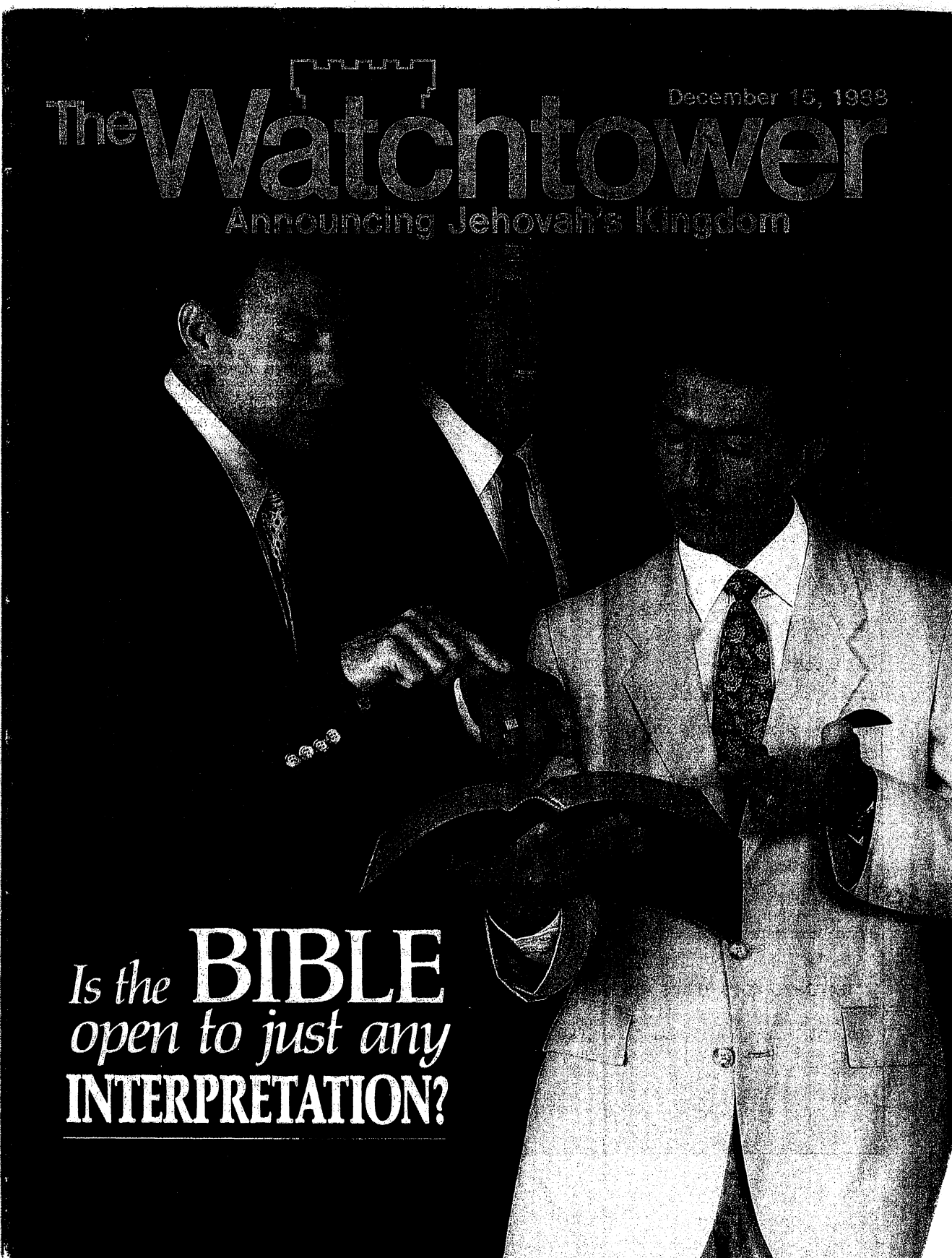


December 15, 1988

# The Watchtower

Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom



*Is the* **BIBLE**  
*open to just any*  
**INTERPRETATION?**

**“YOU** are just skipping around in the Bible, picking out the scriptures that fit your interpretation,” complained the lady to one of Jehovah’s Witnesses who was calling at her door.

