

Do you understand what you are reading?



Introduction

An angel sent Philip to a deserted road, where he came across an important official far from home. So the story goes.

This official is reading aloud from the Bible. Philip overhears him, and asks him that well-known question:

'Do you understand what you are reading?' (Acts 8:30)

The question sounds like a simple one, and innocent enough, but is it? Do we understand what we are reading? Do we always understand it correctly? When we read the Bible, are we reading it right?

Adventism began more than 150 years ago because a group of people asked themselves this same question. 'Do we really understand what we are reading?'

They decided that the answer was 'no', but for their home churches this idea was taboo. These first Adventists had to forge ahead on their own.



They started a church that understood a few things very well: Saturday is the Sabbath, dead is dead, and God is a God of love. Their church would be a place where they could read the Bible thoroughly, without fearing the consequences.

It would be a church where the Bible was central – read, studied, and interpreted regularly.

This is our church. We love the Bible and we love Bible study. We want to interpret the Bible correctly, and we want our lives to be Bible-driven. This is why it hurts so much when we disagree with each other about theological issues.

How can one Adventist see one message in the Bible, while another sees something completely different? Why do some people say that women can be ordained while some say they cannot, and why do others argue that ordination is simply unbiblical? Why do some people say that we should go out and help people on Sabbath, while others say that it's too much work for our day of rest?

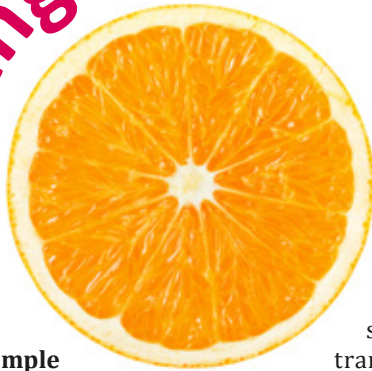
These differences are often rooted the very act of reading the Bible. We all read the same text, but we each understand something very different. We need to think long and hard about how we read and interpret the Bible. That's what this booklet is for.

This booklet is not designed to tell you what you should believe. It won't dictate how you should interpret the Bible. This booklet exists to help make a difficult subject digestible. It will make you think differently about how you read, how others read, and how we can read together as Adventists.

In the end we all want one thing: to grow together in the Bible so that we can devote ourselves wholly to God's work, both where we are and in the rest of the world.



Reading 101



Translation

Words get even trickier when you translate them. Most of us deal with this all the time, since we read the Bible in translation. Translators do their best, but they still have to

make decisions. Perhaps the translator will select the simplest option, and focus on the temperature of the food.

Now the person reading in translation only sees the one option: the food is at a high temperature. But what if the author meant that the food was spicy? You might then question whether this was a good translation. But what should the translator have done otherwise? He could have focused on the spiciness, which would have caused the same problems, but the other way around.

However we translate it, we need to make a decision about what 'hot' means. Unfortunately, this sometimes has to be done without asking the writer what he or she meant when they wrote 'hot'. That was a simple, non-theological example, but what about the following statement:

'The Bible is true.'

What is meant with this statement? Depending on who you ask you may receive a different answer. Some people would say that there are no mistakes

Reading is not as simple as we often think. We seem to believe that reading happens by itself. Nothing could be further from the truth. The writer chooses words that describe what he or she wants to communicate. The reader tries to fit these words into a logical picture, in an attempt to understand what the writer wanted to communicate. Is this attempt always successful? Take this example:

'This food is hot!'

A simple sentence, yes? But what does it mean? Is the food spicy? Is it at a temperature that burns the author's mouth? We can probably deduce from the context that the food is not sexy, but that's about it. As readers we can't answer these questions directly, and we can't always ask the writer what he or she meant. Especially not if the writer is long dead, like the authors of the Bible.

in the Bible. Others would say that despite some instances of human error, the Bible is still true. Still others would say that the Bible is true because it reveals God's identity to us, even though the events it describes may or may not have happened. All three of these groups would say 'the Bible is true', but without knowing the speaker, you would have no idea which of these three meanings is the correct one. Even if you did know the speaker, the meaning of this phrase might still be uncertain.

Reading the Bible

When we read, we interpret without realising it. When you read 'This food is hot!' you immediately formed an idea about which meaning of hot was the correct one. When you read 'the Bible is true' you immediately formed an idea about what 'truth' meant. Whenever anyone reads a sentence they also interpret it. Automatically.

