Scripture in Context

Part I: Reconsidering Our Biblical Roots

Bible Interpretation, the Apostle Paul and Mission Today

by Larry W. Caldwell

Introduction

The interpretation of Scripture runs silent and deep across the frontiers of mission. As evangelicals we value the role of hermeneutics in the mission of the church, and we expect the Bible to be read and interpreted properly as the gospel gains new ground. It’s no surprise that our differences over belief and practice in mission settings force us back to our hermeneutical assumptions, for we know that one’s interpretive compass will direct what one believes to be correct practice in church and mission.

While this evangelical priority may seem obvious we might fail to see the particular assumptions that inform our largely Western interpretative enterprise. These assumptions are especially crucial when our mission interacts with churches and movements emerging in new cultural settings. When we confront difficult questions of contextualization in these settings, are we aware of the cultural influences that shape our hermeneutical orientations? In this article I want to explore these underlying cultural influences on hermeneutics through a study of the apostle Paul. If we can see the unique cultural influences on Paul’s hermeneutical perspective, influences that were quite distinct from our Western heritage, might we then acknowledge the place of cultural preferences in all hermeneutical activity across cross-cultural and multi-cultural mission settings?

The Western “Two Step”

Over the past few decades both the Western and non-Western (Global South or Majority World) church has been bombarded with a plethora of hermeneutical methodologies or approaches: philosophical hermeneutics, minjung hermeneutics, structuralism, feminist hermeneutics, canonical criticism, theological hermeneutics, the hermeneutics of liberation, semiotics, and even queer hermeneutics, to name but a few. For most evangelicals worldwide the
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hermeneutical methodology that has dominated the discussion is one that has two simple steps.

Step One involves the Bible and is concerned with the question: How is a particular Bible passage to be best interpreted? Through an analysis of the original context of the Scripture passage—often using the tools of the grammatical-historical (or historical-critical) process—the interpreter attempts to ascertain, what the Bible passage first meant to its original hearers, to understand what the passage meant then.

Step Two follows on the heels of this first step. Here the interpreter attempts to answer the question: How is that Bible passage to be best interpreted for today? In Step Two the interpreter applies the results of the first step to the particular audience that the interpreter is ministering with now, usually being careful to make sure that the second step closely approximates the results of the first step. These two major steps make up what is known as the “Two Step” approach to Bible interpretation.1

The methodology of the Two Step approach to biblical hermeneutics has dominated Western evangelical hermeneutics over the past fifty years and continues to prevail today. And, because of the success of Western evangelical missionary efforts, this approach also dominates much of the non-Western evangelical world. It is as if the current Western approach is to be universally applied in all cultures, as illustrated in Figure 1.

But should the Two Step approach have gained such international dominance and acceptance among evangelicals worldwide? Several related questions follow:

- Would it not be better for those from other cultural contexts to search for indigenous hermeneutical methods by which the biblical message can best be understood in their own unique cultural settings?
- And, finally, is the Two Step approach, as good as it is, the best approach for the whole church in the 21st century, especially for the majority of the whole church—both Western and non-Western—that is predominately made up of pastors, lay leaders and lay people who will not have the luxury of learning the Two Step approach in evangelical training institutions worldwide?

Kevin Higgins has hinted at the crucial role that indigenous hermeneutics might play in his recent IJFM article on translation and relevance theory.2 Here Higgins highlights relevance theory and its understanding of cognitive environment, especially its implications for communication.

Higgins, following the work of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, describes cognitive environment as “merely a set of assumptions which the individual is capable of mentally representing and accepting as true.”3 Higgins continues: “Thus cognitive environment includes a person’s current and potential matrix of ideas, memories, experiences and perceptions.”4

I was particularly intrigued by Higgins’ desire to understand “how people process the meaning of the Biblical text from within their own cognitive environment” . . . “how cognitive environment shapes meaning and frames questions that are brought to the text.”5 Building on Higgins, I would like to argue that any hermeneutical method, including the Two Step approach, is highly shaped by the cognitive environment of the reader/hearer/interpreter. As such, any hermeneutical method must pay close attention to both the interpreter’s own cognitive environment and its influence on the interpretation of a biblical text, as well as to the reader/hearer and his/her interpretation of that same text. This is not to imply that the reader’s/hearer’s interpretation of the text takes

![Figure 1. Presupposition: Western Hermeneutical Methods Work for All Cultures](image-url)
Higgins speaks of cognitive environment especially in terms of Bible translation. I would like to take his discussion down to the foundational level of Bible interpretation and the hermeneutical assumptions that affect that interpretation, for, in my view, all Bible translation is founded upon pre-existing hermeneutical assumptions. As a result, I believe that we can gain great insight into ‘proper’ Bible interpretation today—whether done by Western or non-Western Bible interpreters—by first examining closely the cognitive environment of the New Testament, in this case the hermeneutical milieu and methods of the apostle Paul. Such an examination will help guard against the previously described tendency of Western missionaries to assume that Western Bible interpretation methods are universal methods that will, by default, work in any cultural context. This article will show that the apostle Paul’s own hermeneutical methods—which he used when he interpreted the Old Testament—defy this Western assumption.

By examining Paul’s hermeneutical methods from an anthropological standpoint, this article will show that Paul’s interpretation methods in regards to the Old Testament were methods arising directly out of the cultural milieu of the first century AD, i.e., his cognitive environment. As a result, the use of such culturally-specific Bible interpretation methods by Paul should give both Westerners and non-Westerners greater freedom in attempting to use interpretation methods that reflect their own cultural contexts and cognitive environments, and a greater confidence to interpret the Bible with more relevance for their own specific cross-cultural and multi-cultural situations. There will be a new recognition that such culturally specific interpretation methods may, in the final analysis, be more authentically biblical than using the Two Step approach.

So why should Bible interpreters try to use culturally appropriate Bible interpretation methods that reflect their own cognitive environment—like those of the apostle Paul that reflect his cognitive environment—rather than relying exclusively, or primarily, on the Two Step approach? I will attempt to answer this question in four sections across two articles. Section 1 will first give a brief background of the hermeneutical milieu out of which Paul’s hermeneutical methods arose, especially looking at the method known as midrash. Section 2 will examine several examples of Paul’s first century hermeneutical methods found in his speeches in Acts. Section 3 will continue in this vein, focusing on examples from Paul’s letters. Section 4 will give examples of non-Western approaches to the biblical text that, like Paul’s, have arisen out of their own hermeneutical contexts and cognitive environments and thus work well in their own cultures. The article will conclude with practical suggestions to help evangelical Bible interpreters better use hermeneutical methods—in both Western and non-Western contexts—that are more culturally appropriate and, in the final analysis, possibly more biblical.

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Part One of this article, comprising Sections 1 and 2, will continue below. Part Two of this article, comprising Sections 3 and 4, will continue in the next issue of IJFM (29:3, July-September 2012).

Section 1: One First Century AD Hermeneutical Method—Midrash

There were several hermeneutical methods used immediately prior to and during the time of the writing of the New Testament. Consequently, the New Testament writers had, as it were, a vast hermeneutical smorgasbord of methods from which to choose: literal historical, allegorical, midrash, typological, pesher, and theological, to mention some of the most significant. In this article I have chosen to investigate in more detail the hermeneutical method of midrash because I believe that it offers perhaps the most parallels and insights for biblical interpretation today, for both Western and non-Western multi-cultural and cross-cultural interpreters of the Bible.

