Good Word Schedule
"Ezra and Nehemiah"
October, November, December 2019

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GOOD WORD 2019.4 **"Ezra and Nehemiah"**
Lesson #1 - October 5 **Ezra 4:1-7; 7:1-28**
– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Making Sense of History: Zerubbabel and Ezra

Leading Question: To what extent can we trust in Providence to make things happen when human beings have such powers to derail God's plans?

In this new series of lessons on Ezra and Nehemiah, we also bring into focus several other important biblical characters: the prophets Haggai and Zechariah; and Zerubbabel, the governor of the province of Judah who is always associated with Joshua the high priest and who spearheaded the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

A crucial issue that will remain important throughout the quarter is the comparison between the methods and message of Jesus with the often harsh approach represented by Ezra and Nehemiah. If Jesus is the clearest revelation of God, then how does the revelation of God in Jesus relate to other revelations that don't seem to be so clear?

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were not written by the men whose names are attached to them. But both books include some first-person accounts featuring both men. For that reason scholars often speak of the books as containing the "memoirs" of Ezra and Nehemiah.

It is also worth noting that the conclusion of 2 Chronicles (36:22-23) and the first verses of Ezra (1:1-3a) are virtually identical. The question has been raised whether or not they might have been together as one book at an earlier point in their history. Most scholars do not consider that likely.

Question: Why did the first returnees under Zerubbabel immediately begin worshiping at the temple site, even though the temple had not been rebuilt? (Ezra 3:1-6)

Question: Why was there both weeping and rejoicing when the foundation of the temple was finally laid? (Ezra 3:8-13)

A prophesied return? The official study guide emphasizes the precision of the predicted return, citing Jeremiah 25:11-12 and 29:10, and Daniel 9:1-2. While some prophecies in the Bible seem to be precise fulfillments, others, such as Jonah's 40-day pronouncement against Ninevah, turn out to be conditional. Is there any way of knowing in advance if a prophecy is conditional? Ellen White's 1883 statement declares that all God's "promises" and "threatenings" are alike conditional:

> The angels of God in their messages to men represent time as very short. Thus it has always been presented to me. It is true that time has continued longer than we expected in the early days of this message. Our Saviour did not appear as soon as we hoped. But has the Word of the Lord failed? Never! It should be remembered that the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional. – MS 4, 1883,

unpublished until *Evangelism*, 695 [1946], and then more completely in 1 SM 67 [1958]. The original response was apparently never sent to anyone.

Getting the job done. Finding the right person for the right job can be a challenge. Ezra was known as a scholar and a student of the law (cf. Ezra 7:6, 10). But what Jerusalem really needed was a man of action. That was Nehemiah. He had the wall of Jerusalem built in 52 days after his arrival! Just how remarkable that is can be seen in a survey of the dates involving Jerusalem and its temple. These are the important ones:

587/586	Destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar
538/537	Cyrus' decree that the Jews may return to Jerusalem
515	Temple completed under the direction of Zerubbabel in the reign of Darius
458/457	Decree of Artaxerxes to rebuild Jerusalem/arrival of Ezra
445/444	Arrival of Nehemiah in Jerusalem/City walls rebuilt in 52 days.

Question: Given the remarkable delays and large gaps, what do terms like "prediction," "providence," "conditionalism" mean when interpreting events described in Scripture?

GOOD WORD 2019.4 **"Ezra and Nehemiah"**
Lesson #2 - October 12 **Nehemiah 1-2**
– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Nehemiah

Leading Question: Is it always clear when circumstances are bad enough to require a man of action – like Nehemiah – to bring about God's will?

The Prayers of a Man of Action. Two aspects of Nehemiah's inner and personal life come to light the first time we meet him in Scripture: a) His deep emotion over the dismal conditions in his home city, Jerusalem; b) His heart-felt prayer, a prayer of confession of sin and a cry for help. A closer look at both can be helpful. And all of this moaning and praying took place over a four-month period after he had gotten the report of the dismal situation in Jerusalem.

Question: If Nehemiah was such an important official in the Persian court, how was it that he allowed himself to show his emotions when "on the job"? (Neh. 1:1-4)

Question: To what extent is Nehemiah's prayer a model for us in times of deep distress?

> **Comment**: Several features stand out in Nehemiah's prayer (1:4-11). First, he includes himself with the sinners among God's people (1:6 - 7). Second, he lets the Lord know that he is fully aware of the "threatened" results of apostasy (1:8). But third, he reminds the Lord of the divine promises to restore his people (1:9-11)

The King's Cupbearer Goes to Work. Nehemiah must have had very good relations with the king, for Artaxerxes not only granted him a leave, but also appointed him governor over the Jews in Jerusalem. Furthermore, he granted Nehemiah an armed guard and letters of introduction to Asaph, "the keeper of the king's forest" (2:8), so that he could receive the needed materials for rebuilding the city.

Nehemiah's approach differed markedly from that of Ezra, for Ezra said that he was "ashamed" to ask the king for protection (Ezra 8:21-23). By contrast, the fearless Nehemiah asked for everything – and got it!

Nehemiah was only on site three days before he took a night tour of the city's perimeter and discovered just how bad the situation was. Remarkably he didn't tell anyone of his plans. Only when he had a clear picture of the need, did he call the people together to lay out the plan.

Nehemiah 2:17-21 encapsulates the challenge and the plan. Nehemiah tersely described to the people the great need, but also noted that "the hand of my God had been gracious upon me." He also told them of the king's support. According to the biblical record, the reaction of the people was immediate and spontaneous. Realizing that the city walls had been in ruins since 487/486, some 140 years, they exclaimed: "Let us start building!" (Neh. 2:18)

Question: In light of the striking contrasts between Ezra and Nehemiah, could one perhaps speak of "salvation by temperament"? And given his firm approach to the people, one thinks of a quote from Goethe: "The man of action is always ruthless. No one has a conscience but an observer."

Question: How does Nehemiah's approach to issues and conflicts compare to that of Jesus?

Contrasting Ellen White quotes on the work of Ezra and Nehemiah. The work of Ezra and Nehemiah provide a good opportunity to show how the text of Scripture offers an author (e.g. Ellen White) the opportunity to illustrate opposite (but both positive) Christian virtues:

Dependence on God, Ezra does not ask for help

> In this matter, Ezra and his companions saw an opportunity to magnify the name of God before the heathen. Faith in the power of the living God would be strengthened if the Israelites themselves should now reveal implicit faith in their divine Leader. They therefore determined to put their trust wholly in Him. They would ask for no guard of soldiers. They would give the heathen no occasion to ascribe to the strength of man the glory that belongs to God alone. They could not afford to arouse in the minds of their heathen friends one doubt as to the sincerity of their dependence on [615/616] God as His people. Strength would be gained, not through wealth, not through the power and influence of idolatrous men, but through the favor of God. Only by keeping the law of the Lord before them, and striving to obey it, would they be protected. – PK 615.2

Dependence on God, Nehemiah asks for help

> His request to the king had been so favorably received that Nehemiah was encouraged to ask for still further assistance. To give dignity and authority to his mission, as well as to provide protection on the journey, he asked for and secured a military escort. He obtained royal letters to the governors of the provinces beyond the Euphrates, the territory through which he must pass on his way to Judea; and he obtained, also, a letter to the keeper of the king's forest in the mountains of Lebanon, directing him to furnish such timber as would be needed. That there might be no occasion for complaint that he had exceeded his commission, Nehemiah was careful to have the authority and privileges accorded him, clearly defined. – PK 633.2

Question: Are critics of Scripture (and of Ellen White) too quick to condemn practices that are quite normal in the practice of devotional writers?

GOOD WORD 2019.4 **"Ezra and Nehemiah"**
Lesson #3 - October 19 **Ezra 7:10; Nehemiah 1:1-11**
– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: God's Call

Leading question: Does God call a person because of that person's gifts, or is it sometimes the case that God's call empowers a person to do the God-given task?

Contrasting roles for Ezra and Nehemiah. Both in general as well as specific terms, the work which God called Ezra and Nehemiah to do differ rather dramatically: Ezra was the devout academic whose place in life made use of his careful study of the word of God; by contrast, Nehemiah was a man of action. There is no biblical record that he pored over Scripture seeking wisdom, knowledge, and guidance for the task of building the wall.

Question: Is there any way to tell whether or not God "pre-prepared" both Ezra and Nehemiah through their genes and chromosomes for the work that he "called" them to do? Is it possible that he quite suddenly gifted them with the needed capabilities, quite apart from their natural impulses?

A Question About Examples. Do any of these examples suggest a "emergency" calling that went contrary to one's natural inclinations?

> **Moses**: When Moses killed the Egyptian, an event that triggered his escape from Egypt, he appears quite confident, headstrong, even arrogant. So God sent him out to herd sheep for forty years, a "calling" that seemed to have unnerved him for the public ministry Against Pharaoh. Exodus 3-4 records a long list of "excuses" that Moses conjured up in his attempt to evade the "call." How does all this relate to the question of genetics, preparation, and divine calling?
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> **Amos**. In Amos 7:14-15, Amos defends himself against the attacks of Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, by declaring that he wasn't a prophet by nature or preparation. He was simply a herdsman and an "dresser of Sycamore figs" whom the Lord called to confront the people of Israel. Is this an example of a calling that goes against a person's "natural" inclinations?
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> **Jesus' Disciples.** A remarkable assessment of the surprising "talents" of Peter and John is recorded in Acts 4:13. When these men were taken into custody by the Jewish authorities because of the effectiveness of their ministry, the author of Acts records the reaction of the authorities as follows: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus" (NRSV). What does this narrative tell us about natural and special endowments and God's call?

The official study guide includes this interesting comment relative to the passion common to both Ezra and Nehemiah, a passion that led both of them to volunteer, but for quite different tasks in God's work: "Sometimes we get the idea that if we love something it must not be from God, because God will give us only difficult tasks that we might not want to do. But if we are walking with God, the desires to do something we love are often God given. God wants us to have a passion for what we do for Him."

Predestined to be saved (or lost)? Or to serve in a particular capacity for God? Or to be transformed? Romans 8:29 sheds some tantalizing light on the question of God's calling. Under the general heading of "predestination," these are the words of Paul: "for those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. . . ." (NRSV). Is it possible that the clearest application of the word "call" to God's people is the call to be transformed, i.e. "conformed" to the image of God's son?

A Question about Free Will. If humans genuinely have free will, then how can God precisely predict the future on anything? Perhaps the Adventist understanding of "conditionalism" is more important than we have realized.

GOOD WORD 2019.4 **"Ezra and Nehemiah"**
Lesson #4 - October 26 **Ezra 4 - 5; Nehemiah 4 - 6; Haggai**
– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Facing Opposition

Leading question: If Nehemiah armed his workers in the face of opposition, what does that mean for the followers of Jesus?

Opposition seems to be an almost constant theme in the narratives presented in Ezra and Nehemiah. Sometimes the opposition seems to have been successful. At other times, God clearly over-ruled to save his people.

The value of opposition to personal development is suggested by this Ellen White quotation:

> Man can shape circumstances, but circumstances should not be allowed to shape the man. We should seize upon circumstances as instruments by which to work. We are to master them, but should not permit them to master us.
>
> Men of power are those who have been opposed, baffled, and thwarted. But calling their energies into action, the obstacles they meet prove to them positive blessings. They gain self-reliance. Conflict and perplexity call for the exercise of trust in God and for that firmness which develops power. – *Ministry of Healing*, 500

Question: The example of "opposition" in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that is potentially most troubling for the followers of Jesus, is the one which led Nehemiah to arm the people of Judah. Under what circumstances might it be appropriate for the follower of Jesus to follow Nehemiah in this respect?