It can sometimes be very difficult to grasp how this automatic process works, but an example always helps. Take these sentences from Paul:

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'). (Galatians 3:13)

Here Paul is referring to the crucifixion of Jesus... but he says that Jesus hung on a tree. What does he mean? We know that Jesus hung on a cross, not a tree. So what did you think when you read this? Did you think: 'But wasn't Judas the one who hung on a tree?' Did you read 'tree' but interpret 'cross'? Did you read 'tree' and think that it could possibly be a synonym for 'cross'? Maybe you decided that Paul uses the word because both trees and crosses are made of wood. Maybe you know your Bible very well, and immediately thought of Deuteronomy 21:23. Perhaps you thought altogether different, but you did think something. You interpreted the word 'tree', in one way or another.

Complicated

Reading is complicated. In this booklet we will try to come to terms with how we read and interpret the Bible. We've already given a few short examples. Let's move on to a longer example: slavery.



Slavery



By now you have probably realised that interpreting the Bible is not always

easy. The examples on the previous pages demonstrated this, but those were simple examples. Of course Jesus died on the cross – and why does it matter which ‘hot’ we are talking about? Now, it’s time for a more difficult example: slavery.

I hope we can all agree that slavery is a bad thing. Slavery is inhuman, and it is definitely unchristian. Fortunately, in the present day most people would concur. If we read the Bible plainly, however, we might come to a different conclusion. Let’s be honest: we are not being unrealistic when we say this. In centuries past, most Christians used the Bible to defend slavery. How? Let’s take a look at slavery in the Bible. We will start in Leviticus:

As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. You may also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you, and from their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. You may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property. These you may treat as slaves, but as for your fellow Israelites, no one shall rule over the other with harshness. (Leviticus 25:44–46)

The Israelites received God’s law in the desert. This started with the ten commandments, and ended with hundreds more. In these laws, the Israelites learnt all about slavery. Apparently, it was fine to enslave foreign peoples. Just not fellow Israelites. These people were then slaves in the full sense of the word. In general, they would remain slaves their entire lives. People could even inherit their parents’ slaves.

In Exodus, on the other hand, we see that also Israelites could be slaves. In Exodus 21 – just one chapter after the ten commandments – we read:

When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master’s and he shall go out alone. (Exodus 21:2–4)

This passage begins on quite a positive note. After six years, it states, an Israelite slave is legally free again. But if this slave had a wife and children during his bondage, he could not bring them with him out of slavery. That sounds very barbaric. First you let your slave marry, then you keep his wife and children!

Just a little bit further we read that female slaves cannot be freed as easily as male slaves. Why not? Because these women have had sexual intercourse with their masters, and the two are now bound to each other (Exodus 21:7–10).

Basically, what we see here are laws permitting sexual slavery among the Israelites. Still further along we find laws regarding the physical beating of slaves. This is allowed, so long as the slave does not die on the spot (Exodus 21:20–21).

There is clear evidence that the Old Testament does not directly condemn slavery. Perhaps you imagine that these laws are overturned in the New Testament,

just like many of the other cruel Old Testament laws. Sadly, this is not the case. Jesus speaks about slavery (and the beating of slaves) in the book of Luke:

That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. (Luke 12:47)

Paul also allows for the continuation of slavery, and he even gives it a Christian perspective. Slaves, he writes, must obey their masters just as they obey Christ (Ephesians 6:5). What’s more, Christian slaves who have a Christian master must serve that master all the harder (1 Timothy 6:1–2).