Midrash: Towards a Definition

Midrash (מִדְרָשׁ) is simply the Hebrew word used to describe exegetical principles developed by the Jewish rabbis over the centuries prior to the writing of the New Testament. The overarching purpose of midrash is to better interpret the Old Testament text. What are some of the essential principles of midrash? Richard Longenecker succinctly describes them:

- Midrashic interpretation . . . takes its departure from the biblical text itself . . . and seeks to explicate the hidden meanings contained therein by means of agreed upon hermeneutical rules in order to contemporize the revelation of God for the people of God. It may
be briefly characterized by the maxim: “That has relevance to This”; i.e., What is written in Scripture has relevance to our present situation.8

Longenecker’s reference to the present contextual situation of the audience as the primary motivational component underlying the midrashic technique was first developed by Renée Bloch.9 She viewed the genre of midrash as “the most characteristic and yet the least understood of the Bible.”10

Bloch cites five “essential and fundamental characteristics” of midrash. First, its point of departure is Scripture. This is what contributes to its exclusive use within the overall confines of Judaism:

This is its fundamental characteristic, which already excludes any possibility of finding parallels to this literary genre outside of Israel. Midrash is therefore a genre which is peculiar to Israel, like prophecy, but perhaps even more unique. Midrash cannot occur outside of Israel because it presupposes faith in the revelation which is recorded in the holy books. It is a reflection, a meditation on the sacred texts, a “searching” of Scripture.11

Second, midrash is homiletical; its purpose is to make the results of the “searching” of Scripture by the rabbis accessible to the people. In her words . . . those who “search” the Scriptures are not “ivory tower” theologians. Midrash is not a genre of the academy; it is rather a popular genre, and above all it is homiletical. Its origin is certainly to be sought for the most part in the liturgical reading of the Torah for Sabbaths and Feasts.12

Third, midrash is a method which is attentive to the text in context:

This is a natural corollary. Since the sacred text was read in the synagogue and had to be commented upon in a homily relating to it, attempts were made to understand it better. Because of this it was studied diligently, that it might be understood and its obscurities made clear. This concern of the rabbis meant that they often began their inquiry by asking the question: why? . . . The principal method by which the rabbis clarify the sacred text and probe its depths is by recourse to parallel passages. The Bible forms a unit; it comes from God in all of its parts and it therefore offers a broad context to which one should always return.13

Bloch’s fourth point is particularly crucial to this study; the primary goal of midrash is to be practical, to be adapted to the present.

If midrashic exegesis consists primarily in attentive study of the texts, it does not stop there. Its aim is not purely theoretical. Its goal is primarily practical: to define the lesson for faith and for the religious way of life contained in the biblical text . . . . This practical concern led midrash to reinterpret Scripture, to “actualize” it. This characteristic . . . along with the close relation and constant reference to Scripture, is the essence of midrash. These two characteristics, which are constant, are the very soul of the midrashic method.14

This “actualization” of the Old Testament occurs, in Bloch’s opinion, because it “corresponds to the way in which Israel—and later the Church—has always understood Scripture as the word of God.” She continues:

It always involves a living Word addressed personally to the people of God and to each of its members, a Word which makes clear the divine wishes and demands and calls for a response, never theoretical, and a commitment: the fidelity of a people and each of its members to the demands which the Word makes manifest. Revealed at a specific point in history, this Word is nevertheless addressed to men of all times. Thus it ought to remain open indefinitely to all new understandings of the message, all legitimate adaptations and all new situations. These things are the foundation and the raison d’être of midrash. So long as there is a people of God who regard the Bible as the living Word of God, there will be midrash; only the name might change.15

How is all of this worked out in the New Testament? Bloch maintains that the genre of midrash was “already completely formed at the time of the birth of Christianity.”16 As a result she concludes: Nothing is more characteristic in this regard than the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament: it always involves midrashic actualization. The newness resides in the actualization itself, in the present situation to which the ancient texts are applied and adapted.17

Bloch’s fifth point concerns the practical working out of midrash into the specific literary genres of halakha and haggadah. Halakha refers to a discussion and/or commentary on the legal material of the Old Testament while haggadah refers to a discussion and/or commentary on the non-legal material: history, prophecy, psalms, and the like.

In summary, midrash is a hermeneutical method that begins with Scripture and ends with specific applications to the present realities facing the people of God. But how did the midrashic interpreters arrive at their specific applications? In other words, what did
they do with the biblical text in order to arrive at their actualized interpretations? The answer to these questions cannot be fully understood apart from briefly reviewing the historical and cultural climate out of which midrashic interpretation initially arose. To that topic we turn next.

The Historical and Cultural Climate from which Midrash Developed

People of the Book

From the time period during and especially after the Captivity in Babylon (587 to 538 BC) the ways in which Jews understood their sacred Scripture changed dramatically. Once Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed the Jewish people were no longer a people with a centralized religious worship center or a people with a centralized worship cultus. All that had once represented the Jewish people and their religion now lay in ruins. What, then, was to replace it? This was the worst crisis that the Jewish faith had yet faced. How would these now scattered and captive peoples hold on to their Jewishness? Their response was deceptively simple: they became the people of the Book.

Of course Scripture (Torah) had always played an important role in the Jewish people's religious identity prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The importance of the twice daily recitation of the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9) is evidence enough of this. But Scripture was not always at the apex of the Jewish religious life prior to the Captivity. While the importance of the Torah was clearly recognized early on, the fact that much of the rest of Jewish Scripture was still at various stages of composition, collection and canonization—not to mention that some of it had not even been spoken or written yet—helped account for the relatively secondary position which Scripture, in fact, occupied. In contrast, it was the geographical center of Jerusalem and the physical structure of the Temple—especially the latter—which stood in ascendency, though even this cultic center was occasionally neglected. Indeed, King Josiah even had to rediscover the “Book of the Law” (commonly thought of as the book of Deuteronomy) during the course of the repairing of the Temple (621 BC), some 30 years before the ultimate destruction at the hands of the Babylonians (2 Kgs. 22:8-10; 2 Chron. 34:8-18). Obviously their Scripture, even the Torah, was not always important to the Jews.

The Captivity changed all of that. Now the only threads of commonality and corporateness in the lives of the Jewish people were the words of Scripture. As a result, a whole new way of handling Scripture began at this time, that is, writing down the various oral traditions that were not yet written down, collecting the various traditions, beginning the complicated canonization process, and so on. Going hand-in-hand with all of this was the placing of more emphasis upon the “correct” interpretation of the Scripture they already had, now for a new generation of exiled Jews with little understanding of the religious cultus prior to the Exile. Moreover, the role of the religious professional—one who could best offer the “correct” interpretation—subsequently took on increasing importance. One individual who represented this new religious role was Ezra.

Ezra was “a teacher [sofer] well versed in the Law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6; cf. 7:11) who “had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). Once back in Jerusalem he and his Levite associates “instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.” (Neh. 8:7-8; cf. 8:1-18)

By making the Scripture clear and giving it meaning, Ezra and the Levites were, in Bloch's words, actualizing the Law for the new immediate situation of these returned Jews.

Halakah and Haggadah

What Ezra and the Levites did in Jerusalem merely reflected what was being done to Scripture in other locations where Diaspora Jews lived: Scripture was being read and interpreted so that hearers could better understand what was being read in the context of the realities of their new living situations; this became a widespread practice. Eventually the oral handling of Scripture in this way led to the development of two different written collections of these oral interpretations: halakah and haggadah. Again, halakah refers to a discussion and/or commentary on the Old Testament legal material while haggadah refers to a discussion and/or commentary on the non-legal material.