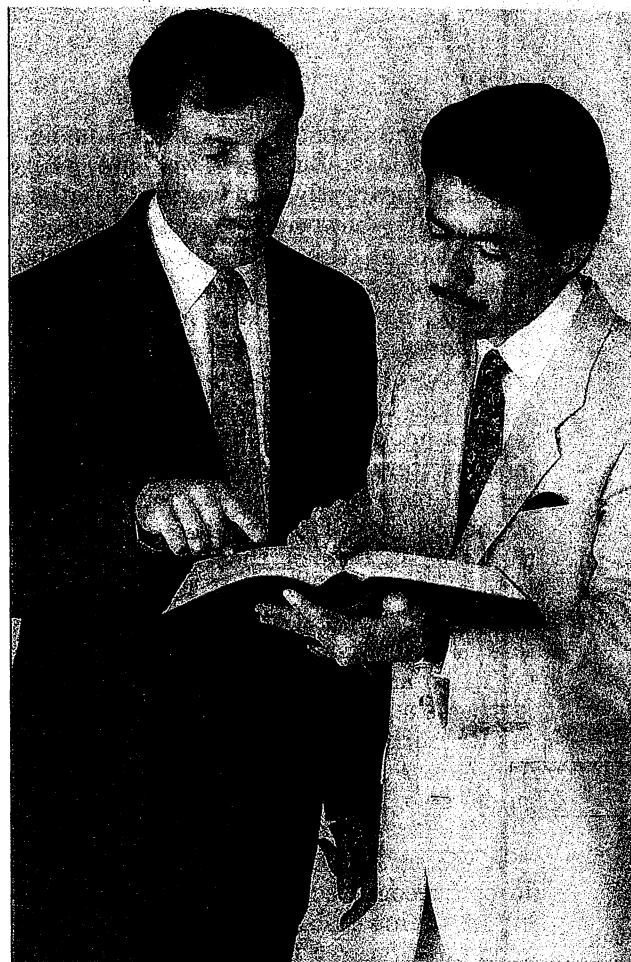
But is referring to texts in different parts of the Bible actually a proof that a person is trying to interpret it to fit his own ideas? And if so, does this mean that the Bible is open to just *any* interpretation—one being just as legitimate as any other?

## *Is the* **BIBLE** *open to just any* **INTERPRETATION?**

### **Let the Author Have His Say**

Whereas the Bible has only one Author, Jehovah God, it does have many writers. These some 40 Bible writers never contradict one another—which, by the way, is a proof of God’s authorship—yet no one Bible writer says all there is to say about any particular subject. So to understand what the Author of the Bible says about a subject, it is necessary to gather together all the scriptures germane to the subject under discussion. This is what the above-mentioned Witness was trying to do.

He was on sound footing. For instance, open your Bible to Romans chapter 9. Here you will find an outstanding example of how the faithful



Christian Paul did the same thing. In this one chapter alone, Paul quotes 11 times from other parts of the Bible. Some critic might even charge that Paul does a considerable amount of “skipping around.” Starting with the first book of the Bible, he skips over to the 39th book, before continuing with the 2nd, the 28th, and finally, the 23rd book of the Bible.\*

Of course, it would have been wrong for Paul to take scriptures out of their

\* The quotations are found in Romans chapter 9, verses 7 (Genesis 21:12), 9 (Genesis 18:14), 12 (Genesis 25:23), 13 (Malachi 1:2, 3), 15 (Exodus 33:19), 17 (Exodus 9:16), 25 (Hosea 2:23), 26 (Hosea 1:10), 27, 28 (Isaiah 10:22, 23), 29 (Isaiah 1:9), and 33 (Isaiah 28:16).

context and twist them to fit his own personal ideas. But Paul was not guilty of this. Apparently some early Christians were guilty, however, for the apostle Peter speaks of "things hard to understand, which the untaught and unsteady are twisting, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction." —2 Peter 3:16.

"Things hard to understand" can easily be misunderstood. Even the works of famous writers like Shakespeare come in for various interpretations—obviously not all of them accurate. Hence, it is not strange that this is true of the Bible. If Shakespeare were still alive, we could ask him: "Just exactly what did you mean?" Yet, this is not possible; neither is it possible for us to ask the writers of the Bible for further clarification. Happily, we can still ask its Author, for he lives! (Psalm 90:1, 2) And he has promised to give such spiritual guidance to men of faith who ask it of him. —Luke 11:9-13; James 1:5, 6.

While in Egypt, God's faithful servant Joseph recognized the importance of asking for divine guidance when he was called upon to interpret a dream that God had given to Egypt's ruler. "Do not interpretations belong to God?" he had earlier asked. After Joseph gave the correct interpretation, Pharaoh was moved to say: "Can another man be found like this one in whom the spirit of God is?" And to Joseph he said: "Since God has caused you to know all this, there is no one as discreet and wise as you are."—Genesis 40:8; 41:38, 39.