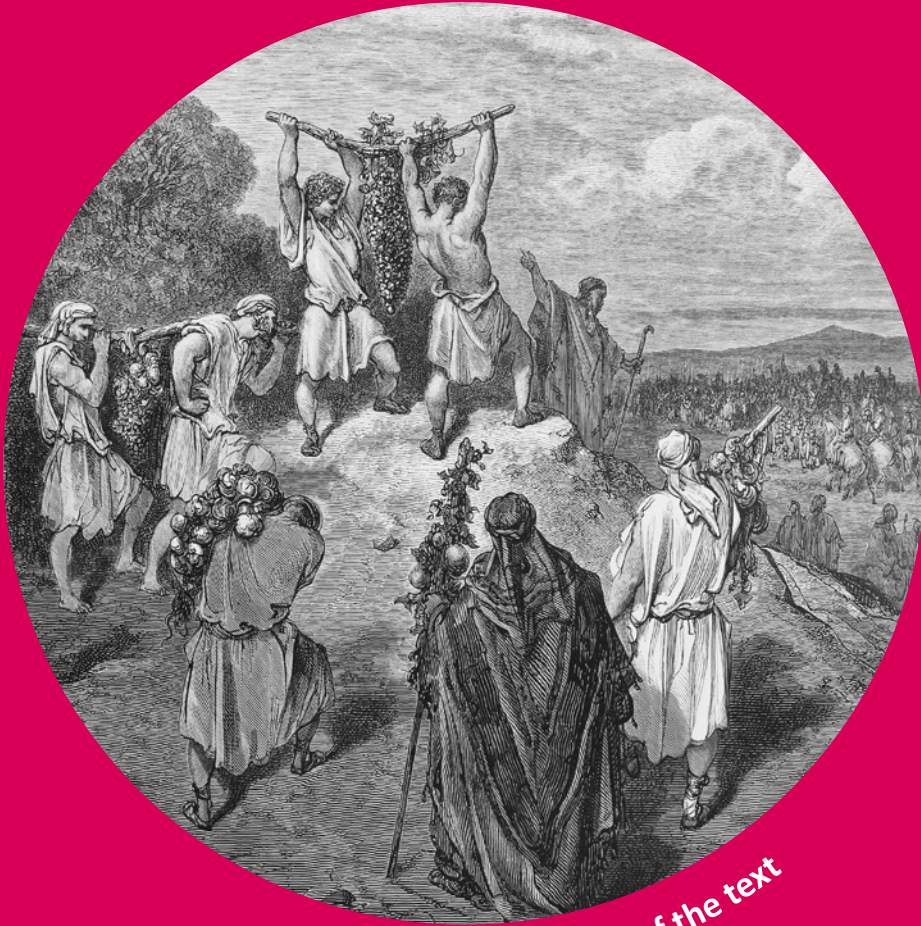
All in all, the Bible is quite clear about slavery: in principle there is nothing wrong with it, as long as you treat your slaves in a certain way. Christian slaves should excel in their servitude.

Nevertheless, we tell each other that slavery is wrong, and we do so with the Bible in hand. How can it be that the Bible seems clear about something, but we conclude something quite different? Apparently a plain reading of these texts is not always sufficient in producing the correct interpretation. Reading the Bible involves more than just plain reading and application. Along the way interpretation happens, and in this process differences of opinion arise. Great challenges reveal themselves.

Look at the illustration on the next page. This illustration tries to show why every reader is an interpreter.

Hermeneutical gap

In the case of the Bible, the world of the text and the world of the reader do not overlap. The reader must work hard in order to place herself in the world where the Bible's various texts originated.



The world of the text

The world of the reader



Basic Principles



Before we delve into the difficulties of reading any further, it might be good to agree on a few basic principles.

These principles were developed during the Protestant Reformation, as a reaction to the Catholic method of reading the Bible. As Adventists, we see ourselves as reformers too, and we have built on the principles they laid out for interpreting the Bible.

The Bible and the Bible Alone

This first and most important principle of biblical interpretation has become a central part of our Adventist DNA. Even the very first Adventist pioneers were hesitant about laying out a doctrine, stating that the Bible was the only basis for their faith. Even now, the preamble to our *Fundamental Beliefs* makes it very clear that the Bible is the only real basis for what Adventists believe.

We believe that the Bible reveals enough to serve as a guide to our salvation. In other words, everything a believer needs to know in order to be saved can be found in the Bible. There are no deficiencies that need to be filled with tradition, additional revelations or announcements from church leadership.

All of the Bible

The second principle from the Protestant Reformation is 'All of the Bible', *Tota Scriptura*.

This principle emphasises the need to read the entire Bible when studying a topic. Theology and biblical studies cannot simply be based on one part of the Bible, while ignoring the rest. They must remain firmly grounded in the entirety of Scripture.

The Analogy of Scripture

The third interpretative principle of the Protestant Reformation is the 'Analogy of Scripture', or *Analogia Scripturae*. This principle follows from the previous one. If the entire Bible is the word of God, and the entire Bible is divinely inspired, then there must be fundamental unity and harmony throughout. Every part of the Bible must be analogous with the other parts. Practically this means that we can claim three things: (a) the Bible interprets the Bible, (b) the Bible is consistent and (c) the Bible is clear.

The divine nature of the Bible allows us to understand that there is a unity among the voices of the various writers in the Bible. When a single voice is unclear, the rest of the Bible can help us to understand the whole picture. In this way, one part of Scripture interprets another part.

Since the Bible is the word of God, it must also be consistent. One part of the Bible cannot disagree with another part on the same subject. In our interpretations, everything the Bible teaches on a particular topic needs to be in harmony.

Finally, given that the Bible interprets itself and its message is consistent, we can also conclude that Scripture must be clear. The various authors each build on the writings and understanding that came before. The same is true for students of the Bible today. The longer you study, the clearer things become.

Spiritual Things Require a Spiritual Attitude

The fourth fundamental interpretative principle of the Protestant Reformation is what is often called 'Spiritual Things Spiritually Discerned', or *Spiritualia Spiritualiter Examinatur*. This principle builds on the previous three, and takes the divine/human nature of the Bible into account. Just as the author of the Bible was a divinely inspired human writer, so a proper interpreter of the Bible needs to be spiritually inspired. This means that any interpretation of the Bible must be aided by the Holy Spirit, and the interpreter must have an active spiritual life.