Over the course of the centuries following the Captivity, collections of various halakah and haggadah sayings were made, collated, and eventually incorporated and expanded into the midrashic commentaries known as the Mishnah. Thus, by the first century AD, the interpretation of the Old Testament had become a crucial element of Jewish intellectual life, as Donald Juel notes:

Scholarly interpreters of the written tradition had largely replaced the priests as guardians of the heritage and experts on legal matters. They
had developed an elaborate hermeneutical mechanism with which to make sense of sacred texts, to fit them into a harmonious whole, and to apply them to the realities of life in the Greco-Roman world. Specific interpretive traditions had grown up, some with roots far back into the postbiblical era and beyond. Exegesis had become a primary mode of intellectual discourse. 21

Why is the above discussion of balakab and haggadab relevant to the midrashic interpretation of the Old Testament by the writers of the New Testament? Precisely because some of the hermeneutical rules eventually underlying balakab and haggadab were also reflected in the hermeneutical methodology of midrash. That is why Bloch, in her fifth essential characteristic of midrash, mentioned earlier, speaks of midrash balakab and midrash haggadab. There was oftentimes overlap between midrash and balakab and/or haggadab.

While the final forms of the written collections of balakab and haggadab were actually collected and collated during the first five centuries of the common era, the actual rules guiding the formulations of the balakab and haggadab existed and were being revised during the years just prior to and/or during the writing and compiling of the New Testament corpus. Therefore, the rules that were formulated to guide balakab and haggadab were also known by the New Testament writers.

The Middoth

What were these interpretation rules? These exegetical rules, or middot (middot), were instituted by the rabbi Hillel (60 BC to 20 AD?) around the year 30 BC We do not know whether Hillel established these rules or merely transmitted them from someone else. 22 There is also much debate concerning how much these seven rules were derived from Hellenistic rhetoric found in Alexandrian in the first century BC. 23 Some maintain that the middot had wide influence in Judaism in the first century AD and beyond. 25 These seven exegetical rules were as follows: 26

1. An inference drawn from a minor premise to a major and vice versa (Kal wa-homer = “light and heavy”). [In other words, an attempt to solve more difficult problems by comparing them with another passage in Scripture.]
2. An inference drawn from analogy of expressions, that is from similar words and phrases elsewhere (Gezera Shawa = “something similar in another passage”). [In other words, an attempt either to expand or to limit the inference.] 24
3. A general principle established on the basis of a teaching contained in one verse (Binyan Av mi-katuv ‘ehad = “constructing a leading rule from two passages”).
4. A general principle established on the basis of a teaching contained in two verses (Binyan Av mi-shenei ketuvim = “con-
5. An inference drawn from a general principle in the text to a specific example and vice versa (Kalal u-ferat = “general and particular” and perat u-khelal). [In other words, this is an attempt to identify a bit more clearly the overall historical and cultural climate out of which midrash developed. Having done this, I want to briefly investigate the use of midrash in the speeches and letters of Paul. The apostle Paul’s use of the Old Testament is especially important to analyze since he interpreted Scripture for both Jewish and Gentile audiences in the early Christian churches. We turn first to some examples of the use of midrash in the speeches of Paul found in the book of Acts.

Section 2: The Use of Midrash in the Speeches of Paul in Acts

Since the publication of H. St. J. Thackeray’s The Relation of St. Paul to Contemporary Jewish Thought in 1900, biblical scholars over the last one hundred years or so have observed that Paul’s hermeneutical methodology was highly influenced by the
Paul was intimately acquainted with several of the various facets of midrashic interpretative techniques used during the first century AD.

In this Old Testament quotation Paul combines Psalm 89:20—“I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him”—with a phrase from the words spoken by the prophet Samuel to King Saul found in 1 Samuel 13:14: “But now your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him a leader of his people, because you have not kept the Lord’s command.”

The original Scriptural contexts of both of these passages to which Paul refers would have doubtless been familiar to those present in the congregation that day. The context of the Psalm quote, observes F. F. Bruce, would have gotten their special attention:

These words of Ps. 89, recording the promises made by God to David, were written in a day when disaster had overtaken David’s house, and the psalmist was bewildered by the contrast between the divine promises and the sorry sight that met his eyes—the crown of David profaned and cast to the ground…. In later days, however, when the sovereignty of the house of David seemed to have passed away for ever, so far as human agency was concerned, it came to be recognized that the promises made to David would be completely fulfilled in a ruler of David’s line whom God would Himself raise up…. As the post-exilic centuries passed, and especially after the brief space of national independence under the Hasmoneans was followed by the Roman conquest, the longing for this messianic deliverer became more intense than ever.21

Thus, Paul here is quoting from these familiar contexts to build up to his preliminary conclusion in this first part of his speech.22 This conclusion immediately follows in 13:23: “From this man’s

Paul is an excellent example of these Jewish hermeneutical influences for several reasons. First, the number of extant letters and writings of Paul that are found today in the New Testament contain a vast amount of material to examine. Second, Paul’s writings were penned before the Gospels and Acts were written and, as a result, give good evidence of the hermeneutical methodology at use in the early Christian church. Third, Luke records several of Paul’s speeches in Luke–Acts, still earlier evidence of Paul’s use of the Old Testament. For these reasons the apostle Paul’s use of the Old Testament in the New is critical to this study. His speeches and writings are especially good evidence for the use of midrash in the New Testament.

At the outset of this discussion of Paul’s use of the Old Testament it must be stressed, once again, that Paul used many hermeneutical techniques in his speeches and writings. Midrash was not his sole choice. From the evidence to be presented shortly, however, it will be seen that Paul was intimately acquainted with several of the various facets of midrashic interpretative techniques used during the first century AD. What follows is a brief analysis of five examples of Paul’s use of the Old Testament. In this first part, three examples are taken from Luke’s record of Paul’s first missionary speech recorded in Acts, and in the following article, two are taken from the writings of Paul himself.20

**Midrash in Paul’s First Missionary Speech: Acts 13:16-41**

In the thirteenth chapter of Acts, Luke recounts the beginnings of what is known today as Paul’s first missionary journey. Here in 13:16-41 is found the first recorded missionary sermon delivered by Paul at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioc. After “the reading from the Law and the Prophets” had occurred the leaders of the synagogue invited Paul and Barnabas to give “a message of encouragement for the people” (13:15). Paul responds to the invitation with a message to these gathered “men of Israel and … Gentiles who worship God” (13:16). In his response he includes several allusions to specific Old Testament events as well as several direct quotes.

**Acts 13:22**

After a lengthy summary of the mighty acts of God in the history of Israel from the time of the Exodus to the establishment of David as King (13:15-22), Paul ties it all together with words concerning Jesus. In Acts 13:22 he emphasizes the truth of his message with his first quote from the Old Testament:

After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: ‘I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.’

The various facets of Paul’s use of midrashic techniques used during the first century AD. By now this observation should not be surprising. These biblical scholars discovered what this article is trying to demonstrate: the apostle Paul was a product of the overall hermeneutical milieu of his day and age. As E. Earle Ellis notes concerning Paul and his Jewish hermeneutical background:

Without a doubt the apostle’s understanding of the Old Testament was completely revolutionized after his conversion; nevertheless his Jewish heritage remained of fundamental importance for his understanding and use of the Bible. His reverence for and study of the Scriptures long preceded his knowledge of Christ. Reading habits, methodology, and hermeneutic norms were firmly implanted by his parents, his synagogue and most of all, his teacher of rabbinics—Gamaliel.29

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descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised.”

What kind of midrashic exegesis is Paul employing here? He is applying the familiar “that” of these biblical texts—especially Psalm 89—to the “this” situation of the coming of Jesus. Here Paul actualizes the biblical texts he quotes to clearly show that they are fulfilled in the person of Jesus, the Messiah.

Acts 13:32-36
The remainder of Paul’s speech to the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch centers on this person Jesus. After giving some historical background about Jesus, especially concerning his death and resurrection, Paul again quotes from the Old Testament, this time with explicit introductory statements. The text of Acts 13:32-36 reads

We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:

‘You are my Son, today I have become your Father.’

The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words:

‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.’

So it is stated elsewhere:

‘You will not let your Holy One see decay.’