The Origins of the Samaritan Schism. In the New Testament era, the Jews and the Samaritans were not on good terms with each other. The roots of that divide go back to a story told in 2 Kings 17:24-41.

When the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, they followed their usual brutal custom of transporting the victims to other parts of the empire and bringing foreigners from elsewhere to settle in Israel. For Israel, such an approach resulted in both mixed blood and mixed religion. These inhabitants of the northern kingdom were the ones who came with an offer to help rebuild the temple. Fearing the possibility of mixing the worship of Yahweh with the worship of other gods, the Israelites, under Zerubbabel, refused their help. Understandably, perhaps, this angered the "opposition" which then embarked on a consistent campaign of opposition and sabotage, both during the building of the temple at the time of Zerubbabel and during the building of the wall under Nehemiah.

Question. When is it safe to accept help from non-believers, or does the danger of compromise always make cooperation dangerous? Both Ezra and Nehemiah accepted material aid from the king. The king's motivation may have been to ensure that the God of the Jews be properly placated by the king's gifts. Are there any modern parallels in the church today?

Prophets to the Rescue. God sent two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to encourage the people to build the temple. They pointed out that their lack of material prosperity was no doubt linked with their unfaithfulness in religious practice. Their intervention helped, so that the temple was completed in 515 BC.

Question: The prophets were very pointed in their criticisms of the people, and sometimes these methods had a desirable effect. But does vinegar work better than honey? Once, in writing to A. T. Jones, Ellen White made this sobering comment:

> Those who present the eternal principles of truth need the holy oil emptied from the two olive branches into the heart. This will flow forth in words that will reform, but not exasperate. The truth is to be spoken in love. Then the Lord Jesus by His Spirit will supply the force and the power. That is his work.– *Testimonies* 6:123.

Paul, in writing to the Corinthian church, gave a choice: "Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?" 1 Cor. 4:23, NRSV? Jesus, too, could be very pointed. His woes against the Pharisees (Matt. 23) are biting. What does all that mean for Ellen White? Was she being overly idealistic when she wrote these words?

> "The Lord wants His people to follow other methods than that of condemning wrong, even though the condemnation be just. He wants us to do something more than to hurl at our adversaries charges which only drive them further from the truth. The work which Christ came to do in our world was not to erect barriers and constantly thrust upon the people the fact that they were wrong." – *Testimonies* 6:121-122

Question: Was Nehemiah coming close to the ideal when he challenged the people to join him in rebuilding the wall?

> Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with the gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good. (Neh. 2:17-18, NRSV)

– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Violating the Spirit of the Law

Leading question: Can an example of generosity lead the greedy to be less grasping and help them become more generous?

Three issues attract our attention in Nehemiah 5: 1) the danger of greed; 2) the danger of money; and 3) the power of example.

Question: Is there any clue in Nehemiah 5 as to how Nehemiah was able to avoid both the danger of greed and the danger of money? He seems to have been incredibly generous throughout the narrative.

Question: Is there any evidence in the text that could illumine Nehemiah's possible motivation for being so generous? Nehemiah 5:18 could be taken as an indication that he was being motivated by the hope of eternal reward, or the fear of the Lord if he were to be greedy: "Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people." How does such a "boast" come across to our western ears? Or is that just our western culture at work?

Comment. The beginning of Nehemiah 5 records how the Jewish leaders were greedily taxing their fellow countrymen. Nehemiah roundly condemns them for their greed.

The address to the enemy within abruptly follows the narrative describing the threats from external opponents. The story is told in the first half of Nehemiah 5. The Jewish leaders were oppressing their fellow Jews, lending money to them at usurious rates and taking possession of their lands, houses, and children. Nehemiah confronted the greedy ones and his abrupt words apparently worked. The people promised to end their abuses of their fellow Jews.

Question: Is this another example of Nehemiah using strong medicine with the Israelites? To borrow Paul's language at the end of 1Corinthians, was this a helpful use of the "stick" (1 Corinthians 4:21)?

The last half of Nehemiah 5 presents a radical contrast with its narrative of Nehemiah's remarkable generosity to his people. For twelve years while he was governor, he had not made use of the governor's food allowance. In addition, he fed 150 people at his table. Each day, that required "one ox and six choice sheep" plus additional fowls. Nehemiah is quoted as saying that it was the fear of the Lord that motivated him. And at the end of the chapter, he reminds the Lord: "Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people" (Neh. 5:18, NRSV).

Question: What does the New Testament say about the role of money in the experience of God's people?

> **Comment:** Jesus, and indeed the whole New Testament has quite a bit to say about money and greed. These passages are especially noteworthy:
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> **Sermon on the Mount:** Matthew 6:24, NRSV: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth"
>
> **Rich Young Ruler:** Luke 18:22, NRSV: "When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."
>
> It is worth noting that Jesus asked the "rich young ruler" for everything. But the taxpayer Zacchaeus only gave part of his estate and was affirmed by Jesus (Luke 19:1-10) What made the difference?

Question: What biblical examples of generosity could help us grasp the power of a good example in matters of stewardship? Did Nehemiah's example make a difference with his people?

> **Comment:** Jesus' story of the widow's "two mites"(Mark 12:42-43; Luke 21:2-3), may not have made much difference initially, but the widow's self-sacrificing offering has no doubt influenced millions of Christians to be more generous.

GOOD WORD 2019.4 **"Ezra and Nehemiah"**
Lesson #6 - November 9 **Nehemiah 8**
– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: The Reading of the Word

Leading question: In an age when reading seems to be less important, can the example of long hours of reading make a difference for good in today's world.?

Nehemiah 8 is a remarkable chapter that features long hours of the public reading of Scripture. Four key issues are worth exploring here: 1) What are the gains and losses that come from the interruption of hard work for the public reading of Scripture? 2) To what extent is the public reading of Scripture in Nehemiah's day comparable to the "oral" model for the modern Contemporary English Version, the first modern version to be heard by the ear? 3) How does one know when to weep or rejoice when seeking the Lord? 4) This event was triggered by lay people: Is that model for today?

Questions: Nehemiah 8 suggests that the returned Jews dropped all their other activities to spend several mornings in the public reading of Scripture.

*What were the real benefits of such a dramatic break in the work routine?

*Does the Sabbath represent the same kind of break from our work routine? Would it have the same kind of positive benefit.

Questions: The public reading of Scripture appears to be something unique. These questions come mind:

*Could this form of public worship be made into a "habit"?

*In our day a recent Bible translation, the Contemporary English Version, is the first translation designed to be heard by the ear. Has the electronic explosion changed the social situation enough to make the Bible Society's rationale obsolete? If everyone has their Bible on their cell phone, what does that men for the "unifying" role of the reading of Scripture?

*What are the plusses and minuses of having the Bible on our phones?

Questions: In Nehemiah 8, the people wept when they heard the reading of Scripture. Nehemiah rebuked them and told them that it was time to rejoice. These questions present themselves:

*When is it appropriate for a church leader to call the people to account for their emotional reactions to the reading of Scripture?

*Is it possible to "command" our emotions to take a different course?

*If nearly a half of the psalms in our Bibles are laments/complaints, what does that suggest about modern forms of "be happy" religion? Was Nehemiah the forerunner of the prosperity Gospel and all its feel good offspring?

Questions: In Nehemiah 8, the public reading of Scripture was instigated by lay people. There is no recorded rebuke of Ezra and Nehemiah, but these questions come to mind:

*Is there an implied rebuke of the leaders when the laity took the lead?

*Is this chapter a model for the church today when the leaders seem to have neglected their proper role?

*In Adventism, a crucial turning point for the church was the year 1888. Are there points of contact between 1888 and Nehemiah 8 represented by this EGW quote?

> Peter exhorts his brethren to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" [2 Pet. 3:18]. Whenever the people of God are growing in grace, they will be constantly obtaining a clearer understanding of His word. They will discern new light and beauty in its sacred truths. This has been true in the history of the church in all ages, and thus it will continue to the end. But as real spiritual life declines, it has ever been the tendency to cease to advance in the knowledge of the truth. Men rest satisfied with the light already received from God's word and discourage any further [706/707] investigation of the Scriptures. They become conservative and seek to avoid discussion.
>
> The fact that there is no controversy or agitation among God's people should not be regarded as conclusive evidence that they are holding fast to sound doctrine. There is reason to fear that they may not be clearly discriminating between truth and error. When no new questions are started by investigation of the Scriptures, when no difference of opinion arises which will set men to searching the Bible for themselves to make sure that they have the truth, there will be many now, as in ancient times, who will hold to tradition and worship they know not what. (*Testimonies* 5:706-707 [1889]; also in GW 297-98 and CWE 38-39])

Questions: Nehemiah 8:8 is generally seen by biblical scholars as a clear example of the development of the "targum," an Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Scriptures. The people could no longer understand Hebrew, since it was no longer the spoken language of the returned exiles. In Jesus' day the everyday language was "Aramaic," not Hebrew. A few phrases of Aramaic are included as transliterations of the original Hebrew. When Jesus raised Jairus' daughter for example, his words were transliterated (as well as translated): "He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum,' which means, 'Little girl, get up!'" (Mark 10:41, NRSV).

Interestingly enough, when Luke tells the same story, he drops the transliteration of the Aramaic and only gives us the translation: "But he took her by the hand and called out, 'Child, get up!'" (Luke 8:41, NRSV). All that gives rise to these questions:

*Could the difference between Luke and Mark help resolve the differences between those who want only the KJV and those who want a modern translation?

*Does the turn to Aramaic in Nehemiah 8:8, link up with the two versions of the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 10, Luke 8) in such a way as to justify both the use of the "formal equivalent" translations (KJV and its many offspring: (e.g., RV, RSV, NRSV, AV, NASB, NKJV, ESV), those that seek to stay as close to the language of the author's day, and the "dynamic equivalent" translations, those that seek to adapt to the language of the receptor readers (e.g. NIV, CEV, Message, NLT)?

What follows is a sequence of three articles on Bible translations, originally published in the NPUC *Gleaner*. Nehemiah 8:8 raises the kinds of questions that this cluster seeks to address.

"Longings, Fears, and Suspicions"

By Alden Thompson

#1 of 3 on Bible Translations, North Pacific Union Gleaner, 1994.06.20

At the editor's request, Bible translations are on the docket for my next few columns. The topic is hazardous – like last day events or music – but still worthy, for not since the Reformation has there been such a blizzard of new translations as we now see. And we owe much to the Reformers for paying the price for us. Someone has noted that of all the sixteenth century translators of the English Bible, only Miles Coverdale died a natural death in his own bed.

Though my own position will become clear, I want most of all to address the topic in a way that will help us understand why convictions are so divided on the issue. For starters, I would note that Ellen White was not speaking of any one translation when she said, "Cling to the Bible, as it reads, and stop your criticism in regard to its validity, and obey the Word, and not one of you will be lost" (*Selected Messages* 1:18).

I am convinced that *any* translation can point to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Some translations are better than others; some are better for particular purposes; some are clearer; some are safer; and yes, some can be misleading in certain passages – but never so misleading as to cost an honest person a place in God's kingdom.

In the early history of the King James Version, for example, careless typesetters left a remarkable trail of "misleading" errors. The "Wicked Bible" (1631) dropped the "not" out of the seventh command, making it "Thou shalt commit adultery!" – a slip that cost the King's printers, Barker and Lucas, a three hundred pound fine from Archbishop Laud. The "Murderers' Bible" (1795) read "Let the children first be killed" (instead of "filled") for Mark 7:27. The "Wife-hater Bible" (1810) read "wife" for "life" in Luke 14:26: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother...yea, and his own wife also." The "Sin on" Bible (1716) reads for John 5:14, "Sin on more" instead of "sin no more." – F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1978), p. 109.