The New Testament Builds on the Old

Although the Bible should be seen as a whole, the variation in the Bible should also be taken into account. Sixty-six books written over a period spanning 1500 years will naturally contain some diverse material. A further point that must always be in the mind of a biblical interpreter is the difference between the Old and the New Testament.

On the one hand, there is great unity between these two testaments: the same God, the same grand narrative of cosmic conflict. God has one redemptive plan. Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in the New Testament, and New Testament authors often quote the Old Testament.

On the other hand, there are some fundamental differences. The New Testament is truly a 'new testament'. It teaches us of a new covenant between God and mankind. Many Old Testament institutions – such as the nation of Israel, the temple, sacrifices, the kingdom, the priesthood and the ceremonial law – have been improved, replaced or done away with.

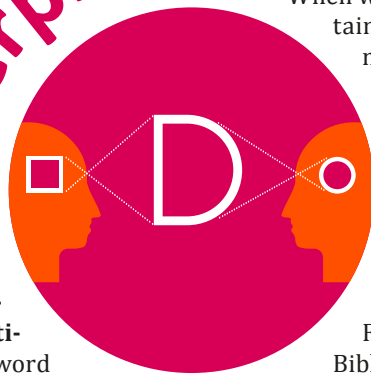
Biblical interpretation needs to take this role of the New Testament into account. We live in a time when Christ is the head of the church. The time of Israel, with its human kings and priests, is over.



Every Reader Interprets

A few pages ago you were given an illustration of the 'hermeneutical gap'. This is a fancy word for the gap between a reader and a text. You may never have considered this fact before, but we live in a world that is very different from that represented in the Bible. We also live in a very different time, in a different culture with a different language. There is a large gap between our world, and the world of the Bible. Somehow, we must bridge this gap.

If you were born and raised in an English-speaking country, and are reading an English-language newspaper, you won't need to be very concerned with gaps. You are reading in your native language. The text is written with your culture in mind. In most cases, you share the same worldview as the writer. The text was written just a few days (or a few hours) ago. There is a very small gap between yourself and the text. In this case reading and interpretation happen almost automatically. Perhaps there is a word, phrase, or reference you don't entirely understand. Perhaps you don't recognise the name cited in the article. If we are honest, though, the newspaper is generally easy to read.



When we read the Bible, it certainly doesn't look like the newspaper. Things suddenly become much more complicated, and we need to think carefully about all sorts of things we do automatically when reading a newspaper.

Firstly, we need to have the Bible in a language that we can read: English, Spanish, French, German, or something else altogether. No matter how good a translation is, it always changes the meaning of a text. In addition to understanding the literal words on the page, then, we need to consider the culture they come from – but the culture of the Bible is already thousands of years old. We need to understand the worldview of the writers, and remember that every writer has a slightly different perspective. We also mustn't forget to put the text in its historical context, so that we interpret things correctly.

This is only the first half of the story. We need to do all of these things to try and bridge the gaps between ourselves and the Bible, but we must also overcome obstacles within ourselves. These are things that we often unintentionally bring with us as we read the text – our own traditions, preconceptions, and cultural norms.

Reading is (and remains) an act of interpretation, in which we must build bridges and scale obstacles.

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. (Luke 2:17-19)

This text seems very simple. Mary treasured and pondered all of these words about her son in her heart. Because of her great love for him, she had strong emotions about all the things she heard. After all, everyone knows that the heart is the symbol of love and emotion.

In reality, though, people in biblical times had very different ideas about the heart. For them, it was the most important organ. Not because it pumps blood – they had no idea the heart did that. Instead, they believed that people reasoned with their hearts. Every heartbeat was a thought. Mary kept everything she heard in her heart, but today we would say she kept them in her head or her mind. This text isn't talking about emotions at all.

Linguistically speaking, the meaning and experience of a word can change dramatically, and lead us to very different conclusions.

Linguistic Divide

Cultural Divide

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work".' (Luke 13:31–32)

Jesus says that Herod is a fox. The average Westerner would automatically assume Jesus is calling Herod sly here. Some Bibles actually put that interpretation straight into the translation: 'Go and tell that sly fox, Herod...'. After all, everyone knows that foxes are sly.

