse’s unique threefold

emphasis on the verb *bara'*, “to create,” reiterates God’s intention to create man and woman uniquely in His image and in His likeness. The immediate context of Genesis 1 indicates that both ‘*Elohim*, “God,” in His majestic plurality and *ruach Elohim*, “the Spirit of God,” are involved in the creative work (*Gen. 1:1, 2*). John 1:1–3 makes it clear that Jesus was the agent of Creation, for “ ‘He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made’ ” (*NKJV*). When allowing the fullness of Scripture to interpret itself, we learn that the “us” in Genesis 1:26 included all three members of the Godhead. Humanity, in this way, was created *in relationship for relationship* in order that they might be “fruitful and multiply; fill the earth” (*Gen. 1:28, NKJV*). They were created to commune with God on the Sabbath that He created for them (*Gen. 2:1–3, Exod. 20:8–11*). That God might dwell among His people continues to be His purpose for us through eternity.

Part III: Life Application

So, how can we study the Bible deeply without understanding the original biblical languages? We have tools such as Strong’s or Young’s concordances available now through the internet, and physically, that are more accessible today than ever before. We can study how words are used within sentences, within books, and throughout Scripture. The founders of our church did not have all of the tools available that we have today. They had their Bibles and concordances. By carefully following Protestant principles of biblical interpretation and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they were able to know God’s plan of salvation and the truths taught by the prophets and by Jesus. Here are some discussion questions you can use to lead your group:

- 1. How does the knowledge that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible help us to accept Scripture as a reliable source today? Remind your class again of the words of admonition that Moses gave to the people at the time of his death (*Deut. 32:46, 47*). Discuss how we can practice this principle in our families.**

2. What does it mean to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture? Why is it important to understand the meaning of what Scripture itself says rather than importing our own ideas into Scripture?

3. How does the understanding of a word and its depth of meaning help us see God's purpose for our lives? What kind of power do certain words have in the Old Testament (for example: *justice*, *mercy*, or *hope*)? How do these words impact our knowledge of God's character?