But for all the embarrassment that such errors have caused, I can't imagine an honest soul mistaking the true teaching of Scripture. The very fame of the "errors" indicates how obvious they were. In time, as Edgar Goodspeed noted, the King James Version became "one of the most accurately printed books in the world." – Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Translators to the Reader: Preface to the King James Version 1611* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), p. 2.

Maybe that very accuracy helps explain why "new" translations arouse fears and suspicions: Don't put my anchor at risk! We'll consider those fears and suspicions below and several times before we're through. But first a look on the positive side:

1. LONGING. The Lord has used new translations to satisfy a deep longing for the Word of God, something hard to grasp amidst our feast of Bibles. During the time of the Reformers, however, owning an English Bible could mean a fine, imprisonment, or death. In 1546, for example, a royal decree from Henry VIII declared that "No man or woman of what

estate, condition, or degree, was after the last day of August, to receive have, take, or keep, Tyndale's or Coverdale's New Testament."

A plaintive human response appeared on the flyleaf of a copy of Polydore Vergil's *History of Inventions* (1546):

> "When I kepe Mr Letymers shepe I bout thys boke when the Testament was oberragated, that shepeherdys myght not rede hit. I pray God amende that blindness. Wryt by Robert Wyllyams, keppyng shepe upon Seynbury hill, 1546." – Cited in H. Wheeler Robinson, ed., *The Bible in its Ancient and English Versions* (Oxford, 1940), p. 180.

2. FEAR. On the negative side, fear is perhaps the most widespread reaction to new translations – fear that a novel translation could twist biblical teachings, undermine Adventist landmarks, or simply introduce change. One newsletter put it this way:

> "The faithful are being harrassed by those who are determined to change our church, our beliefs, and our way of life. They are trying to change our worship, our music, and our thinking. They are trying to change what we do and why we do it. They are trying to change our very morality."

I believe modern versions can actually make Adventist landmarks more secure. Yet my answers may not work for you. That's alright. Just "cling" to *your* Bible "as it reads" and "obey the Word" (cf. *Selected Messages* 1:18).

3. SUSPICION. Unresolved fears can intensify and turn into suspicion. That is now what haunts the translation debate, for some see new translations as part of a "Jesuit" or "New Age" plot. The troubling dilemma is that any attempt to refute a "conspiracy" theory can simply be written off as part of the conspiracy itself. Clifford Goldstein told me that when he addressed the "Jesuit" issue (*Liberty Alert* 2:2 [March/April 1993], p. 14), he was deluged with letters and phone calls accusing him of selling out to the enemy or simply being deceived.

I worry about literature that is critical of any translation of the Bible. A struggling soul could question the very words that God has sent to help them. And as far as our discussions here are concerned, I hope we can hear Ellen White's counsel to A. T. Jones to treat "the bitterest opponents" with "respect and deference" and every person as "honest" (*Testimonies* 6:122). By God's grace both the alarmed defenders of the King James Version and the alarmed defenders of modern translations can view alternate convictions as sincere attempts to be honest before God. We should by all means try to convince each other of what we believe is true. But along the way, trust brings us closer to the kingdom than suspicion.

"Still the King's Speech"

By Alden Thompson

#3 of 3 on Bible Translations, North Pacific Union Gleaner, 1994.07.11

Ellen White warned against "learned men" who "unsettle minds" about the Bible's inspiration. "Brethren," she wrote, "let not a mind or hand be engaged in criticizing the Bible" – *Selected Messages* 1:17.

Amen! But now my dilemma: How can I avoid "criticizing" the Bible in the debate over the King James Version and modern translations? Defending one side easily turns into criticism of the other and defending both offends those who believe "God wrote only one Bible." Anything I say could "unsettle minds"!

But the mailbag has convinced me that the church needs a clear defense of both old and new translations. I have been surprised at the widespread feelings against modern translations. Adventist publications have long assumed that the debate was over. It is not.

Are the complexities of the translation debate essential for salvation? No! The Bible is a powerful guide to salvation, but is not *essential* for it. If Christ commends in the judgment those who have "known little of theology" but have "cherished His principles," if those "ignorant of the written law of God" "will not perish" (*Desire of Ages,* 638), then a particular understanding of complex passages of Scripture cannot be central even for those who have the Scriptures. Simplicity is our word. "If one had no other text in the Bible," Ellen White exclaimed after quoting John 3:16, "this alone would be a guide for the soul" (*Testimonies to Ministers,* 370). "We thank God that the Bible is prepared for the poor man as well as for the learned" (*Selected Messages* 1:18).

That same love for ordinary people compelled Wycliffe to brave the ire of the church and translate the Bible into English (1380). "No man was so rude a scholar," he declared, "but that he might learn the words of the Gospel according to his simplicity" (cited in H. Wheeler Robinson, ed., *Ancient and English Versions of the Bible* [Oxford, 1940], pp. 137-38). Ellen White said that through his translation he "placed in the hands of the English people a light which should never be extinguished," doing "more to break the fetters of ignorance and vice, more to liberate and elevate his country, than was ever achieved by the most brilliant victories on fields of battle" – *The Great Controversy,* 88.

Which version did he translate? The Latin Vulgate, the "Catholic" Bible. And here we must face B. G. Wilkinson's theory that the KJV belongs to a "pure" line of manuscripts that goes back through the Reformers, Erasmus, and the Waldenses to the Apostles, while the versions differing from the KJV represent the "corrupted" line of "Catholic" manuscripts (Benjamin G. Wilkinson, *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated* [Washington, D. C., 1930; reprint, Leaves-of-Autumn Books, 1993]). Even outside of Adventist circles, Wilkinson is known and cited by the more flamboyant supporters of the "KJV only" (See, for example, David Otis Fuller, ed., *Which Bible?* [1990 (1970)] and G. A. Riplinger, *New Age Bible Versions* [1993]).

While historical research does not support the theory, I am more interested here in practical matters. Why, for example, would Ellen White wholeheartedly praise Wycliffe's Bible if it was "corrupted"? She knew its shortcomings, stating in her comments on Tyndale, the translator of the first printed English New Testament (1525), that Wycliffe's Bible "had been

translated from the Latin text, which contained many errors." She also noted that with Erasmus's Greek New Testament (1516) "for the first time, the word of God was printed in the original tongue." "In his work many errors of former versions were corrected" (*Great Controversy,* 245). In short, she praised Wycliffe for his translation and Tyndale and Erasmus for correcting it!

The KJV translators also readily claimed both "good" and "better" Bibles as God's Word. They affirmed that the Greek Old Testament, the Bible most often quoted by the New Testament writers, was still the Word of God. But because it "dissenteth from the Original in many places" (Edgar Goodspeed, ed., *Translators to the Reader* [Chicago, 1935], p. 29), they unhesitatingly based their translation on the Hebrew original, faithfully following the two great principles that drove all the Reformation translators: 1) Back to the best manuscripts in the original languages; 2) Forward to the current language of the people.

Today, the Bible Societies continue the work of the Reformation translators. Like Erasmus, scholars examine ancient manuscripts in order to come as close as possible to the original. Then faithful translators follow in the footsteps of Tyndale and Luther, bringing God's Word into the language of the people. As of the end of 1993, at least one book of the Bible was available in 2062 languages and dialects with some 400 additional projects underway. Still, one billion people, 20% of the world's population, are without the Word of God in their own language.

Tragically, however, because of supposedly "corrupted" manuscripts, the "one-Bible only" reasoning calls in question all that Bible Society work. Recently I heard of a Korean campmeeting where the believers were alarmed to hear that the only Korean Bible available was based on "corrupted" manuscripts. Think of it: over 100,000 Adventists in Korea, plus myriads of other Christians – all won and nurtured by a "corrupted" Bible? Please no! Undoubtedly the Korean Bible could be improved just as Tyndale and Erasmus improved on Wycliffe. But don't dismiss it as "corrupted."

I like the way the KJV translators compared the Bible to the King's speech before parliament, for in whatever language the speech appears, they declared, and however poorly translated, it "is still the King's speech" (Goodspeed, p. 29). Oh that those words could be in every KJV Bible. Those godly translators have much to tell us. Even today – especially today – we would do well to listen.

"Gored by Every Sharp Tongue"

By Alden Thompson

#2 of 3 on Bible Translations, North Pacific Union Gleaner, 1994.08.01

The KJV translators expected to be gored by sharp tongues. That's what happens to those who meddle with a person's religion, they said.

Edgar J. Goodspeed discovered they were right when his "American" New Testament appeared in 1923. Amazed by the comments of otherwise educated people, he began urging publishers to again include the original "Translators to the Reader" in printed KJV editions.

No, they said. Too scholarly, too controversial, too obscure. Precisely the point, exclaimed Goodspeed when he himself published the preface. If it were known that "university

professors and scholars" produced the KJV, it would help overcome the "rift between piety and learning that is most dangerous to the church."

Was it controversial? Of course. But why leave the impression that the KJV "descended like the gentle dew from heaven," fully accepted by all?

Was it obscure? Yes, as are long passages from Paul and the prophets in the KJV. Why fault the Bible for not being clear when the problem is in the translation?

Goodspeed felt the preface would help correct two widespread impressions. First, that the KJV is "the original." How many know that numerous Bible translators and revisers, beginning with William Tyndale, produced 95% of what now stands in the KJV? Second, that the KJV is "*the* 'authorized'" Bible, meaning "authorized" by God. But "authorized" simply means approved for use in public worship. The first "authorized" English Bible was the Great Bible of 1539; the second was the Bishops' Bible of 1568; the 1611 KJV was the third.

But now from the original preface, let's let the KJV translators remind us of the problems facing all Bible translators:

1. Change is hard, especially in religion. The preface opens by discussing change. Anyone meddling with Religion, especially the word of God, "setteth himself upon a stage to be gloated upon by every evil eye, yea, he casteth himself headlong upon pikes, to be gored by every sharp tongue." Translators have a hard life. The KJV people knew that.

2. How can you meditate on Scripture if you don't understand? The translators tell why they are risking the evil eye and the sharp tongue. God's Word cannot bless in an "unknown tongue." Translation opens the window "to let in the light," breaks the shell so "we may eat the kernel." Without it, ordinary people are "like children at Jacob's well (which was deep) without a bucket."

The preface explains that the New Testament used a translation that needed "correction," the Greek Septuagint. Yet the writers used it because it was in the people's language and was "for the greatest part true and sufficient."

With an eye on Catholic foes who opposed giving the Bible to the people, the translators argued *from Catholic history* in favor of popular translations. Because the Romans spoke Latin, many Latin Bible translations soon appeared, but "too many to be all good," says the preface, quoting St. Augustine (d. 430). And since the OT translations were "out of the Greek stream," not the original Hebrew, when the Greek fountain was not "altogether clear," the Latin derived from it was bound to be "muddy."

Enter Jerome (d. 420) to bring order out of the Latin chaos. Still hammering away at Catholic critics with good Catholic weapons, the preface praised St. Jerome as "the best linguist of his age or of any that went before him." He produced the Latin Vulgate, "out of the very [Hebrew] fountains themselves" with such "great learning, judgment, industry and faithfulness, that he hath forever bound the Church unto him, in a debt of special remembrance and thankfulness." And Jerome was down-to-earth, too, producing a people's translation in the Dalmatian tongue. The preface cites many more examples of popular translations *in the Catholic tradition*. No, "to have the Scriptures in the mother tongue is not a quaint conceit lately taken up," says the preface.