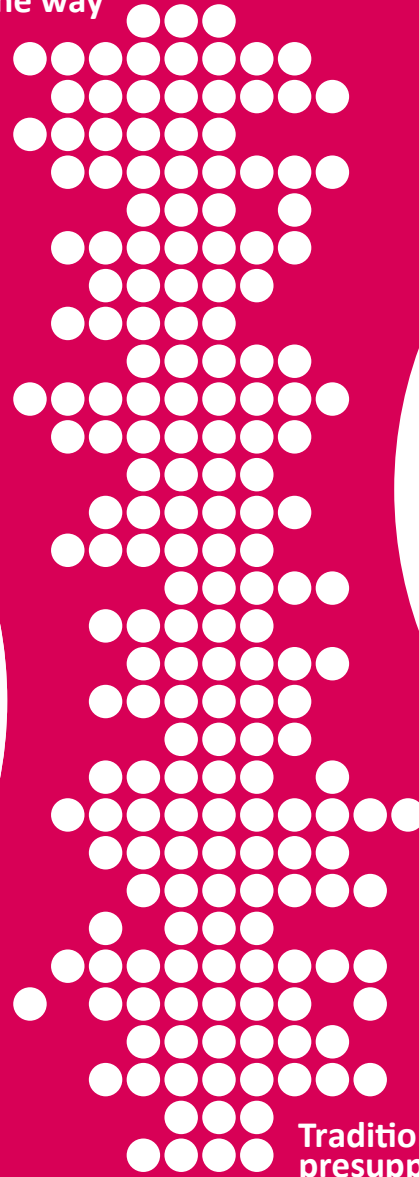
That isn't what foxes stood for in Jesus' time, however. In his culture, foxes were known as good hunters. If you were to call a man a fox, you meant that he was good at hunting... for tail. Herod was a man who liked the ladies, and wasn't afraid to show it.

What a difference cultural gaps make in how we interpret even the simplest things.

Preconceptions

A great many obstacles can separate us from the texts we read. As readers, we must constantly try to break down the things that stand between us and the text.

Stuff that gets
in the way



The horizon of the reader



The horizon of the text

Tradition,
presuppositions,
culture, prejudice,
ignorance...



Guide to Interpretation



The World Behind the Text

A text isn't born in a vacuum. There is always an author, and this author lives somewhere in the world. The author brings his or her culture, language, expectations, and point of view to the text. This is

what creates the hermeneutical gaps we discussed just a few pages ago.

In most cases, and certainly in the case of the Bible, the author is writing for a specific group. We call these the original audience. The biblical books of Corinthians are Paul's letters to the Christian church in Corinth. It's unlikely that Paul ever considered how these letters would be read by us today, almost two thousand years later. They were meant for the Corinthians, over whose shoulders we can read along.

The author doesn't just string random words together. Authors choose to write different things for different situations. Sometimes it is very clear what that situation is, and sometimes it isn't. Luke lays things out for us very clearly. He knows a man named Theophilus, who has heard some rumours about Jesus. Luke wants to convince Theophilus that what he has heard is true, and so he writes a book. It's much more difficult to identify the specific situation for which Matthew

or Mark wrote their books, but it must have existed.

Basically, we can conclude that the world of the text plays two key roles in the reading process. The author lives in this world, and we need him or her to write the text. Logical. The other role the world of the text plays is to illuminate the text for us. Our knowledge of the world in which the text was written helps us to better understand the text. Knowing the specific situation for which it was written helps us to understand why certain things are said. Knowing the language allows us to literally understand the text, knowing the culture helps us to understand customs, and knowing the original audience helps us to understand the text's purpose. Without this knowledge we are simply left to guess at the text's meaning.

The Text

The text is the simplest of the three things needed for reading to take place.

It is a collection of words in a certain order, and that order remains the same every time we read it. The text does not change between our first reading and our thousandth. You may experience a text quite differently after you've read it a thousand times, but that can be put down to the reader, who we will get to in a moment.

The only thing we can really say about a text is that it was produced by an author. That author intended to communicate something, and from that intention the text was born. Unfortunately, we have no guarantee that the text communicates exactly what the author wanted to say. None of us write as clearly as we would like to all the time. We do know

that the intention is there, however, and often this intention is actually what we are most interested in.

The Reader

The reader is the most variable of the three factors that make up interpretation. After all, every person is unique. If two random people read the same text, will they always come to the same conclusion? No, of course not. The reader unintentionally brings a part of herself to the text, just like the author does.

When you read, various personal factors – your culture, knowledge, preconceptions, and personality – play a role in your understanding of the text. We'll call this your 'current situation'. Think about it. Reading about the sacrifice of Isaac is very different for a parent than it is for a child, as is the story of the Prodigal Son. People in slavery have found comfort in the stories of Exodus. People who have never been enslaved will find it more difficult to place themselves in these stories.