For when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

This string of successive Old Testament quotes is taken from Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 55:3, and Psalm 16:10, respectively. The two quotes from the Psalms are exact translations of the Masoretic text, while that from Isaiah is in a form similar to that found in the Septuagint.

What are the midrashic elements in this series of verses? These three Old Testament quotes are being used according to the seven m idd oth of Hillel examined in Section 1. Since Hillel was either the father or grandfather of Gamaliel, Paul’s rabbinical teacher, it is not surprising that Paul’s writing, even after his conversion experience, reflects his rabbinic training. As J. W. Doeve (1954, 175) comments:

“. . . in the argument of Acts 13 the work of a schooled rabbi is quite perceptible. If one is familiar with the working methods of a rabbinic expositor and able to assess the value of this exegesis, then one can hardly deny that Acts 13 offers a sound and well-built argument, arresting by its exegetical ingenuity.”

Though this exegetical rule of analogy is not nearly as obvious as one might like it to be, there seems to be sufficient evidence for its use by Paul here relative to this quote from the second Psalm.

Acts 13:38-41
The last quotation used by Paul in his Pisidian Antioch synagogue speech is found in Acts 13:38-41:

Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of
Moses. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: ‘Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.’

Here Paul’s reference to “the prophets” is actually a quotation of Habakkuk 1:5, taken from the Septuagint. The original context of the Habakkuk quote concerns the imminent rise to world power of Nebuchadnezzar and the Chaldeans as God’s answer to the tyranny of the world by the Assyrians. The Chaldeans will deliver the world from Assyrian tyranny and all the nations of the world will be amazed.

The hermeneutical method underlying Paul’s use of this quotation from Habakkuk is the “this is that” understanding inherent to the midrashic pesher style. Paul pays scant attention to the details of the original Habakkuk context except for the theme of deliverance inherent in it. Paul, however, does not totally divorce the Habakkuk quotation from its original context. For the “this” is found in the overall deliverance context of Habakkuk 1:5, but now it is more completely revealed in light of the “that” context of the deliverance offered through Jesus Christ. According to Bruce, Paul applies Habakkuk 1:5 “to the new situation in which God is offering deliverance through the greatest of all His mighty works. Great as was the disaster that overtook those who ignored the warnings of the prophets, an even greater disaster will fall upon those who refuse the gospel.” It is imperative, then, for Paul’s audience to realize that the deliverance now offered through Jesus Christ be given the hearing it justly deserves.

Preliminary Summary
These first two sections have attempted to show, however briefly, that the hermeneutical milieu of the first century AD was one that significantly influenced the apostle Paul and his own cognitive environment. It is not surprising, then, that Paul used the methods from his own hermeneutical milieu in his speeches in Acts. The “two step” method we are so familiar with in our modern milieu was not the primary lens through which Paul interpreted Scripture when he preached.

The “two step” method we are so familiar with in our modern milieu was not the primary lens through which Paul interpreted Scripture when he preached. It’s clear from Acts 13 alone that Paul’s interpretive lenses were drawn from his hermeneutical milieu, in this case from midrash and the seven rules that guided Hillel, Gamaliel and the Pharisaic tradition. I hope this initial look at Paul’s milieu will cause us to reconsider our assumptions about biblical interpretation as we use Scripture cross-culturally across our world today.

In Part Two I will continue this exploration of Paul’s hermeneutical milieu by looking at some passages from his letter to the Romans. I will also introduce a few modern-day examples of non-Western indigenous Bible interpretational approaches that likewise arise directly from their own cognitive environments. I will then conclude with some practical applications for all Bible interpreters today.

Endnotes
1 The strengths of this Two Step approach are several. This approach takes the Bible seriously and allows the biblical text to always take precedence over the world of the interpreter and his/her culture. The approach deals honestly with the context of the original text and attempts to understand as much as possible the original author’s intended meaning. This approach looks at the strengths and weaknesses of the interpretation of the Bible throughout church history and learns from it. This approach takes the best of evangelical scholarship and uses it for better understandings of the biblical text and its context. The weaknesses of this Two Step approach are also several. This approach assumes the universal nature of western hermeneutical methods that may not necessarily be applicable in all non-western contexts. This approach has grammatical-historical roots with a possible anti-God and anti-Bible bias. This approach is costly to implement and maintain (requiring books and libraries and/or access to them) and thus is oftentimes limited to more wealthy cultures. Furthermore, this approach is very complicated to learn; it assumes a high educational level and takes years of advanced training to effectively handle the approach. For a more thorough analysis of the weaknesses of the Two Step approach, especially in non-western cross-cultural situations, see my “Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics: Questioning the Relevancy of Western Hermeneutical Methods in the Asian Context.”

6 Higgins essentially agrees when he says that the reality is “that translation is itself an iterative, interpretive process,” 191.
7 Note that what follows in Sections 1 through 4 is simply an attempt to paint in very broad strokes both the hermeneutical milieu of the first century AD as well as the apostle Paul’s use of midrash. It does not presume in any way to be exhaustive. See the bibliographical references for more thorough discussions.
8 Richard N. Longenecker, Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 37.
9 See Renée Bloch, “Midrash,” trans. by Mary Callaway. In Approaches to Ancient Judaism, ed. W. S. Green (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978). This major article by Bloch appeared posthumously in French in 1957. Bloch was one of the first proponents for studying midrash as a hermeneutical method.
explanations are my own. For more details as well as numerous examples see Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics*, 66-75.

14 Ibid., 32-33.
15 Ibid., 33.
16 Ibid., 29.
17 Ibid., 33.
18 Again, what is described here has been greatly simplified. In actuality the answer of the Jewish people was simple but the process underlying the answer was incredibly complex.
19 Cf. Ibid., 34-36.
20 Allowance, though, must be made for the possibility that this “making it clear and giving the meaning” may not have involved midrashic interpretation at all, but rather translation from Aramaic to the local dialect; cf. Geza Vermes, “Bible and Midrash: Early Jewish Exegesis,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*. From the Beginnings to Jerome. Vol. 1, eds. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 201. The entire context of this passage, however, along with the several times it appears the interpretation was given—“making it clear,” “giving the meaning,” “so that the people could understand”—seems to imply more than mere translation. For a thorough analysis of the influence of Aramaic on Jesus and the New Testament church see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Semitic Background of the New Testament*. Combined edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).
24 Cf. Vermes, “Bible and Midrash,” 221. Possibly the middoth were the result of attempts to put some kind of limits upon the freer midrashic hermeneutical forms in vogue around this time period.
25 Hillel’s seven middoth were later expanded by others to total a standardized 32 middoth by 160 AD.


27 Interestingly enough, this seventh middoth is a hermeneutical method that parallels to some extent some modern historical-critical hermeneutical techniques. Note, however, that though this middoth was readily available to the New Testament writers they seldom chose to use it.
28 For a historical chronicking of various scholars’ understandings (since 1900) of this relationship between Paul and the rabbinical hermeneutical methods of his time see Dan Cohn-Sherbok, “Paul and Rabbinic Exegesis.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35 (1981).
30 With regard to the examples from Acts, while the probability of Luke’s redaction of these Pauline speeches to reflect Luke’s own overall theological agenda must be acknowledged, nevertheless the overall tenor of Paul’s hermeneutical methodology in these speeches is easily discerned.
32 Paul’s additional phrases, “son of Jesse” and “he will do everything I want him to do,” are inconsequential. They may merely be turgidic comments upon the Old Testament texts or they could reflect the possibility that Paul (or the Pisidian Antioch congregation) had a text that included these phrases. Note that the longer phrase occurs in the Targum of Jonathan; cf. F. F. Bruce, “Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Acts,” in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne with Otto Betz (Grand Rapids, MI/Tübingen, WG: Eerdmans/Mohr, 1987), 72.
33 See Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 33-34, n. 50, concerning sources for further debate over this issue. It is interesting to note that Paul’s teacher, Gamaliel—according to H. E. Dana and R. E. Glaze, Jr., *Interpreting the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1961), 19—“was broad-minded and considerate in his interpretation of the Law, having been characterized very much by the spirit of his grandfather. The remarkable liberality of his attitude may be seen in the fact that he studied and taught Greek literature and contended for the inherent rights and privileges of the Gentiles. He was, nevertheless, held in high regard by the Jews of his own and later generations . . .”, cf.
Scripture in Context
Part 2: Reconsidering Our Biblical Roots: Bible Interpretation, the Apostle Paul and Mission Today

by Larry W. Caldwell

The first part of my article on the need for us to reconsider our biblical roots as we interpret the Bible in the context of mission today appeared in the previous issue of IJFM (29:2, Summer 2012). As we launch into this second part, let us recall the argument of the two parts.