The translators chide Rome for her "motherly concern" for "her children," allowing them to have the Bible, but only with a written "license" approved by "their Confessor." As for the

Catholic version in English (Douai, 1609-10), Rome is "not ashamed to confess that we forced them to translate it into English against their wills."

Finally, let's note how the preface responds to three specific objections (from both "brethren" and "Adversaries"):

1. **OBJECTION: Does the new mean the Church has been deceived all along by the old?** No. "We never thought from the beginning, that we should need to make a new Translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one, but to make a good one better."
2. **OBJECTION: The authors were heretics.** If it's good, it doesn't matter who did it, declares the preface, citing both Tertullian (d. 225) and St. Augustine. For years "Origen [d. 254] and the whole church of God" used OT translations produced by "most vile heretics," Symmachus and Theodotion.
3. **OBJECTION: "Altering and amending our Translations so oft."** Is it a fault to go back and improve one's work? Jerome and Augustine did it. So will we, declares the preface. That's what it means to be "sons of the Truth."

To sum up, how tragic to cherish the Bible while rejecting the very principles and ideals that brought it into existence. The KJV is a good translation. Sons and daughters of the Truth will reverence it – along with the labors of all those who have taken a good work and sought to make it better.

GOOD WORD 2019.4 **"Ezra and Nehemiah"**
Lesson #7 - November 16 **Nehemiah 9**
– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Our Forgiving God

Leading question: What can we learn from a lesson entitled "Our Forgiving God," but which includes the call to separate from foreigners?

If one attempts to reconstruct a history of the post-exilic period from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, one would face a number of challenges, not least of which is the "feel" that the books including the following somewhat pasted together from miscellaneous fragments.

Question: If it seems clear that a particular book of the Bible is a compilation, does that diminish its value in comparison with a book that might be constructed in a more "normal" way? The book of Proverbs, for example is clearly a compilation of compilations. Does simply recognizing the possibility of "compilation" reduce the "aura" that more typically accompanies the idea of sacred text.

> **Note from the author of the study guide.** In the teaching of "inspiration," I well remember the comment of a student who initially had been very excited about being able to ask his questions. But several weeks into the class he sounded the alarm: "It feels like the Bible was like a giant blow-up figure from which all of the air has been drained out, leaving only a piece of shriveled-up plastic on the ground."
>
> A similar sense of near disillusionment was expressed by a student who said on the one hand, that she liked the emphasis on "common sense" which George Knight was proposing in the reading of Ellen White. But somehow the use of "common sense" seemed to make "inspired writings feel more ordinary rather than more special."

> **Comment:** The inclusion of a "signed covenant" which is added to the prayer of Nehemiah 9, "feels" like a mismatched addition. Or should one consider such a covenant to be essential to the practical value of the prayer?

Question: How far should one press the value of a particular style of prayer, or a particular outline of "required" parts to a prayer. Or should prayer simply be the outpouring of a person's soul, and outpouring that could take a wide variety of forms?

Sample Prayers. The prayer in Nehemiah 9 includes a mix of history, confession of sin, and expressed confidence in God's mercy, grace, and forgiveness. Here are some additional prayers from Scripture that follow a similar pattern. How are they the same? How do they differ?

> **Daniel 9:4-19.** Daniel appears to be much more humble in admitting his sin, at least in comparison to Nehemiah, e.g. "Remember me O my God for good" (Neh. 13:14, 22, 31).

Psalm 105. This narrative prayer is placed in the context of Israel's sojourn in Egypt. And in this psalm judgment falls largely on Egypt, not on Israel.

Psalm 106. This narrative prayer focuses on the Exodus experience with full documentation of all Israel's sins. Yet the conclusion remembers God's mercy and appeals to God to remember his people again.

Psalm 107. This psalm includes a number of confessional vignettes, while the psalm is not explicit in its setting in Israel's history, it seems to be shadowed by the memory of Israel's failures that were followed by the memory of God's gracious intervention on Israel's behalf.

Question: What does all the variety in the prayers of Scripture suggest for our use of prayer among believers today?

GOOD WORD 2019.4 **"Ezra and Nehemiah"**
Lesson #8 - November 23 **Nehemiah 10**
– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU
Theme: God the the Covenant

Leading question: Does the biblical concept of covenant make any sense in our modern world?

Where we live in College Place ("Highland Park Drive") a "covenant" used to be taken very seriously. Those who lived in the Highland Park area faced certain restrictions on what they could do with their property. It limited, for example, the kind of separate buildings could be built on an individual lot. And I think I heard somewhere that originally wooden "shake roofing" was required for all buildings constructed in the "covenant" area. Google not only defines "Shake-style roofing" but also suggests why our "covenant" has let the matter slide:

> "What Is Shake-Style Roofing? Shake shingles traditionally have been made of wood. But today's shake-style roofing shingles are asphalt and fiberglass-constructed shingles designed to deliver the charm and character of hand-split wood shakes but at a fraction of the cost and maintenance."

In short, times have changed, but our covenant has not. It has simply been ignored.

But next to our property is a newer private sub-division which still has some "teeth" in it. Of particular interest to us is the prohibition against overnight on-the-street parking. Even parking overnight in your own driveway is prohibited, a provision now sometimes ignored.

Increasing pressure from homeowners means that a change in the covenant is being proposed that would allow people to park a car in their own driveway overnight, a change that we would welcome because, even though we are outside the covenant area, some conscientious souls within the covenant area have been parking their cars on the street outside the gates, indeed in front of our house!

Question: Does God change his covenant when the times change?

The official study guide includes this comment and list:

"The Bible identifies seven major covenants that God has made with people:
1st Covenant – Adam *(Genesis 1–3)*
2nd Covenant – Noah *(Genesis 6–9)*
3rd Covenant – Abraham *(Genesis 12:1–3)*
4th Covenant – Moses and the Israelite nation *(known as Sinaitic or Mosaic Covenant; Exodus 19–24)*
5th Covenant – Phineas *(Num. 25:10–13)*
6th Covenant – David *(2 Sam. 7:5–16)*
7th Covenant – New Covenant *(Jer. 31:31–34)*"

The official study guide also briefly discusses the word "everlasting" as applied to the covenant. But these covenants change. The official study guide states that "each consecutive covenant serves to expound and deepen our understanding of the everlasting covenant of love..."

Yet that word "everlasting" is applied to the Abrahamic covenant and the promise of the "land." (Gen. 17:7-8). The whole system of "dispensationalism" as proclaimed by Evangelicals, is an attempt to retain the "everlasting" concept. Seventh-day Adventists generally take a different approach, one characterized by the word "conditionalism." Yet devout people are much inclined to hear the words of King Darius reverberating in their ears: "Just like all written laws of the Medes and Persians, it cannot be changed."

It can be noted here that both the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament give us a very flexible perspective on all the words that belong to the "everlasting/eternal/forever" cluster. In Jonah's experience, he was in the belly of the whale for 3 days (Jonah 1:17), yet that stay inside the whale is described a few verses later as being" forever" (Jonah 2:6).

An even more vivid example involves God's dealings with Eli. A "man of God" (1 Sam. 1:27) reminded him that God had promised: "your family and the family of your ancestor should go in and out before me forever" (1 Sam.2:30). But because of the wickedness of his sons, all that had been lost. In its place, "I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed one forever" (NRSV).

So how long is forever and everlasting? Perhaps three days (Jonah); perhaps several years (Eli). And note that in Eli's situation, one "forever" priestly line was being dumped and another "forever" line would be put in its place.

Question: How different is the new covenant of Jer. 31:31-34 from all the covenants that went before?

> 31 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant
> with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant
> that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of
> the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says
> the Lord. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after
> those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on
> their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer
> shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall
> all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will
> forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (NRSV)

GOOD WORD 2019.4 **"Ezra and Nehemiah"**
Lesson #9 - November 30 **Ezra 8, Nehemiah 11, 12**
– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU
Theme: Trials, Tribulations, and Lists

Leading question: Since several books in the Bible, including Ezra and Nehemiah, include long lists of names, how do we make sense of such lists in an age that seems to avoid lists as deadly dull?

This particular lesson suggests several points of contact with the church in our day, including some tantalizing hints on the right way to trigger a helpful lay "rebellion." But it also includes matters which seem to have no relevance for us, in particular, the long lists of names.

Question: If long lists are not exciting, not interesting, and apparently not helpful, why are they included in Scripture?

> **Comment:** The lists of names in Scripture, especially the genealogies, serve a variety of purposes. At the end of this lesson is an excerpt from *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (2016) which addresses (both in survey form and in some detail) the role of "lists" in Scripture. Though tangential to the content of Ezra and Nehemiah, that discussion is quite relevant to the issue of the "lists" in those two books.

Question: What might be the specific reason why the list of names in Ezra 2 is repeated in Nehemiah 7?

> **Comment:** The last sentence in Nehemiah 7 reads: "And all Israel settled in their towns." The official study guide includes this suggestive comment: "In many ways, the whole return and rebuilding was amazing. A people who many years before had their city devastated, their temple destroyed, and their land ravaged had now returned to that same land and that same city and were rebuilding everything, even the temple. It must have seemed miraculous to them and to those around them, as well. It was all, however, according to the will and the promises of God."

Question: Given the astonishing fact that all these people were "settled in their towns," which of the two leaders was more crucial to this miracle: Nehemiah, the man of action, or Ezra, the learned scribe?

Question: Ezra 8 describes the scene when Ezra and his contingent of returnees were getting ready to leave for Jerusalem. Ezra was horrified that there were no Levites in the group. Can we surmise why the religious leaders were not there? Were they lazy, wicked, oblivious? Does Scripture offer any suggested reasons?

Question: Nehemiah 11:1-2 tells how the people (not the leaders?) took the initiative to cast lots to determine who would move into Jerusalem. Are there religious implications for us in this event? Should "church" determine where we choose to live?

Question: At least twice in the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative, the people, not the leaders, took the initiative in key activities: 1) Nehemiah 8:1 states that "the people told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law" so that they could hear God's words read to them: 2) Nehemiah 11:1, 2, referring to the people living outside Jerusalem, declares: "Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem; and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in the holy city Jerusalem, while nine-tenths remained in the other towns. 2 And the people blessed all those who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem."

Are these two examples pointers toward a healthy lay "rebellion" that could be instructive for the church today?

Question: In the "holy party" described in Nehemiah 12 – the dedication of the wall with great rejoicing – "they" brought in the Levites to help out. Then Nehemiah brought the leaders to join the procession. Two features stand out: 1) the recruitment of the Levites and rulers – by hook or by crook – 2) the great rejoicing: "The joy of Jerusalem was heard far away" (Neh.12:43). After all that joy, the assignment of duties as described in Nehemiah 12:44 - 47 seemed to have flowed easily and without resistance. Could "joy" help us achieve all of our religious duties?

Excerpt from *Inspiration*

Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (2016), 267-274 (Chapter 19, "Numbers, Genealogies, Dates: Amram's Brothers Were Really Prolific"). In the published book, the chapter begins with four pages of biblical genealogies: Genesis 15:13-16; 1 Chronicles 2:1-20; 1 Chronicles 6:1-3; Numbers 26:57-59; 1 Chronicles 7:23-27; Numbers 1:45, 46; Numbers 3:43; Numbers 3:27, 28; Matthew 1:1-17.

Deadly Dull But Dangerous

You took one look at the key texts and almost skipped this chapter, right? That's why my original plan for this book did not include it. Boring, technical, volatile – those are all words that could describe what we are about to discuss.