And these examples only deal with a current life situation. Knowledge plays an equally important role. Would you understand the Old Testament prophecies if you had never heard of Jesus? Would you know what the phrase 'the blood of the Lamb' meant if you had never heard of offerings? Preconceptions are also important. An atheist sees all manner of contradictions in the Bible, but a Christian feels differently. Eighteenth-century slave owners found so many Bible texts to justify the slave trade precisely because of their preconception that slavery was acceptable.

Up to this point everything we've discussed has been quite complicated, and reading is certainly far from simple. Fortunately, we're well on our way to forming a more complete picture of how we read. On the following page is a diagram that should help with that. But when you look at it you may well think (just like the Ethiopian official) 'how am I supposed to understand this if no one explains it?'

So let's break things down. Three things are involved in reading or interpreting: the world behind the text, the text itself, and the reader. These three things work together to create an interpretation. Without any one of them reading becomes impossible. Without the world behind the text, the text would never come to exist. If there is no actual text there is nothing to read, and without a reader there is no one to read it. All three are vital.

Up to this point we've been talking about the reader as an individual, but readers often belong to communities. This explains in large part the difference between Christian denominations. As Adventists – together – we read the Bible in a particular way, with our own Adventist culture, situation, preconceptions, and knowledge. Different denominations have different cultures, situations, preconceptions, and knowledge.

In our fundamental beliefs we acknowledge how important community is to a reader. The preamble states that our fundamental beliefs can be changed 'when **the church** is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word.'