A Review of Part One

In Part 1 we looked at the hermeneutical methodology that dominates Bible interpretation for evangelicals worldwide—what I call “the Western Two-Step.” The first step responds to the question: How is a particular Bible passage to be best interpreted? In this initial step the interpreter attempts to ascertain what the Bible passage first meant to its original hearers, to understand what the passage meant then. Step Two follows as the interpreter attempts to answer the question: How is that Bible passage best interpreted for today? In this second step the interpreter applies the results of the first step to the particular audience with whom the interpreter is ministering now, being careful to make sure that the second step closely approximates the results of the first step.

I called into question the appropriateness of the international dominance of this “Two Step” approach to Bible interpretation among evangelicals worldwide. I considered the possibility that it might be more appropriate to examine indigenous hermeneutics as the starting point for multi-generational, multi-cultural and cross-cultural mission work today. Building on Kevin Higgins’ work with relevance theory, I examined the role that cognitive environment plays on an individual’s “current and potential matrix of ideas, memories, experiences and perceptions.” I maintained that any hermeneutical method, including the Two Step approach, is highly shaped by the cognitive environment of the reader/hearer/interpreter. Furthermore, I argued that we must examine carefully the cognitive environment of ourselves as interpreters, as well as the cognitive environment of the audiences with whom we do...
mission, which would include the various indigenous hermeneutical methods.

Since one’s cognitive environment shapes one’s hermeneutical methodology, I argued that it’s appropriate for both Westerners and non-Westerners alike to use interpretation methods that reflect their own cultural contexts and cognitive environments. I then examined this cultural preference for hermeneutical methods in the New Testament, since the biblical authors model their hermeneutical preference in their interpretation of the Old Testament. Not surprisingly, their hermeneutical methods reflect their own cognitive environments, a tendency especially apparent in the speeches and writings of the apostle Paul. So in Section 1 of Part 1 we examined the hermeneutical milieu and cognitive environment of the first century AD out of which Paul’s hermeneutical methods arose. I gave special attention to the method known as *midrash*. In Section 2 I described Paul’s use of *midrash* in his speeches in Acts.

Now, here in Part 2, we will continue our investigation of Paul’s hermeneutical methods in the third section. I want to illuminate Paul’s use of *midrash* from his letter to the Romans. Section 4 will then give three examples of non-Western approaches to the biblical text that, like Paul’s, have arisen out of their own hermeneutical contexts. I’ll conclude with some practical suggestions for both Western and non-Western evangelical Bible interpreters on how to use hermeneutical methods that are more culturally appropriate.

**Section 3: The Use of Midrash in the Letters of Paul**

The use of midrashic interpretative techniques by the apostle Paul in his sermons in the book of Acts, as demonstrated in Part 1, continued throughout his ministry in both oral and written form. His writings available for our study today are all of an epistelary genre, both the letters written to churches and individuals. Paul quotes from the Old Testament 93 times. Old Testament quotes are found in all of his letters except for Philemon.

Since the bulk of these quotations are found in Romans, I will offer two examples from that letter. Though only representative, these two examples amply reflect Paul’s use of hermeneutical method across all his letters.

**Romans 9:6-29**

One obvious example of Paul’s continued use of *midrash* methodology in referencing the Old Testament is found in chapter 9 of his letter to the Romans, particularly in verses 9–26. Here several Old Testament quotations are strung together by Paul in a very structured way, an example of what is commonly referred to as the proem *midrash* technique.

This proem form had the following elements:

1. The (Pentateuchal) text for the day.
2. A second text, the proem: the introduction or “opening” for the discourse.
3. Exposition containing additional Old Testament citations, parables or other commentary and linked to the initial texts by catch words.
4. A final text, usually repeating or alluding to the text for the day.

Paul clearly uses this proem *midrash* technique in verses 9:6-29 as seen below:

6 It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. 7 Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” 8 In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring. 9 For this was how the promise was stated: “At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.”

10 Not only that, but Rebekah’s children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. 11 Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad— in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: 12 not by works but by him who calls—she was told, “The older shall serve the younger.” 13 Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

14 What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! 15 For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”

16 It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. 17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” 18 Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

19 One of you will say to me: “Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?” 20 But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” 21 Does the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

22 What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruc-
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like many scholars today, Jewish-Christian readers at Rome would not have been troubled by Paul’s hermeneutical methods.

What Paul is doing here in Deuteronomy can be better understood by examining the original context. In Deuteronomy 30:11-14, Moses is trying to impress upon his audience that the law is not too difficult to obey:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

Paul, in Romans 10:6-8, takes these same words of Moses and applies them directly to the righteousness which is by faith in Christ. In so doing his hermeneutical methodology exhibits characteristics of midrash: he actualizes the Deuteronomy passage and interprets it in light of the present context of the historical fact of Christ’s death (“that is, to bring Christ down”) and resurrection (“that is, to bring Christ up from the dead”). Paul simply interprets the “that” of Deuteronomy in light of the “this” of Jesus Christ. The quotation of the Deuteronomy passage, in other words, is actualized and reinterpreted in light of the new context and present situation of those to whom Paul is writing this epistle. The new context compels Paul to adapt this Old Testament quote for purposes of New Testament faith.

Section 4: Three Examples of Indigenous Non-Western Hermeneutical Approaches to the Biblical Text

Having examined briefly the hermeneutical milieu and cognitive environment out of which Paul’s hermeneutical methods...

This Romans passage fits the previously mentioned four sections of the proem pattern as follows: 46

1. Verses 6-8: theme and initial text from Gen. 21:12 (v. 7).
2. Verse 9: a second, supplemental text from Gen. 18:10 (also 18:14).
3. Verses 10-28: exposition containing additional citations: Gen. 25:23 (v. 12); Mal. 1:2, 3 (v. 13); Ex. 33:19 (v. 15); Ex. 9:16 (v. 17); Isa. 29:16, 45:9 (v. 20); Hos. 2:23 (v. 25); Hos. 1:10 (v. 26); and Isa. 10:22, 23 (v. 28)—all linked to the initial texts by the catchwords καλέω and ὑιός (“calls,” “called” and “son,” vs. 12, 24-26, 27).
4. Verse 29: a final text from Isa. 1:9 alluding to the initial text with the catchword σπέρμα (“descendants”).

Paul’s argument, moving from one proof-text to another, is interrupted twice in order to deal with false inferences (and possibly an objector in v. 19) that may have arisen from the texts with which he deals. Paul is actualizing these Old Testament texts to the current needs of his audience in the proem midrash style to which the majority were undoubtedly accustomed. Being familiar with this style, the Jewish-Christian readers at Rome would have understood Paul’s use of the Old Testament quotes relative to the question posed in verses 1-5. Unlike the quardry of many scholars today, they would not have been troubled by Paul’s hermeneutical methods, for it was in keeping with the rabbinic style of that day. 37 Paul (like Jesus before him) was a master teacher intimately acquainted with the proem midrash technique.