But if you were brave enough to get this far, we should be able to move ahead rather boldly. First, let's note two general problems. Then we can move more directly into the evidence.

1. The difference between casual and analytical reading. Casual readers may not realize some of the more complex problems lurking behind the scenes. As a result, seemingly obvious conclusions can break down when the evidence in Scripture is analyzed more closely.

Given the great variety of people in the church, however, I believe we must make room for both casual and analytical reading. To that end, it would be helpful if we could avoid reinforcing casual observations with dire warnings and heavy dogmatic arguments. Yet that is

precisely the danger when believers fear the slippery slope, the camel's nose, and the falling dominoes.

2. The danger of building proofs on the basis of casual reading. When casual reading is combined with the fear of the slippery slope, great weight can be attached to lesser matters. If these lesser matters then become part of a larger argument "proving" the validity of Scripture, faith is at risk when the analytical overtakes the casual.

The evidence in Scripture suggests that we should be cautious about placing too much weight on numbers and genealogies and on the dates linked with them. Ideally, we should be able to see numbers and genealogies as interesting, even fascinating – but not crucial. Otherwise fear could lead us away from sound conclusions. And the absence of sound conclusions could turn our fears into self-fulfilling prophecies.

Amram's Brothers

To introduce the evidence, let's pick up the story behind our playful chapter title, "Amram's Brothers Were Really Prolific." It can illustrate how the difference between casual and analytical reading can get us into difficulty.

If I were to ask typical church members how many people left Egypt at the time of the Exodus, they would likely answer, "Millions." And we could consider that answer to be biblical. Exodus 12:37 says that 600,000 men, besides women and children went out from Egypt. Numbers 1:46 gives 603,550 as the number of men 20 years old and above. Similar figures are found in Exodus 38:26 and Numbers 2:32; 11:21; 26:51. Adding the women and children yields a figure close to two million (cf. PP, p. 334) or, stated more generally, "millions" (cf. PP, p. 410).

But if we read Numbers 3:43 analytically, we are startled to learn that the number of first-born males from one-month old and upward is given as 22,273. The implications are intriguing. If we accept both figures as being correct (603,550 adult males over twenty; 22,273 first-born males one-month old and upward), we would need to distribute all the males into 22,273 families. The results, translated into family size, are as follows:

27 adult males per family [603,550 divided by 22,273]
27 adult females per family
13 juvenile males per family [est. 300,000 males under 20]
13 juvenile females per family
80 average number of children per family

Now let's push the averages. How many children did Amram and Jochabed have? We know of two sons, Aaron and Moses (Ex. 6:20), and one daughter, Miriam (Ex. 15:20). If there were only three children, the next family would need 157 to make up the shortfall in the average.

But we can make the picture even more vivid, and this is where our chapter title comes in. In Numbers 3:27 (see key texts) we read that Amram and his three brothers (Izhar, Hebron, Uzziel) had 8,600 male descendants (one month old and upward) at the time of the Exodus, an average of 2,150 per family. Adding in the women yields an average of 4,300 children per family. Prolific would be an understatement. But if Amram had only two sons, each of the other three brothers would have had to father some 700 more sons, plus daughters.

Either something is dreadfully wrong with the numbers or Amram was not Moses' father but his great, great, great, great grandfather (the number of generations would just be a guess). Indeed, both numbers and genealogies are involved in the problem. And there is other subtle evidence in Scripture to suggest that the group leaving Egypt was smaller than two million.

But immediately we are confronted by three different slippery slopes. Let's identify them right here so that we can control any potential panic before moving on:

1. Confidence in Scripture. If we cannot trust the biblical record here, can we trust it elsewhere?

2. The Miraculous. If we reduce the number of people who left Egypt, are we undermining the miraculous in Scripture?

3. Confidence in Ellen White. If Ellen White cites the figure of 2 million and we conclude that there were significantly fewer involved, can we trust *her* as an inspired writer?

We address the issue of Ellen White specifically in Appendix E, though it is helpful to recognize that the same "problems" appear in Scripture. The basic question in both instances is whether or not trustworthiness requires absolute perfection. If Scripture is viewed as a philosophical treatise, a scientific document, or a transcript of matters purely divine, then perhaps one could speak of the one fatal flaw. But if Scripture is more like a family letter or a letter from a dear friend and if we determine the trustworthiness of Scripture in much the same way as we do a trustworthy person, then absolute perfection is not required; it could even be counterproductive. "The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language," wrote Ellen White. "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" (1SM, p. 20). Some of the people who are most precious to me are actually more precious because of supposed flaws and imperfections that have become part of a new beauty. In a perfect world I suspect it won't be that way anymore. But in our twisted world God has so blessed us that we can turn the ordinary and the troublesome into sources of beauty and blessing.

In the first manuscript reproduced in *Selected Messages*, book 1, I sense Ellen White struggling to communicate a message like that about the Bible. She yearns for her readers to have such an experience with God, that the Bible as a letter from God, will be both precious and safe to read. "I take the Bible just as it is, as the Inspired Word," she writes. And again: "Men should let God take care of His own Book, His living oracles, as He has done for ages" (1SM, p. 17). Or, "Brethren cling to your Bible, as it reads, and stop your criticisms in regard to its validity, and obey the Word, and not one of you will be lost." In conclusion she expresses gratitude that God has given us a Bible for the poor as well as the learned. Particularly interesting is her comment about the individual possessing "large talents of mental power." Such a one, she notes, "will find in the oracles of God treasures of truth, beautiful and valuable," but also "difficulties and secrets and wonders" that will yield "the highest satisfaction to study during a long lifetime, and yet there is an infinity beyond" (1SM, p. 18). In all this I find no evidence that the believer should be in dread of that fatal flaw. No, God and His book have proven their worth. The believer is at peace with both.

In that very connection we must remind ourselves that the all-or-nothing position is not a biblical one, even if it has been proclaimed by great men and spiritual giants. John Wesley, for example, wrote in his journal of August 24, 1776: "Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible,

there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book it did not come from the God of truth" (Wesley/Curnock, vol. VI, p. 117). With all due respect to Wesley, the all-or-nothing argument is quite misleading and can be deadly. It does reflect a powerful psychological tendency, to be sure, one often reinforced by devout believers in their zeal to defend Scripture. But it is not a response dictated by Scripture itself.

Interestingly enough, our daily interaction with people and events typically reflects a much more practical approach. Imagine, for example, two normally trustworthy students rushing excitedly into class and exclaiming that they just saw an accident at the corner of College Avenue and Fourth Street. One reports three people were injured, the other just two. Would I be justified in concluding that there was no accident at all? On the contrary, one *obvious* conclusion would be that there had indeed been an accident! Only the details are uncertain. Yet for some strange reason, when it comes to Scripture, the received view is that one "error" would nullify the whole.

That is precisely the danger of a *theoretical* approach to inspiration. A *practical* approach using the *incarnational* model allows for the mysterious blending of the human and divine. Then the Bible is no longer held captive to the fear of the fatal flaw, but is accepted on the same basis as a trustworthy account from a reliable friend.

If, however, one is inclined to accept the all-or-nothing stance toward Scripture, then the first two slippery slopes (confidence in Scripture and belief in the miraculous) can funnel into a single grand slide that drops the believer into the abyss of agnosticism and atheism. For without confidence in Scripture how can one believe the biblical accounts of divine intervention into human history? For that very reason, rationalists do not simply question how many people went out in the Exodus, they question if there even was such an event. (See Appendix F.)

Taking a more practical approach to the matter allows us to recognize that asking *how many* is not the same as asking *whether.* Anyone who has been a summer camp counselor for just one unit of eight juniors knows that it would take a miracle to lead them through the wilderness! A smaller number of Israelites would still require a whole series of miraculous interventions: the path through the sea, water from the rock, and manna, for starters. So even if asking *how many* ends up reducing the estimate of the number of Israelites leaving Egypt, the miraculous element remains very much alive. And if at the same time we thereby address some of our minor rational difficulties (minor because the credibility of the account does not rest on our ability to resolve them all), the biblical story becomes more powerful and effective.

So let us look more closely at the minor rational difficulties that arise if we adopt the figure of two million as the number of Israelites leaving Egypt: How could that many people make it through the Red Sea in a hurry? How could that many people camp around Mt. Sinai? How could that many people march around Jericho, a ten-acre site? How could Palestine absorb such a large a population all at once? Today modern Israel has a population of some eight million. How would two million intruders fare in biblical times? Without questioning the *whether* of the Exodus at all, Scripture itself contains suggestions that help us address the question of *how many*.

My first exposure to this problem and the suggested solutions came from Dr. Siegfried Horn, Professor of Old Testament in the Seventh-day Adventist seminary at Andrews University in the mid-sixties. I have wished that a printed explanation had been more readily available to the church, as it could have tempered our dogmatism in a number of instances.

Both numbers and genealogies are involved with the problem. And we address both below. Dr. Horn, however, while helping us with the problem of large numbers in the Old Testament, was very cautious on the matter of genealogies. Whenever asked, he would pick up his Bible and turn to one of two texts: "Avoid foolish questions, and genealogies" (Titus 3:9, KJV), or "Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith" (1 Tim. 1:4, KJV). I can still hear his charming accent (Dutch/German) as he would point to the text with a sheepish grin and say, "I do dat!"

Horn's first step in dealing with the problem of the number of people involved in the Exodus was to recognize some counterbalancing evidence from Scripture itself. Exodus 1:15, for example, states that there were two mid-wives serving the Hebrew people at the time Moses was born, Shiphrah and Puah. How large a population could two mid-wives serve? Eighty years later would one have expected a population of 2,000,000? Not likely.

Then he led us to Deuteronomy 7 and Moses' words of counsel to Israel as Moses approached the end of his own ministry. There on the borders of Canaan, Moses counseled Israel and warned of the dangers that would face them as they entered Canaan. He ticked off a list of "seven nations greater and mightier than yourselves" (Deut. 7:1). He described Israel as the "fewest of all peoples" (verse 7). Finally, Moses promised that "the Lord your God will clear away these nations before you little by little; you may not make an end of them at once, lest the wild beasts grow too numerous for you" (verse 22). It doesn't sound as though Moses was describing a throng of 2 million people.

Our modest rational problems can be resolved more easily if we project a smaller number of people based on (1) the 22,273 first born males, (2) the inference from Exodus 1 that two midwives served all Israel just 80 years earlier, and (3) the implications of the statement that Israel was the "fewest of all peoples."

When I have used this illustration in class, many of the students really struggle to find ways to make both figures fit, the 600,000 adult males and the 22,273 first-born. They don't want to admit that either one could be wrong.

So why did the Lord allow such differences? In my view, He wants us to know that the number of people involved in the Exodus is not that crucial. God led a motley crowd out of Egypt, performed miracle after miracle in the wilderness, and finally brought them to Canaan. That is the punch line of the story. And that is what counts.

When I take time in class to go over the genealogies or the number of people involved in the Exodus, I actually tell my students that we are going to take whatever time we need to convince them that we don't need to take that much time about such things! Put another way: The conclusion that the numbers are *not* all that important is so important that we will take two precious days of class time just to convince them.

We turn now to some more specific information on numbers, genealogies, and dates. We will look at additional evidence supporting the possibility that the numbers cited in the Old Testament have been distorted. When we look at genealogies, we will consider the possibility that Amram and Jochabed were Moses' ancestors, but not his parents. As we note below, genealogies show line of descent not necessarily direct descent. Thus one genealogical list in Scripture lists Moses in the *fourth* generation from Jacob, another puts Bezalel in the *seventh*, and yet another has Joshua in the *twelfth*. Yet all three men were contemporaries. Interestingly

enough, the story of Moses' birth does not mention Amram, Jochabed, or Miriam by name. The story simply begins: "Now a man from the house of Levi went and took to wife a daughter of Levi" (Ex. 2:1). Finally, if the number of generations between Amram and Moses is uncertain, we may need to take a fresh look at the date for the Exodus.