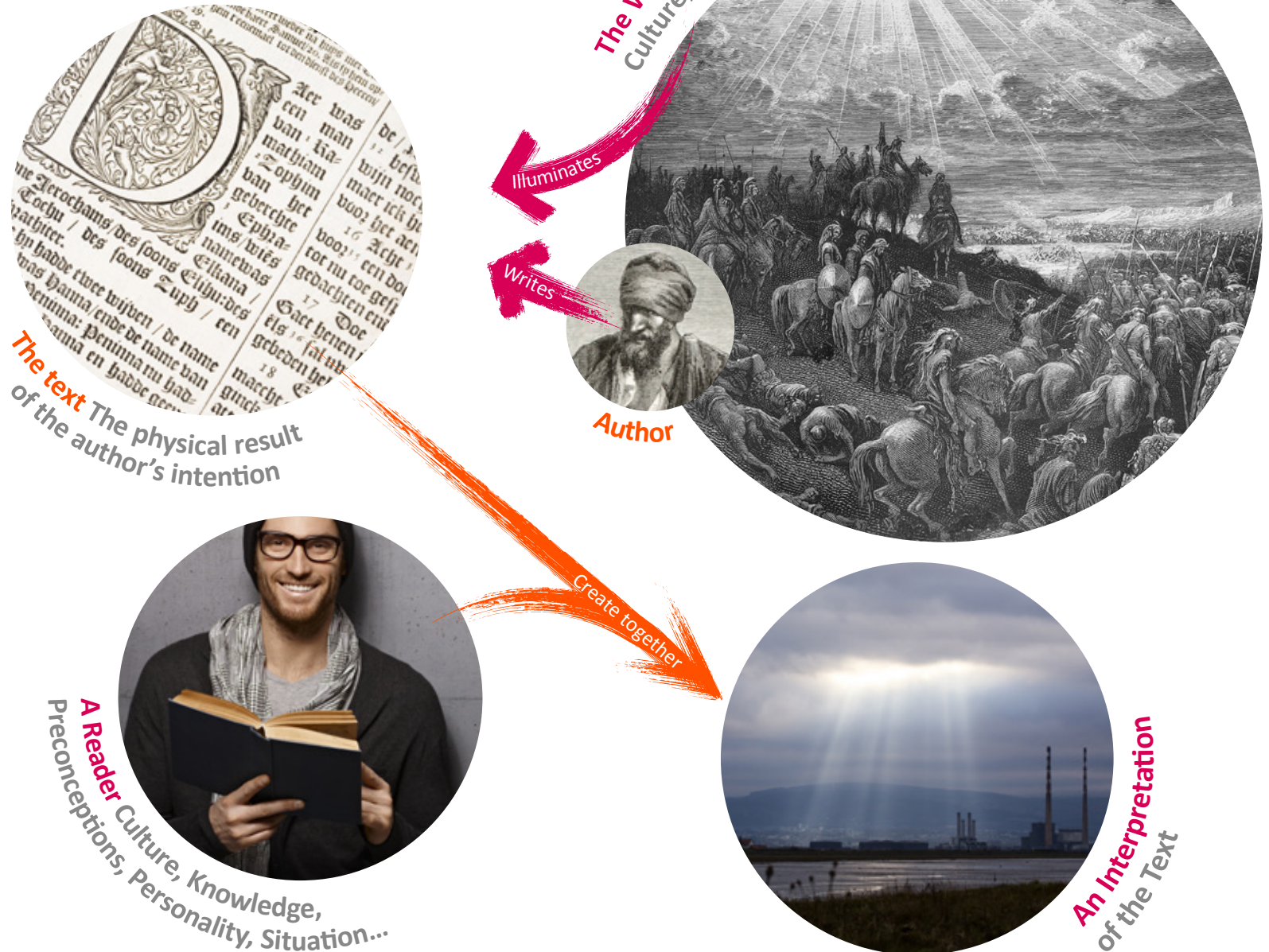
An Interpretation

Our picture of interpretation is nearly complete. We have the author. We have the world of the text, which illuminates the texts it helps create. We have the text and the reader, which come together to form an interpretation. One interpretation can be drastically different from another, depending on the reader. Still, we very much want to come to some kind of agreement about our interpretations. It's not particularly helpful if each of the twenty million Adventists worldwide has a different interpretation of every single text in the Bible!

That's why it is useful to think about the best way to read texts. Read on to learn more.

Guide to Interpretation

Textual interpretation is complicated. The world of the text, the reader, and the text itself all play a role in the reading process.



How Do You Interpret the Bible?



Reading is a complicated exercise. The Bible was written many years ago, in a very different culture than our own. That makes it doubly difficult to interpret, and to apply to our time and culture. It is certainly possible, however, especially once you have a good reading strategy.

One of the most useful ways to interpret the Bible well is through universal principles. They offer a way to get from 'what it *meant*' to what it *means*'. This approach has a theological basis. We believe that the Bible was written for a specific occasion, in a specific culture, but we also believe that it transcends culture. We believe it speaks to all people in every era. This means that there must be a reliable way to get a lesson for the present from the words of the past.

Example

Let me give you an example. In Colossians 4:17, Paul writes 'And say to Archippus, "See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.'" Archippus is long dead now, and we know very little about him. We have absolutely no idea what task he had, so there's not much we can interpret from this text. We can still do something with it today, however. Even though the text is talking about Archippus and not about us, we can see a principle behind the message: when the Lord asks you to do something, do it. Archippus was told to keep doing the Lord's work, but so are we. Could this verse be suggesting that we too should persevere? That could well be a good application for Paul's words in our own lives.

In this example, then, we moved from 'what it meant' (Archippus must persevere) to 'what it means' (we should persevere in our work for the Lord). How exactly did we do that? It felt simple, but was also quite complicated. We went through a five-step process, which you can follow on the next page.

1 Simple Meaning

Even though the words in front of us seem as plain as day, finding the simple meaning is not always easy. We need to think very carefully about the literal meaning of the text, in the original situation and for the original readers. To do this well, you need to study the language, culture, audience, and author of the text. Historical knowledge is also important. With some hard work, however, you can come to a good understanding of the text's simple meaning.

2 Deeper Principle

The simple meaning of a text is important, but that only tells us what a text meant for its first readers. We are peering over their shoulders, and we have a different situation, culture, and language. The simple meaning isn't always applicable to us, and so we must dig deeper. This is where the work of the Holy Spirit becomes apparent; we see the same overriding themes returning again and again. Behind the simple meaning lies an eternal principle. Once we have identified this principle, we are one step closer to identifying the text's meaning for us.

3 Original Situation

The text was written for a specific situation, and we need to understand what that was in order to understand what is being said. 'Turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea' was good advice for the Israelites in Numbers 14:25, but in our situation random desert treks are probably not advisable.

4 Comparable Situation

Once we have a good grip on the original situation, we must then find a comparable situation in our own lives. Numbers 14:25 might be applicable when your car's SatNav is broken, but a situation where you haven't listened to God is a better comparison.

5 Context (General & Specific)

When we have a principle and a comparable situation to apply it to, we are very close to understanding the meaning of the text for us today. We just need to place it in context. This context is different for each person, and for each group. The way you apply a principle will depend a lot on the situation to which you are applying it. You will need to look for the best application of the deeper principle in your particular context.

What It Means

Once you have followed this process, you will finally arrive at the best interpretation of the text for your time, and your culture.

Let's use this five-step method on one of the texts about slavery to try and arrive at a good interpretation. We'll take the following passage:

When a slave-owner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives for a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property. (Exodus 21:20–21)

1 Simple Meaning

The simple meaning relates to a context and culture of slavery. In this context a slave's existence was often a misery. They were little more than property, and the slave owners mistreated them. The Bible talk about beating slaves, which happened regularly, and adds a few restrictions. A slave owner may beat a slave, but not so hard that the slave dies immediately. If this happens, the slave owner must be punished. If the slave does not die immediately but lives for a few days after the beating, this is less problematic. The loss of valuable property is punishment enough for the slave owner.