Romans 10:6-8

Another example of Paul’s midrashic hermeneutical techniques can be seen in his use of Deuteronomy 30:12-14 in Romans 10:6-8. Paul writes:

But the righteousness that is by faith says: “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven’? (that is, to bring Christ down) "or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming. . .

Since at least the time of John Calvin exegetes have noticed that Paul’s treatment of Deuteronomy 30:12-14 is not in keeping with the general context of that passage. As Calvin expressed it,

This passage may for two reasons cause considerable difficulty to the reader. Paul seems to have not only distorted the proper sense of the passage, but also to have changed the words to a different meaning. 48

But is Paul really distorting and changing? Could it not be that he is simply following a familiar hermeneutical technique which is unfamiliar to Calvin and many modern exegetes?

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arose, and having focused on several examples of Paul’s hermeneutical approaches, we now can rightfully proceed to the next question: “How does all of this relate to interpreting the Bible in multi-generational, multi-cultural and cross-cultural situations today?” The answer to this question is found in contemporary indigenous approaches that, like Paul’s, have arisen out of their own hermeneutical contexts. We will look briefly at three examples of hermeneutics being done in three different non-Western contexts.

Hermeneutics Among the Cotobato Manobo of the Philippines

The first example comes from the Cotobato Manobo people of Mindanao in the Philippines. The Cotobato Manobo have four major hermeneutical methods by which they interpret their own vast oral literature: peligad (figurative speech that is interpreted according to what it symbolizes); tegudon (the re-telling of historical doctrine from their legends that teach Cotobato Manobo what they should believe today); telaki (simple stories that end with an application designed to teach younger Cotobato Manobos the Manobo ideals and values in life); and dayuy (the expression of emotion through stylized singing). Let’s look at a concise example of the first, peligad, and how it may be used by the Cotobato Manobo to interpret the Bible.

This example involves a newly arrived missionary to the Cotobato Manobo who heard the tribal leader speak the following words while in dialogue with another man:

My friend, a poor man from a far village, about eight mountains away, together with his family, has hiked the long mountain trail bringing with them a precious rice seedling. They are hoping to find a fertile field. Now, outside are the twenty-feet-that-walk waiting to be given as a gift if he is allowed to plant his precious rice seed in somebody’s field. And if it is well with you and your family he wants to plant it in your fertile field.

When the missionary heard these words she did not know what to think. She became even more puzzled when the man joyously answered the leader:

I am privileged and honored to be chosen among the many fields. Yes, I tell the poor man to do as he pleases and that I will gladly receive his gift. Expect us when the moon first appears in the eastern sky.

The missionary later discovered that the conversation was actually about a wedding arrangement. The poor man was the father. The “rice seed” was the young man for whom the father wanted to find a wife and the “fertile field” was the young maiden who was the daughter of the man to whom the leader was talking. The “twenty-feet-that-walk” were five horses (the bridal price). The receiving of the gift and the promised visit meant that the man accepted the proposal and would later bring the bride to the groom’s village for the wedding.

This cross-cultural illustration from the Cotobato Manobo illustrates how the hermeneutical method of peligad—something shared in light of a similar cognitive environment—made the conversation understandable to both speaker and hearer, but not to the missionary outsider who knew little about this interpretive method. The fact that both Manobos knew the hermeneutical rules brought the conversation to a successful conclusion.

What literary genre from the Bible lends itself to the peligad hermeneutical method? The parables of Jesus should come to mind. While Western interpreters often struggle for the main point of comparison (tertium comparationis) in many of these parables, the peligad of the Cotobato Manobo helps the interpreter to arrive at essentially the same exegetical conclusion. For example, in Mark 4:30–32 (cf. Matt. 13:31–32), Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God and a mustard seed. The comparison of the two drives the hearer to look for the main point of comparison: the growth from insignificant to significant. The peligad, when applied to this same parable, interprets the figurative language in light of what it symbolizes: Jesus uses the figurative language of mustard seed to fully-grown tree to symbolize the kingdom and its growth. Either the method of tertium comparationis or the peligad allow the interpreter to arrive at the same basic conclusion. In this case, the peligad is perhaps a more appropriate hermeneutical method for the Cotobato Manobo culture.

Hermeneutics among the Bulisa of Ghana

The second example comes from the Bulisa people of Ghana, West Africa. Many proverbs are useful for expressing Christian truth and these Bulisa people have a tremendous number of indigenous proverbs. These old proverbs often express values that have been adopted as part of their Bulisa Christian worldview, their cognitive environment. These indigenous proverbs have become effective carriers...
of biblical truth, as evidenced in the following story. It concerns a group of Builsa pastors and the missionary working among them:

Twelve Builsa pastors attended the meeting and Pastor Kofi—one of the Builsa pastors—opened with the proverb that has helped his own faith in Yezu (Jesus), "Nurubik a labni ka kpiak kawpta po" (A human being hides in the feathers of a fowl). Joe, who is a missionary to the Builsa people, was totally puzzled, while the Builsa seemed to enjoy reflecting on this proverb. Upon Joe's request, the church leaders explained the background of the proverb.

In the life of the Builsa people, fowls are used to hide shame or problems. If someone comes upon a problem requiring money, they can always sell some of the fowls at market and then use the money to solve the problem. In this way, they hide behind the chicken's feathers so that the shame of the problem does not reach the person. The fowl is also commonly used in situations requiring sacrifice to the ancestors or earth shrines for problems such as sickness, infertility, drought, famine, etc. The fowl is sacrificed to the ancestors or earth shrine to solve the problem and cover our shame. In this way, they hide behind the chicken's feathers so that the shame of the problem does not reach the person.

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Immanuel added, "When we rest in the feathers of Yezu, then we no longer need to have a jiuk, bagi, or any other black medicine to protect us. The feathers of Yezu will cover us—our relationship with Him assures us that He will cover us with His wings. Naawen Wani (the Bible) says that Naawen (God) will ‘cover you with his feathers and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart’ (Ps 91:4)."

Joe was stunned. He remembered reading this verse in seminary while studying in the West. The imagery of “hiding under the wings of God” was strange to his ears and it was difficult for him to gain the meaning of the metaphor back then. Now, the meaning was starting to dawn on him. The perspective of the Builsa culture brought out a richer meaning of this Scripture passage. This dealt with protection from harm, shame, and difficulties. It also implied a close relationship with God, who was willing to receive the brunt of our difficulties as we hid under his protection. "What a wonderful metaphor," Joe thought to himself, "and it took another cultural perspective for me to gain this insight." Little did Joe know that the best was yet to come.

Immanuel added, "This proverb has touched me deeply and it helps me to understand the heart of Yezu." The earnestness in his voice revealed that this was a deep matter of discipleship for him. Joe was eager to hear more.

"When I hear this proverb and read Matthew 23:37, I can feel Yezu's heart and desire for us Builsa people," continued Immanuel. "Yezu says, 'How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.' That is Yezu's desire for us: to protect us, cover our shame, receive the brunt of our difficulties. Is that a closer friend than I have ever known!"

Kofi continued, “Now that I am a Kristobiik (Christian), I feel that Yezu is the chicken that I hide under. When problems come, I can run to Yezu in prayer and ask him to cover my shame and protect me. He will bear the full impact of the problem that has come upon me, and I can safely rest in His feathers.”

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Kofi’s eyes lit up, “Are you sure that is in Naawen Wani? Let me see that.” He read slowly in Buli how Yezu wanted to “pawbi ni meena a tara ase kpiak ale pawbi ka bias di la.” This literally means to “wrap you all up like a fowl wraps up her children (under her wings).” Since fowls are a daily part of the life-experience of the Builsa, the picture of a hen wrapping up her chicks under her wings in order to protect them from hawks and other dangers was a very vivid and concrete picture in Kofi’s mind. Kofi sat back and smiled as he reflected on this picture of Yezu and what it meant to him.