The Problem of Large Numbers in the Old Testament

One key variable in the discussion of Old Testament numbers is the ambiguity in the meaning of the word *'aleph*, the usual word for thousand. It can be translated in each of the following ways: (1) ox – "Our *oxen* will draw heavy loads" (Ps. 144:14, NIV); (2) clan – "Though you are small among the *clans* of Judah" (Micah 5:2, NIV); (3) captain – "Thou hast taught them to be *captains*" (Jer. 13:21, KJV); cf. Matthew's quotation of Micah 5:2 "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the *rulers* of Judah" (Matt. 2:6, RSV); and (4) thousand – "Though thou be little among the *thousands* of Judah" (Micah 5:2, KJV).

The implications of this ambiguity could be significant if one were recording (or reading about) the various elements going out to battle. The same word could mean 1,000 men, one chieftain, or one fighting unit. One would have to look at the record and ask: Were there 100,000 who went out to fight? or 100 units? or 100 chieftains? The variations in the handling of Micah 5:2 illustrate the ambiguity. KJV opted for *thousands*, the NIV went with *clans*, and Matthew, giving the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew, chose *rulers*.

We cannot prove the point, of course, but the remarkable ambiguity possible with the Hebrew word for thousand may very well lie behind some of huge numbers in the Old Testament that seem much too large to us. We may still have monumental miracles without insisting on quite so many people. The evidence from Scripture itself suggests that we should allow for that kind of flexibility in the biblical text.

It seems to me that a *careful* study of the use of numbers in Scripture suggests that we should be willing to allow the inspired writers some latitude. In other words, if we study the matter *carefully*, we can discover when and where we should *not* require precision from the inspired writers.

Sometimes even very small numbers do not mesh. In the synoptic gospels, for example, as we have noted, it is not clear whether the cock crowed once or twice before Peter denied his Lord the third time (see Chapter 16). Dewey Beegle argues that it shouldn't make that much difference: "What essential difference is there if the other Gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, follow the general tradition of the cock's crowing just once? (whereas Mark says the cock crowed twice). All three Gospels contain the historical features necessary to convey the truth of the matter: the prediction of denial and Peter's boast, the fulfillment of the prediction, and Peter's remorse on remembering the words of Jesus" (Beegle, p. 193; cited in Lindsell, p. 174).

Now, I happen to think that Beegle is essentially correct. Harold Lindsell, however, the defender of inerrancy who cites Beegle for the purpose of challenging him, does not agree: "It is the same old story: never mind the details that are in error; what the writers intended to say comes through despite the errancy of the divergent accounts. How do we respond to this

challenge?" (Lindsell, p. 174). Lindsell then produces his harmonization that yields three crowings of the cock and six denials.

Ironically, while Lindsell refuses to allow that kind of flexibility in the inspired writers, he himself reveals a kind of carelessness with details which too often has discredited the scholarship of conservative Christians. On pages 36 and 37 of *The Battle for the Bible*, Lindsell reveals a vague awareness of the problem involving the Hebrew word for "thousand." He argues that "a copyist's mistake is something entirely different from an error in Scripture." Then he adds: "Furthermore, it has always been acknowledged that Hebrew numbers are a problem because the differences between the Hebrew words for a hundred and a thousand are so slight that a much-handled manuscript could be misread."

If Lindsell intended to refer to the problem with the word "thousand" as discussed above, he should have said simply that the *translation* of the Hebrew word for thousand is ambiguous, not that the words for hundred and thousand are similar in *form*. In Hebrew the words for hundred (*meah*) and thousand (*'aleph*) are not any more similar in form than the English words. Hebrew reads in the opposite direction from Greek and English, but one doesn't need to know any Hebrew to recognize that "hundred" (מאה/*meah*) does not at all resemble "thousand" (אלף/*'aleph*). There is only one common letter and it is not in the same position. None of the other letters would ever be confused with each other because of slight similarities.

Now perhaps I should not be so hard on Lindsell, but I happen to think that his poorly remembered argument is more misleading than whether the cock crowed once or twice in the story of Peter's denial. But on second thought, maybe Lindsell's slip is closer to Paul's lapse in memory when he said initially that he hadn't baptized any of the Corinthians – then proceeded to remember several (1 Cor. 1:14-16). Or maybe it is like the author of Hebrews who quotes Psalm 8, but can't remember the reference, so simply says, "It has been testified somewhere. . ." (Heb. 2:6). Or maybe it is like Matthew (or was it Jesus himself?) who refers to the murder of Zechariah the son of *Barachiah* (Matt. 23:35) when he intended to refer to Zechariah the son of *Jehoiada* (2 Chron. 24:20). Or maybe it is like Matthew's reference to *Jeremiah* when he intended to refer to *Zechariah* (Matt. 27:9, 10 citing loosely Zech. 11:12, 13).

Is the slippery slope so dangerous that we cannot allow the Bible writers to share the common foibles of humanity? I must admit, that if I really believed in inerrancy, I would be frightened by the kind of material discussed in this chapter. That, of course, was why I avoided writing it at first. Many Adventists consciously or unconsciously accept inerrancy as do some sixty percent of all Americans.

Unfortunately, the topic will always be volatile. I hope that burying this chapter toward the end of the book might help. If only we would be willing to let the Bible writers do it the way they have done it and not insist that they stand on their heads nor we on ours, trying to force our concept of inspiration in ways that simply cannot fit the evidence!

Once we get over our need to harmonize all the details, fear disappears and we can turn to the all-important task of listening to the essential message of Scripture, seeking to understand His will so that His truth can live in us.

If you have caught the implications of what we have discussed thus far, you may have thought of a very practical question: If we conclude that Amram and Jochabed were not Moses's parents, but his ancestors much further back, how will we tell the Bible story? What should we

say to the children in Sabbath School and to our own children at home about the parents of the little boy rescued from the river? I suspect Amram and Jochabed are with us to stay, given the fact that the casual conclusion is so readily available from Scripture. But at some point our children and our church members will need to become aware of the intriguing situation with the numbers, lest they be afraid when they actually have nothing to fear.

Genealogies

We have already suggested that the ancients did not use genealogies in the same way that we do. The following analysis (informed in part by Geraty's 1974 article) notes some of the more significant features of the genealogies in Scripture.

1. Genealogies are often included in Scripture for purposes transcending both history and chronology. Let's consider some possible interpretations of some biblical genealogies.

Genesis 5 and 11: Illustrating the Impact of the Flood – The lists of names for the first 20 patriarchs include the patriarch's age at the birth of his first son and his age at death. Those ages seem to suggest that they could be used for purposes of dating. And since these lists provide the only actual figures which *might* tell us how much time elapsed between creation and the flood, and between the flood and Abraham, it is not surprising to find Christians using the figures to compute time and establish dates.

There is a distinct possibility, however, that the ages were included primarily to illustrate the stark impact of the flood on human life. Before the flood, several of the great men among the first ten patriarchs lived nearly a thousand years each. But after the flood, life expectancy dropped dramatically. Shem, Noah's son, lived 600 years, his son lived 438 years, and on down to Terah, who lived 205 years, and his son Abram who lived 175.

Another factor that makes it unwise to put too much weight on those numbers for dating purposes is the fact that all three of the earliest texts of Genesis give different numbers and different totals for the first 20 patriarchs:

Masoretic Text (Hebrew):	1946 years
Samaritan Pentateuch (Hebrew):	2247 years
Septuagint (Greek):	3412 years

The Masoretic Text (MT) is the official Jewish Bible. It takes its name from the Masoretes, a group of devout Jewish scribes living between 500 and 1000 of the common era, who dedicated their lives to copying the Hebrew Bible with incredible accuracy.

The ages listed in most modern translations of Genesis 5 and 11 reflect the Masoretic textual tradition. Even though the oldest copy of the MT comes from around 1000 CE – during the medieval period Jews burned their old Bibles – the MT is still highly regarded as a reliable text.

In comparison with the MT, the Samaritan Pentateuch (SP) adds some 300 years to the ages of the patriarchs. The SP is simply another independent witness to the Hebrew text. It is the Bible of the Samaritans, which they copied and preserved apart from the MT textual tradition after the Jews and Samaritans parted company some time after the fifth century BCE (cf. 2 Kings 17, Ezra 4). The oldest known SP manuscript is the Nablus Scroll, dating from the early Christian centuries. For the full Pentateuch, it varies from the MT in about 6000 instances,

though the variants are mostly minor. In some 1600 places it agrees with the Septuagint over against the MT.

The Septuagint (LXX) is the most intriguing here, for in comparison with the MT it adds 1466 years to the total ages for the patriarchs, most of which comes from the addition of a hundred years to each of the patriarch's ages after the Flood. Some scholars have suggested that a scribe felt that the patriarchs in the second set were much too young when they had their first sons, so he systematically added a hundred years to the age of each before the birth of a son. The LXX also adds the name of Cainan between Shelah and Arphaxad, a variant reflected in Luke 3:36. Originally produced by Diaspora Jews some 200 years before Christ, the major LXX manuscripts available to us were preserved by Christians.

In addition to the variation between the three major text types for Genesis, another more subtle element from those early chapters is the *impression* (and it is only an impression), that there is a great gulf fixed between Abraham and the earlier patriarchs. If the years recorded in the Masoretic Text are correct, Abraham's life overlapped with Shem's. But then how was it possible that Abraham's own family could serve other gods (Joshua 24:2)? that Abraham himself could consider child sacrifice an appropriate way to serve God – until God used that very method to teach him otherwise (Genesis 22)? or that he could take another wife without considering it a sin (Gen. 16; cf. PP, p. 145)?

Typically, Christians adopt the faith stance of Hebrews 11 and apply it consciously or unconsciously to the entire Bible. I have sometimes called that approach the "high road" because it emphasizes continuity and faith. By contrast, a "low road" approach, especially in the Old Testament, allows us to recognize how far the people had fallen. Specifically with reference to Abraham, if we assume that there was a firm, clear connection through the patriarchs back to Adam, then we really are at a loss to explain the considerable gap between what Abraham was supposed to have known and what he actually did. If the link with Adam through Noah and Seth was as fragile as it appears, however, then it would make good sense to conclude that Abraham's shocking acts (child sacrifice, polygamy) simply reflect the status of his conscience and knowledge. That is certainly the impression I get when I read the Genesis account of Abraham's life. But it is only an impression. It does help me understand Abraham's experience, however, and at the same time places a very positive light on the God of the Old Testament, a God who turns out to be remarkably patient as he reaches down to a people far removed from Him.

That impression of a long period of time between Abraham and the earlier patriarchs has led some to suggest that the Genesis record simply provides sample ages and that the real purpose was to illustrate the stark impact of the flood on human life. Perhaps the best illustration of a genealogy being a list of sample characters comes from the period between Jacob and the Exodus. As indicated in the key texts and briefly noted above, one list puts Moses in the fourth generation, Bezelel in the seventh, and Joshua in the twelfth.

The biblical figures for the first 20 patriarchs were used by Archbishop Ussher in his Old Testament chronology, published in 1650-54. When I was a youngster playing Bible Seek (now reissued as Bible Scramble), we memorized his dates for creation and the flood: 4004 and 2348 BCE. If Ussher seems too precise with his date of 4004 BCE, his contemporary, John Lightfoot, was even more so: Creation was on September 12; Adam was created at 9 a.m., sinned that same day at noon, and was promised salvation at 3 pm. (Lightfoot/Pitman, vol. VII, pp. 372, 377).