The variety of contradicting interpretations we find today among so-called Christians is not the fault of the Bible's Author, nor is it the fault of Bible writers. As God's prophets, these "spoke from God as they were borne along by holy spirit." (2 Peter 1:20, 21) It is the fault of Bible readers who have failed to follow the leadings of God's spirit in allowing God to

interpret his own Word. They have allowed personal ideas to becloud their view of what the Bible's Author himself says. Let us take two examples.

### What Is the Punishment for Sin?

Some people have been taught to believe that the punishment for sin is everlasting conscious torment in hellfire. Such people may read Revelation 20:10, which speaks of the Devil's being "hurled into the lake of fire and sulphur," and they interpret it to support their views. Of course, this does not agree with Ecclesiastes 9:5, which says that the dead "are conscious of nothing at all"; nor does it agree with Romans 6:23, which states that "the wages sin pays is death," not conscious torment. Still, some might wonder, does not Revelation 20:10 say that Satan (and, supposedly, persons misled by him) "will be tormented day and night forever and ever"?

In the first century, the Greek word for "torment"—here used by the Bible writer John—had a special connotation. Since prisoners were sometimes tortured (although this was contrary to God's law), jailers became known as tormentors.

Another Bible writer refers to this when speaking about an unfaithful slave whose master "delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him." (Matthew 18:34, *King James Version*) Commenting on this text, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* says: "Probably the imprisonment itself was regarded as 'torment' (as it doubtless was), and the 'tormentors' need mean nothing more than jailers."

We can thus see that by comparing scriptures and taking into consideration their meaning in the languages in which the Bible was written, it is possible to arrive at an interpretation that agrees with the rest of the Bible. Free from pre-

conceived ideas, we can clearly see that Revelation 20:10 is no proof of everlasting torment in hellfire. The fate for all rebels against God is everlasting imprisonment in death. Their destruction is as complete as though they were hurled into a literal fiery lake.

### What Is Earth's Destiny?

According to 2 Peter 3:10 (*KJ*), "the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up." Some people interpret this to mean that the globe will be destroyed, possibly in a nuclear holocaust. Yet, in view of what the Bible's Author says elsewhere, how can that be? At Psalm 104:5 (*KJ*) the psalmist, under inspiration, stated that God "laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed for ever." Wise King Solomon, also speaking under inspiration, said at Ecclesiastes 1:4 (*KJ*) that "one generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever."

A contradiction? No, the Bible's Author, a God of truth, cannot contradict himself. Then how can these two verses be reconciled? Let us consider the context of 2 Peter 3:10.

In verses 5 and 6 Peter speaks about the Flood of Noah's day and likens it, in verse 7, to the destruction to come on "the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men." What was destroyed in the Flood? Verse 6 says "the world that then was . . . perished." This earthly globe did not perish. Rather, a wicked worldly system did. And when God promised Noah, at Genesis 9:11 (*KJ*), that never again would there "be a flood to destroy the earth," he was obviously not speaking of the planet, for it had not been destroyed. So "the earth" to be destroyed, according to 2 Peter 3:10, is the same kind of "earth" that was destroyed at the Flood—not the planet Earth but a wicked earthly society of people.

—Compare Genesis 11:1, where "earth" is used in a similar way.

Search as you may, you will find no Bible text that contradicts this interpretation. Of necessity then, it must be the correct one from the Bible's Author himself.

### Why Not Open to Just Any Interpretation?

What would a housewife think of a recipe book that was open to just any interpretation? Or of what benefit would it be to spend money for a dictionary that allowed its reader to interpret the meaning of words just any way he chose? Is that the kind of guidebook we would expect God to give his creatures? Indeed, in such a case, would it even be proper to speak of it as a guidebook?

Honest, God-fearing persons are not interested in twisting the Scriptures "to their own destruction." (2 Peter 3:16) To avoid doing this, they find all the scriptures dealing with the subject they are trying to understand. When scriptures are found that clearly contradict previously held views, those views are quickly discarded, as they cannot be correct.

Because of having this kind of meek attitude, millions of people who were formerly religiously divided have now achieved religious unity with Jehovah's Witnesses. Instead of wanting to interpret the Bible to fit personal ideas, they have been willing to conform to the obvious interpretation made by the Bible's Author himself.

How good it is to know that the Bible is not open to just any interpretation. When we allow its Author to interpret it for us, it is truly "beneficial for teaching, for re-proving, for setting things straight, for disciplining in righteousness." Then, and only then, will it make us "fully competent, completely equipped for every good work."—2 Timothy 3:16, 17.