David then added an application from the book of Ruth, “Do you remember how Ruth was a widow? Like our widows here in Buluk, she had little hope for the future. When she placed herself under Naawen’s feathers, Naawen covered her shame and brought about a wonderful blessing. Listen to the praise she received from Boaz in Ruth 2:12, ‘May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge’” (emphasis added).

It was Joe’s turn to be surprised, “Are you sure that is in the Bible? Let me read that.” Joe had read the book of Ruth several times before but he never noticed the imagery of “Hiding under the wings of God.” He could now feel Ruth’s desperation of widowhood, and he also understood the imagery of taking refuge under God’s wings. Joe was learning new things from Scripture that he had overlooked before.
For the next month, they chewed on these thoughts. This proverb raised other connections to Scripture. Could this proverb give additional understanding as to the significance of the cherubim’s wings covering the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle (Ex 25:17-22) and God’s words, “There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the testimony, I will meet with you” (Ex 25:22)? This imagery was repeated in Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs 8:6-11) where “The cherubim spread their wings over the places of the ark” (1 Kgs 8:7). Again, Joe wondered if it may explain some of the imagery behind God carrying Israel on his wings when bringing them out of Egypt (Ex 19:4), as well as shed some light on the hard to understand passages in Ezekiel 10, etc.

Joe was realizing that Builsa culture offered another perspective from which to see biblical truth that he normally overlooked. The proverb was the window to open this understanding for him; he was eager to learn more.

In the above example, an indigenous proverb engaged the Bible and handcrafted a uniquely Builsa “chicken theology,” a theology that works for the Builsa because it fits so well with their cognitive environment. This proverb—as we see it discussed within the Builsa hermeneutical community—shapes their Christianity in terms and concepts that are uniquely Builsa. Notice how the Builsa are essentially using midrash (“that is this”) to explain biblical truth in light of their own Builsa proverb.

Hermeneutics among a Multilingual Community of Muslim Followers of Isa

The third example comes from Kevin Higgins and an extended Bible study he participated in with Muslim followers of Jesus from several different people groups. They had gathered together to study Luke’s Gospel, and now they were studying the birth account of Jesus. What follows is Higgins’ analysis of the discussion that ensued following the reading of the passage concerning Elizabeth: “After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion” (Lk 1:24). Higgins recounts the group discussion:

Why did Elizabeth stay in her home for five months? As (one) respondent went on to say, “No woman would do that. It seems very strange.”

Of all the questions that I might have foreseen or guessed would arise (so-called theological questions, etc.), it was this last question about why Elizabeth remained in her house for five months that prompted the most passionate, heated, intense, and lengthy discussion. Clearly this was something important, though I have never found any other group in my studies in the USA who thought so!

An indigenous proverb engaged the Bible and handcrafted a unique Builsa “chicken theology.”

As the groups went round and round three possible answers emerged as the main contenders:

1. Perhaps this was their culture? This took a long time to come to, until one man related how he had become aware that women in peoples within his country other than his own cultural group did have different customs after the birth of a child.

2. I suggested that perhaps since Elizabeth was elderly, she was worried that too much exertion would endanger the baby (it seemed so natural a possibility to me, given my cognitive environment).

3. She remained five months as an offering of special thanks and praise to Allah for this special child.

Suggestion number two was vigorously debated and in the end rejected with great fervor, drawing on the argument that Elizabeth could not possibly be afraid for the welfare of the child. The reasoning proceeded like this:

Jibril (Gabriel) had already told Elizabeth what Allah was going to do in this child’s future, so that meant that this future would happen. There was no risk.

Answers 2 and 3 are wonderful examples of how our cognitive environment shapes even the things we think are conceivable answers, let alone what we settle on.

In the end they left this as an open question. If we had voted I think #3 would have beat out #1 as the favored answer. It might have been a close vote, but #3 would have won the debate. Again, in a culture where men elect to go on various lengths of tableeq trips in order to fulfill vows or compensate for a sin, or gain favor, or draw near to Allah, and where Sufis travel from one place to another as a part of various rituals and initiations, the idea of someone deciding to remain five months at home for a religious reason would be a natural contender for understanding Elizabeth’s actions.

As Higgins observed, suggestion number 2 was the most obvious explanation according to his own cognitive environment. However, as this hermeneutical community of Jesus followers midrashed the Lucan text their suggested answers (especially suggestion number 3) reflected their own hermeneutical milieu and cognitive environment. They actualized the text in light of their own cultural experience and in so doing gave a new and significant interpretation to a passage mostly dismissed by Western interpreters like Higgins.

These three examples show the promise of hermeneutics when different peoples use indigenous hermeneutical resources arising directly from their own unique cognitive environments. There should be little doubt that the hermeneutical methods of the Cotobato Manobo Christians, the Builsa Christians, and
the Muslim followers of Isa—as well as other non-Western cultures like theirs—may one day play important roles in the overall hermeneutical task of the worldwide church. The Christian world’s understanding of the Bible will be infinitely richer as a result.

**Conclusion**

What I have been arguing for in this article is that God not only works through culture—hence the need to communicate the truths of Scripture in culturally relevant forms—but, correspondingly, that God also works through the hermeneutical processes and cognitive environments inherent in each culture. This is what the discipline of ethnohermeneutics is all about. Ethnohermeneutics is simply Bible interpretation done in multi-generational, multi-cultural and cross-cultural contexts that, as far as possible, uses dynamic hermeneutical methods which already reside in the culture. Its primary goal is to interpret and communicate the truths of the Bible in ways that will be best understood by the receptor culture.53

As we have seen, this sensitivity to interpretive method, indeed, is modeled for us in the Bible itself. That’s where the very roots of ethnohermeneutics are found. New Testament writers like the apostle Paul—through the guidance of the Holy Spirit—used their own culturally relevant hermeneutical methods in communicating Old Testament truths in light of the cognitive environment of their particular New Testament audience. The discipline of ethnohermeneutics helps us discover both the hermeneutical milieu as well as the particular hermeneutical method used by the New Testament writers. Such discoveries reveal a direct correlation between milieu (Jewish first century AD) and method (midrash). In the case of the apostle Paul, the hermeneutical milieu and cognitive environment of the first century AD directly influenced his method of interpreting the Old Testament text for his audience.

All of this gives evidence to the fact that what the New Testament writers wrote is inspired, but not their specific hermeneutical methods. This fact is significant for all Bible interpreters today. Why? Because it means that no one hermeneutical method is inspired; each and every method simply emerges from its own unique hermeneutical milieu and cognitive environment. The dominance of one particular method does not necessarily indicate God’s favor or that there is a single, Spirit-filled, universal method. Rather, other factors give rise to a method’s predominance, like colonization/westernization in the case of the Two Step approach.54

During the past two millennia God, in his infinite wisdom and creativity, chose to work through the hermeneutical processes inherent in the various cultures within each historical period to make his Word clear and understandable. He used the hermeneutical milieu of the first century AD to impart his inspired message through New Testament writers like the apostle Paul and his use of midrash. He did the same during the thousand years of the Middle Ages through the interpretive use of allegory.55 For twenty-first century North Americans, the Bible is made relevant through the hermeneutical methods inherent in our Western world, which would include historical criticism and the Two Step approach. In like manner, God desires to use Filipino hermeneutical methods to reach Filipino audiences, Builsa methods to reach Builsa people, and so on, as illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Different Hermeneutical Methods for Different Cultures**
If God wishes to use the hermeneutical methods that are appropriate for each culture, then both Western and non-Western interpreters must seriously consider using hermeneutical methods appropriate for both their own as well as for their target culture. We must reconsider our own biblical hermeneutical roots, and we must return to the Bible as our guide for interpreting Scripture in the multi-generational, multi-cultural and cross-cultural contexts in which we do mission today. The apostle Paul was careful to interpret the Bible in light of his own culture’s hermeneutical cognitive environment. Clearly we who are Bible interpreters today can do no less.