Beginning in 1701, Ussher's dates were published in the margins of the King James Version of the Bible. That may explain why the 6000-year figure became so thoroughly ingrained in Christian circles. To borrow a phrase from Ellen White, Ussher's dates came to be accepted as "facts," "well-known and universally acknowledged by the Protestant world" (GC, p. xi).

In the nineteenth century, as the relatively new science of archaeology began to unlock the secrets of early civilizations, it became difficult to mesh Ussher's chronology with what was being discovered about ancient history. His date for the flood is particularly problematic. If, as many Christians have assumed, the flood was universal, it should have obliterated all traces of civilization. But for the centers of the two major ancient civilizations, Babylon and Egypt, recorded history extends uninterrupted back to at least 3100 BCE. For ordinary Christians, however, who had Ussher's dates printed "in the Bible," it was easy to conclude that these new scientists were destroying faith.

A more recent example comes from the mid-1970s, when the world of biblical scholarship was treated to rich finds from the ancient city of Ebla, a 70-acre site in northern Syria. According to the archaeologists, Ebla reached its peak about 2500 BCE when it was the administrative center for over a quarter of a million people. Again, continuous occupation at the site rules out the possibility of a flood before that time. And the size of the population served by the city would suggest that a flood would have to have occurred centuries earlier.

Those familiar with modern trends know that the pervasive scholarly view, except among some conservative Christians, is that the flood account in Genesis has its roots in a more localized event. One could argue, of course, as many Christians do, that the primary concern of the flood story is to pass judgment on human sin. For the moral to stand out sharp and clear, one does not necessarily need to argue for a *universal* flood. A sequence of water disasters would meet the requirements of the text just as well. Genesis 6-9 certainly describes the flood in universalistic terms, but the Bible also describes other events as being world-wide that clearly are not. The descriptions of the four kingdoms in the book of Daniel are described in universalistic terms, though only the third and fourth kingdom are described as ruling "the whole earth" (Dan. 2:39 [third kingdom]; 7:23 [fourth kingdom]). And in the New Testament, Paul declares that his gospel is bearing fruit "throughout the whole world" (Col. 1:6, NIV) and that the gospel has been proclaimed "to every creature under heaven" (Col. 1:23, NIV).

To argue against a flood, however, on philosophical grounds, that is, to assume that a miraculous intervention by God is *a priori* impossible, is a much more serious departure from the boundaries of traditional Christian faith. As an aside, I would add that I have always been intrigued by the wide distribution of flood stories throughout the cultures of the world. For me, at least, that provides an important echo of the biblical account.

What is particularly interesting about the recorded history in the Ancient Near East, is that, while it provides no support for those who want a more precise fit for Ussher's chronology, the sudden appearance of recorded civilization in or around the fourth millennium presents a sharp contrast with the typical evolutionary estimates that the history of modern man goes back some 100,000 years. The beginning of recorded history at or around 4000 BCE is just yesterday compared with that 100,000 year estimate. For that reason, a number of Adventist scholars (who generally prefer not to be quoted) are willing to say that the world as we know it is relatively young, in terms of thousands of years rather than millions.

The comparatively recent beginning for recorded history suggests that the impression left by the biblical account, namely, that the world is relatively young, is believable. That does not constitute an argument for Ussher's chronology, however. And the precise age of the earth and any estimated date for creation still does not speak to the *fact* of creation. For that reason, I believe it wise to keep the questions of the age of the earth and the fact of creation separate. One does not depend on the other.

Chronicles: Legitimating the Lines of David and Levi – The Chronicler, writing at the end of the Old Testament period, was particularly interested in re-affirming the glories of the temple and the might of the house of David. Accordingly, the genealogies of Chronicles add a note of authenticity to both the Davidic and Levitical lines. Interestingly enough, it is possible, though it cannot be proven, that some of the key religious leaders during the judges and early monarchy may have been adopted into the tribe of Levi and given a Levitical genealogy. Both Eli and Zadok, whose genealogies are rather anomalous, would be candidates for such adoption. In any event, the genealogies in Chronicles are concerned with legitimizing a blood line, not in establishing dates.

Matthew 1: Illustrating the Quality of Jesus' Ancestry – A study of Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (see key texts) reveals a remarkable perspective on mathematics. Not only does he omit names (Ahaziah, Joash, Amaziah) to arrive at his 14-14-14 scheme, he also must have counted Jehoiachin in both the second and third clusters to arrive at 14 names for each. Furthermore, when compared with other genealogical lists covering the same time period, the other lists consistently include more names: at least seven more for the first group, three more for the second, nine more for the third (see key texts).

But the most striking feature of Matthew's list is his inclusion of four women in Jesus' genealogy, an unheard-of feature in proper Jewish circles. And all four women are "exceptional": Tamar, a Canaanite who bore Perez through incest; the Palestinian Rahab, a former prostitute; the Moabitess Ruth, though morally faultless, still (technically) banned from Israel because of her Moabite ancestry (Deut. 23:3); finally, the adulteress Bathsheba, whom Matthew does not name, preferring to refer to her by the more striking phrase, "wife of Uriah."

What is Matthew trying to tell us? That Jesus came from thoroughly human stock! With incest, prostitution, and adultery in his history and foreign blood coursing through his veins, Jesus came as "God with Us" (= Immanuel, Matt.1:23) to save us from our sins. Never mind the math. The message is a powerful one.

Luke 3: Jesus is One with the Whole Human Race – Attempting to line up Luke's genealogy of Jesus with Matthew's is a frustrating task. For the period after the monarchy, not only does Matthew list 13 names to Luke's 23, but the lists also share only two names: Shealtiel and Zerubbabel. Some have suggested that Matthew traces Joseph's line while Luke gives us Mary's. That is only an educated guess. But the really significant contrast between the two lists lies in the fact that Matthew produces a *Jewish* lineage, linking Jesus with Abraham while Luke traces a full *human* lineage, moving all the way back to Adam. Matthew's genealogy was for Jews; Luke's was for the world, telling us that Jesus was "the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God" (Luke 3:38).

To sum up, of the several genealogies in Scripture, only the ones in Genesis 5 and 11 could possibly be used for purposes of dating. But even there it appears doubtful whether the

evidence supports such a usage. And as we fill in the picture now with some other aspects of the use of genealogies, what may appear to us as carelessness of detail should not be surprising if we remember the various reasons why the inspired writers used genealogies in the first place. *We* might think that genealogies should be precise and complete. But that seems to be *our* worry, not that of the Bible writers. That point becomes even clearer as we turn to some other aspects of the genealogical lists in Scripture.

2. Genealogies often provide a line of descent or a line of authority, not a direct list of father-son relationships. Though not from a genealogical list, one of the most obvious uses of the phrase "son of" to jump over hundreds of years in time is the popular title for Jesus, "Son of David" (see, for example, Matt. 9:27).

That same usage appears in the genealogies where "son of" or "father of" can simply refer to lineage, not next of kin. Judged by ancient rules, then, we have no right to criticize either Moses or Matthew for leaving names out.

Another intriguing example is that of Belshazzar, King of Babylon (Dan. 5). In the early days of the so-called higher criticism of Scripture, critics loved to cite Belshazzar as proof that the author of Daniel did not know his history. Since Belshazzar was unknown in the official court records of Babylon, the more radical scholars took Belshazzar to be an imaginary character invented by Daniel, Nabonidus consistently appeared as the last king of Babylon. The archaeologists changed all that. Raymond Dougherty published the definitive work, *Nabonidus and Belshazzar*, in 1929, demonstrating on the basis of new discoveries that Belshazzar was indeed king and the son of Nabonidus.

The text of Daniel 5:2, however, refers to Nebuchadnezzar, not Nabonidus, as Belshazzar's father. Was Daniel right? Dougherty suggested that Belshazzar's mother may have been the daughter of the great king, making Belshazzar Nebuchadnezzar's grandson. (See article, "Belshazzar," in SDABD.)

But "son of" and "father of" had an even broader usage in ancient times, referring to a line of authority, not necessarily a blood line. Applied in our day, that would mean that any president of the United States could be described as a "son of" George Washington. The most notable example of that happening in Biblical times involved Jehu, king of Israel, who was known in Assyrian records as "Jehu, *son of Omri*." Both Jehu and Omri were kings of Israel, but there was no blood tie between them. Omri had established his reputation so firmly that for 150 years after his death, the Assyrians continued to refer to Israel as the "house of Omri." So even though Jehu had actually wiped out the family of Omri, usurping the throne for the purpose of setting up his own dynasty, the Assyrians still referred to him as "son of Omri."

3. Genealogies rather than historical records may have provided the source for certain problematic numbers in Scripture. In some cases an author or a scribe may have wanted to indicate a time period but only had access to a genealogical list. One could arrive at a time period by taking the number of names on a list and multiplying it by *an average number of years per generation*. Two possible examples come to mind, Genesis 15:13-16 (four generations times 100 years per generation yields 400 years) and 1 Kings 6:1 (12 generations times 40 years per generation yields 480 years), both of which are connected with attempts to date the Exodus from Egypt.

GOOD WORD 2019.4 **"Ezra and Nehemiah"**
Lesson #10 - December 07 **Nehemiah 12**
– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU
Theme: Worshiping the Lord

Leading question: In an age when music is a very divisive issue in the church, how can the worship music described in Scripture help us unify our church worship today?

Since Nehemiah 12:44-47 is central to this lesson on worship, it is printed below for ease of reference:

> 44 On that day men were appointed over the chambers for the stores, the contributions, the first fruits, and the tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the law for the priests and for the Levites from the fields belonging to the towns; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered. 45 They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the command of David and his son Solomon. 46 For in the days of David and Asaph long ago there was a leader of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. 47 In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah all Israel gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers. They set apart that which was for the Levites; and the Levites set apart that which was for the descendants of Aaron. (NRSV)

After the cross, these are the major "worship" elements that are no longer relevant to us and all of them shaped by the events recorded in the New Testament:

1. No sanctuary/temple
2. No animal sacrifices
3. No priests or Levites
4. No purification rites

Question: Historically, how did these changes play out?

1. No degrees of holiness in approaching God. All have access through Jesus.

> 1 We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— 3 we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. 1 John 1:1-4, NRSV

2. Jesus' sacrifice brought all animal sacrifice to an end.

3. Jesus declared all things to be clean (Mark 7; Romans 14)

4. No hierarchical worship leaders (priests and Levites)

> 25 "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:25 - 28, NRSV)

Question: What's left of Nehemiah 12 that we can apply to our day? Salaried musicians!

Question: What issues are not addressed? The style of music.

Question: Could we go so far as to say that the "fruit" of the music is the final test: Does it bring me to God? Does it make me more faithful in my relationships with others?

Comment on animal sacrifice. While Jesus seems to have supported the Jewish sacrificial system, these Old Testament passages suggest that animal sacrifice was not God's original plan:

> **Jeremiah 6:20** (ESV): "What do I care about incense from Sheba or sweet calamus from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable; your sacrifices do not please me."
>
> **Jeremiah 7:22** (ESV): "For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices."
>
> **Psalm 50:9-13** (NIV): "I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?"
>
> **Isaiah 1:11-13** (NIV): "The multitude of your sacrifices - what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations - I cannot bear your evil assemblies."

> **Micah 6:6-8** (GNT): "What shall I bring to the Lord, the God of heaven, when I come to worship him? Shall I bring the best calves to burn as offerings to him? 7 Will the Lord be pleased if I bring him thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil? Shall I offer him my first-born child to pay for my sins? 8 No, the Lord has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God."