2 Deeper Principle

Many deeper principles can be drawn from this example. In a culture that condoned widespread abuse of slaves, the Bible actually argues the opposite: a slave owner does not have the right to beat his slave to death. We don't have slaves, and so it's impossible for us to abuse them. The simple meaning of this text has no influence on how we live our lives, but deeper principles might. One lesson could be that we should value the people for whom we are responsible

When you're responsible for someone you must take care of them, regardless of what everyone else is doing.

3 Original Situation

The original situation talks about slavery.

4 Comparable Situation

There are a number of comparable situations in our day and age in which we are responsible for others. We might think of the people who work for us, or of the labourers who make our appliances and electronics in China, or we may even think of our children. The possibilities are endless, but for this example we will look specifically at office employees.

5 General & Specific Context

If we see the principle 'look after the people who are your responsibility' in the context of a work relationship, then we will treat our employees with compassion and care. We might reconsider the effects of our decisions, which tend to be driven by economic concerns. We would look at the influence we have on their family lives. Perhaps we would send them all home early once or twice, or give them a raise. Perhaps we would give them a second chance when we could have fired them.

Conclusion

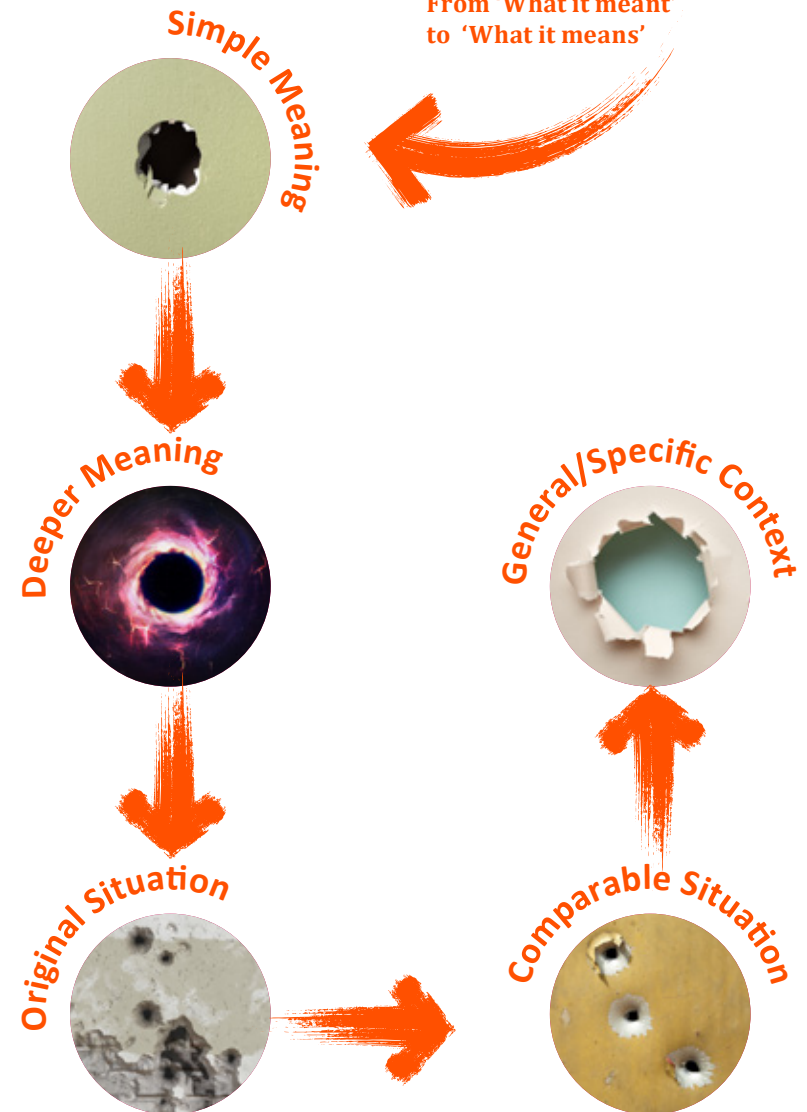
As you can see, a text that was actually about something completely different in Biblical times can still be applied and interpreted today. Slavery may no longer be a concern, but Exodus 21:20–21 can still play a meaningful role in our lives.

How Should We Interpret the Bible?

This diagram shows a useful way to get from the simple meaning for the original audience to the contemporary meaning for us.

Universal Principles

From 'What it meant' to 'What it means'



More Information
www.adventist.nl/lezen



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