A Key Turning Point? When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22), the fact that Abraham complied immediately without objection, implies that not just sacrifice, but child sacrifice was universally accepted as the ultimate gift to the "gods." But the principle of God supplying the sacrifice may also have taken its starting point in this narrative when God pointed to the ram caught in the thicket as the "substitute" for Isaac.

The ultimate fulfillment of that principle can be seen when Christ died on the cross – thus providing the sacrifice for all of us, but at the same time bringing all sacrifice forever to an end.

GOOD WORD 2019.4 **"Ezra and Nehemiah"**
Lesson #11 - December 14 **Nehemiah 13**
– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU
Theme: Backslidden People

Leading question: When dealing with backslidden people in his day, did Jesus support or modify the strong-arm methods of Ezra and Nehemiah?

Nehemiah 13, the last chapter in the book, does not finish on a high note, but on a low one. The five examples of "backsliding" are as follows:

1. Allowing Ammonites and Moabites to be part of the "assembly of God (13:1-3).

2. Allowing Tobiah (an Ammonite, according to Nehemiah 2:10), an enemy of the people, to set up housekeeping in the temple precincts (13:4-9)**.**

3. Levites left unsupported (13:10-14).

4. Sabbath practices left unprotected (13:15-22).

5. Mixed marriages (13:23-31).

Let's consider each of these in terms of seriousness. And let's assess the handling of these issues against the teachings of Jesus.

1. Excluding the Moabites and Ammonites. The most striking OT/NT difference is the handling of the Moabite-Ammonite dilemma. And I use the word "dilemma" carefully, for even in the OT, the picture is mixed. Here are two examples:

Ruth. Not only was Ruth a Moabite, she also became part of the royal Davidic bloodline (Ruth 4:17). Her place in Jesus' genealogy emphasizes the point (Matt. 1:5).

Naamah the Ammonite. Remarkably, not only is a Moabite in the royal genealogy, but also an Ammonite. Solomon's son, Rehoboam, was born to Naamah the Ammonite, ironically, the only one of Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines mentioned by name in Scripture.

From the standpoint of canon, both the book of Ruth and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are included in the "Writings," the third and final section of the Hebrew Bible. The tussle over foreigners, indeed foreign wives, not only haunted the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, but left its mark in the list of books which are part of our Bible.

The Teachings of Jesus. Jesus seemed to go out of his way to welcome foreigners, especially foreign women. The healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter at Tyre and Sidon (Matt.15:21-

28) and Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4) are two of the better known examples.

Question: What reasons can be cited for the "harsher" appoach in Ezra-Nehemiah? In the light of Jesus' teaching and practice, is it appropriate for us to use the earlier harsher methods?

> **Comment:** One could argue that the threats against the Jewish nation at the time of Ezra/ Nehemiah justified the more rigorous separation from the "world." At Elephantine on the Nile down in Egypt at this very time, a Jewish temple featured the worship of Yahweh and Yahweh's female consort, an echo of Canaanite practice, for Baal also had a female consort. Clearly, Judaism was in great danger of losing its identity.

2. Evicting Tobiah the Ammonite from the temple. Jesus' cleansed the temple in his day. Could the cleansing of the temple by Nehemiah be seen as an appropriate parallel?

3. Not paying the Levites. Would Jesus support Nehemiah's efforts to restore support for the Levites? Most likely.

4. Sabbath-breaking. Jesus got into trouble for healing on the Sabbath. But it is hard to imagine him buying and selling on the Sabbath. Nothing in the New Testament record suggests that he would.

5. Mixed marriages. Next week's lesson is dedicated to this issue. We will deal with it then.

GOOD WORD 2019.4 **"Ezra and Nehemiah"**
Lesson #12 - December 21 **Nehemiah 13**
– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU
Theme: Dealing with Bad Decisions

Leading question: Are some decisions so bad, that the way out requires the suspension of grace?

The formal study guide has chosen to dedicate this whole lesson to the fifth problem which Nehemiah discovered when returning to Jerusalem after a 12 year absence, namely, the call to end all mixed marriages. A crucial question looms over this issue: Is the way of Jesus' "better" than that presented in the OT? While Jesus himself never killed anyone, never even struck anyone – when he cleansed the temple he attacked the furniture not the people – he does tell stories in which violent punishments play a key role.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) comes like a cold shower after one has absorbed the teachings of Jesus. And 1 Corinthians 5 presents a "violent" side of the Apostle Paul – "Drive out the wicked person from among you" (1 Cor. 5:13), a striking contrast with 1 Corinthians 13, a beautiful passage found in the same book.

The last verse in chapter 4 of 1 Corinthians may point us to a kind of middle ground, namely, the occasional but necessary use of the heavy hand: "What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love, in a spirit of gentleness?" (1 Cor. 4:21). Still, the actions of Nehemiah in addressing the question of the mixed marriages contrast sharply with the methods of Jesus.

The author of this study guide (Alden Thompson) approaches this issue with a heavy "accommodationist" emphasis, which sees Jesus as the clearest revelation of God, with all other "revelations" being "accommodations" to sinful human circumstances. Two chapters in his book, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* show how he develops and applies this approach: chapter 2, "Behold it was very good, and then it all turned sour," and chapter 6, "The worst story in the Old Testament."

In only one instance does Ellen White address and illustrate this position. In *Patriarchs and Prophets* (p. 515) she seeks to explain the custom lying behind the establishment of the cities of refuge in ancient Israel (see Numbers 35), blood vengeance. This excerpt from a paper presented to European Adventists addresses her "developing" understanding of the cities of refuge as an "accommodation" to sinful conditions.

Divine accommodation. In my own approach to Scripture, the idea of "radical divine accommodation" in response to the needs of a humanity steeped in violence, provides a framework within which the God who revealed himself most fully through the non-violent Jesus, can be seen to be consistent with the violent God of the Old Testament. The biblical foundation for such an approach is laid out in my book, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?,* especially in chapter 2, "Behold it was very good, then it all turned sour."

The idea that God accommodates or condescends to work within tragic and violent human situations has a long but fragile history within Christianity. It is not universally acclaimed in evangelical circles. Indeed, it is often emphatically rejected. The late David Wright, the left-of-

center evangelical church historian at the University of Edinburgh who was instrumental in getting the first edition of *Who's Afraid?* published by Paternoster Press in Britain, told me that InterVarsity Press UK would never touch the book because the emphasis on accommodation in it was far too strong.

I have kept my eye open for traces of an accommodationist approach in Ellen White's writings, especially in connection with violent passages. She says nothing about the worst ones: bloodguilt for Saul in 2 Samuel 21, the dismembered concubine in Judges 19-21. But she does tackle the custom of blood vengeance that lies behind the appointment of the cities of refuge, described most fully in Numbers 35. To my knowledge, however, this is the only narrative where Ellen White explicitly adopts an accommodationist interpretation. Here we see it in two steps: first in an 1881 periodical article and then in 1890 in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

A comparison of the two passages reveals her struggles with the story. Her concern that murder be punished, prominent in 1881, disappears in 1890. The importance of protecting the innocent is affirmed in both.

In 1890 she focuses exclusively on safety for the accused and refers to the appointment of these cities as a "merciful provision" that was "rendered necessary by the ancient custom of private vengeance." Her conclusion: "The Lord did not see fit to abolish this custom at that time."

But neither account is a clean accommodation. In 1881 the avenger may act "in extreme cases"; in 1890, "where guilt was clearly evident." But Scripture offers no such qualifications. If the accused could not outrun his pursuer, the avenger was free to kill him without penalty.

The crucial point: Ellen White has adopted the position that God was not directly responsible for the ancient custom, but chose to work within the framework of what was considered to be just at that time.

> From: Alden Thompson, "Ellen White: A Gentle Corrective for Adventist Fundamentalism?" Presented at Ellen White Symposium, Villa Aurora, Florence, Italy, November 2, 2011: "The European Seventh-day Adventist Church in the XXI Century: The Relevance and Meaning of the Writings of Ellen White"

Obversations about the contrast between Nehemiah 13 and the NT:

1. **No choice offered to the foreign wives.** The text of Scripture itself records no offer of "conversion" to the foreign wives. They are summarily dismissed.

2. Beating and cursing. The text of Nehemiah offers no gentle alternatives, only the heavy hand of Nehemiah: "And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves" (Neh. 13.25, NRSV).

3. Jesus' attitude toward foreigners. While we have no record in the Gospels of how Jesus dealt with the issue of mixed marriages, we do have his response to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4) and the Canaanite woman of Tyre and Sidon (Matthew 15).

4. Jesus' attitude toward the use of force. In Matthew's version of the account (Matt. 21:12-17), when Jesus cleansed the temple, the evil people fled, but the children came to him. The text of Scripture does not suggest that the children would come running to Nehemiah. In short, when Jesus cleansed the temple, he attacked the furniture not the people, and the children played happily in his presence.

5. Paul's attitude toward an unbelieving spouse. The following passage from 1 Corinthians 7 suggests that a conversation between Nehemiah and Paul might not be harmonious:

> 10 To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband 11 (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.
>
> 12 To the rest I say—I and not the Lord—that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. 13 And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15 But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you. 16 Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife. (NRSV)

Question: If Nehemiah is speaking of maintaining the purity of the faith (and he is), what do his words tell us about marriage in our day?

GOOD WORD 2019.4 **"Ezra and Nehemiah"**
Lesson #13 - December 28 **Ezra, Nehemiah, Matthew 20:25-28**
– prepared by Alden Thompson, School of Theology, WWU

Theme: Leaders in Israel

Leading question: After we put Jesus at the head of our list of good leaders described in the Bible, which ones would you rank as the three next best leaders?

Leadership: Jesus as the ideal. Evaluating various leaders in the Bible for their strengths and weaknesses is an intriguing exercise. But we should always start with Jesus as the ideal model of the servant leader. Jesus' response to James and John when they asked for "leadership" positions sets the ideal for us:

> 25 "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 26 It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Comment: Jesus' statement provides more of the ethos of leadership rather than guidance for specific tasks of leadership. Among the disciples, for example, Andrew and Peter, the two brothers reveal two quite different perspectives. Peter was always recognized as the forthright leader; yet Andrew is revealed in the Gospels as one who is always bringing someone to Jesus. After all, he brought his brother Peter to Jesus (John 1:42), he brought the little boy with the 5 loaves and 2 fish to Jesus (John 6:8-9), and he introduced to Jesus the Greeks in the temple (John 12:21-22). Peter and Andrew are two quite different leaders, but effective in their own way.

Other leadership choices. Rank your choices within each of the following groupings:

Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and Joshua. Rank in order effectiveness.

Deborah, Barak, Gideon, Samson, and Jephthah. Rank in order of quality of leadership.

Samuel, Saul, Jonathan, David. Rank in order of moral qualifications to be leader of Israel.

Nehemiah and Ezra. Which was more effective as leader?

Who was the better king? Do the biblical assessments of these men change your vote?

> **Hezekiah** (2 Kings 8:5-6). "He trusted in the Lord the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. 6 For he held fast to the Lord; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses.

> **Josiah (**2 Kings 23:25). "Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him."

Remembering Paul's counsel. If a good leader is inclined to take credit for his leadership skills, he should remember these comments from the Apostle Paul:

> Friends, I have used Apollos and myself as examples to teach you the meaning of the saying, "Follow the rules." I want you to stop saying that one of us is better than the other. 7 What is so special about you? What do you have that you were not given? And if it was given to you, how can you brag? – Cor. 4:6-7, CEV