With that end in mind, here are five practical suggestions for those who wish to reconsider their biblical-hermeneutical roots in order to facilitate better Bible interpretation in mission today:

1. Study the hermeneutical methods that Jesus and the New Testament writers used when they interpreted the Old Testament. If the Bible is indeed the final authority for everything that we evangelicals believe and do, it behooves us, does it not, to at least be familiar with the hermeneutical methods of our Lord and Savior, as well as his servant, the apostle Paul? We may want to reconsider hermeneutical methods that are more “biblical” than the ones we now use.

2. Know your own culture’s hermeneutical methods. This is a given for those involved in cross-cultural mission, but it is also important for those ministering in the increasingly multi-cultural Western world. The maxim “know yourself” is incredibly important for all Bible interpreters. For until you know how your own hermeneutical method arose from your own culture’s hermeneutical milieu you will not be able to see how those methods may influence how you interpret and teach those who are of a different culture from yourself.

3. Understand the worldviews and thought processes of those among whom you are working, especially if you are working multi-generationally, multi-culturally or cross-culturally (and, these days, who isn’t?). Here are some questions to ask: How do they process the meaning of the biblical text from within their own hermeneutical milieu and cognitive environment? How do they interpret reality and how can that same hermeneutical thinking process be used to help them interpret the Bible for themselves? How can you both model and encourage them to use their own indigenous hermeneutical methods, rather than the rudimentary Western hermeneutical methods based upon historical criticism and the Two Step approach? I believe that some of our current dialogue concerning “insider movements” and the translation of familiar biblical terms would benefit from this understanding.

4. Train Christian leaders—both Western and non-Western—in how to best interpret the Bible for their own contexts. This may involve extensive curriculum review and change in theological training institutions in order to really help all Christians use culturally appropriate hermeneutical methods when they interpret the Bible. At the very least it should involve supplementing the rudimentary Western hermeneutical methods with more culturally appropriate approaches. It should include instruction on how to understand one’s own hermeneutical milieu and cognitive environment, as well as how to discover the hermeneutical milieus and cognitive environments of people from a different culture.

5. Remember the Holy Spirit wants the Bible understood by others just as much as you do. Rely on the Holy Spirit to guide you, and instruct your hermeneutical communities to do the same.

In conclusion, I reach back one hundred years to a quotation from the eminent missiologist Roland Allen. Allen described the imposition of foreign governmental systems on native peoples in his day with striking candor; however, I believe his words speak just as powerfully to the imposition of hermeneutical methods by one group of people upon another:

Moreover, the systems which we import are systems which we acknowledge to be full of imperfections, the sources of many difficulties and dangers at home....[W]e bind it upon a people who have not inherited it. To us the burden is in a sense natural...We know its history. It has grown upon us. It belongs to us. It is our own. But it is not the converts' in other lands. They do not know its history, nor is it fitted to their shoulders. They will doubtless make their own mistakes. They will create their own burdens; but they need not be laden with ours. May we evangelicals of the 21st century, who have applied Allen's warnings across so many aspects of mission today, also hear a voice calling us to greater awareness of our hermeneutical methods.

Endnotes

42 For the number of times Paul quotes the Old Testament cf. Ellis, Paul’s Use of the Old Testament, 11 and Henry Barclay.


44 Earl E. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 155. Ellis assumes that the proem structure was in fact in use by the first century AD, and thus a structure readily available to the writers of the New Testament including Paul. To assume an early first century date for the proem structure makes sense since this structure is found in many places in the New Testament (see, for example, Jesus’ use of the proem form in Luke 10:25–37).


47 For example, scholars oftentimes are at a loss as to how to interpret the predestinarian texts in this Romans passage—specifically the Hosea quotes in Rom. 9:25–26—and link them to a particular eschatological schemata. However, when these same texts are viewed in relationship to their purpose in Paul’s overall proem *midrash* here in the context of 9:6–29, the need to minutely discern what Paul is doing with these two verses from Hosea loses its urgency. These verses simply are supplemental texts used to bolster Paul’s overarching argument. Therefore, they should not be viewed as key texts on eschatological doctrine in and of themselves.


49 This example has been adapted from a paper submitted by one of my former Asian Theological Seminary students, Mila Gultiano Cagape, entitled, “The Indigenous Hermeneutical Methodology of the Cotobato Manobo: How Does It Apply to Bible Interpretation?” Cagape worked as a missionary among the Cotobato Manobo for many years.

50 This example from the Cotobato Manobo reminds those of us steeped in the study of written material that oral cultures (including non-reading peoples in written cultures) use different hermeneutical methods in regards to how they interpret their oral traditions and literature. As a result, since a large portion of the New Testament text was first communicated orally, including the words of Jesus and a large percentage of the writings now known as the Gospels, serious study of oral hermeneutical methodologies is warranted.


53 For further reading on ethnohermeneutics see my articles: “Cross-Cultural Bible Interpretation: A View from the Field.” *Phronesis. A Journal of Asian Theological Seminary* 3/1 (1996), 13–35; “Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics: Questioning the Relevancy of Western Hermeneutical Methods in the Asian Context.” *Journal of Asian Mission* 1/1 (1999), 21–43; “A Response to the Responses of Tappiner and Whelchel to Ethnohermeneutics.” *Journal of Asian Mission* 2/1 (2000), 135–145; and “Towards an Ethnohermeneutical Model for a Lowland Filipino Context.” *Journal of Asian Mission* 7/2 (2005), 169–193. For an excellent recent application of ethnohermeneutical methodology to Bible interpretation from a Tongan cognitive environment see Nāsili Vaka’uta, *Reading Ezra 9–10 Tua-Wise. Rethinking Biblical Interpretation in Oceania* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011). Though Vaka’uta prefers the phrase “contextual hermeneutics” to my term “ethnohermeneutics” (3, n. 8) his first objective is “to develop a theoretical framework or a way of reading that is informed by Tongan cultural perspectives and knowledge in general, and the experiences of Tongan *tua* (a Tongan common person) in particular. Tongan *ways of being* (i.e. the ways they act, relate, and behave) and *ways of knowing* (i.e. the way they think, understand, and construct knowledge) … provide the ontological and epistemological foundations of this Tongan *way of reading*. They offer the directions for interpretation and provide the insights for the formulation of methods.” His second objective is “to chart a methodology for the analysis of biblical texts based on the proposed (Tongan) theoretical framework. This involves developing new methods and tools of analysis, rather than borrowing and employing existing methods of interpretation,” (his emphasis). Vaka’uta then tests this all out with an examination of Ezra chapters 9 and 10 from a Tongan ethnohermeneutical perspective.

54 For a study of Western colonization in relationship to Asian theological education see my “How Asian is Asian Theological Education?” in *Tending the Seedbeds. Educational Perspectives on Theological Education in Asia*, ed. Allan Harkness (Quezon City, RP: Asia Theological Association, 2010), 23–45. Here I argue that past colonization efforts in Asia by the West—which includes Western missionary efforts—has had profound effects on the way theology is taught in Asia, including the dominance of Western hermeneutical methods.

55 Rather than ridiculing the use of allegory, as do many scholars today, we would rather do well to understand how it functioned within its hermeneutical milieu and cognitive environment of the Middle Ages and how it helped to bring gospel truths to largely non-reading cultures; indeed, allegory may again prove to be an appropriate method for the non-reading masses of today.


57 *IJFM* articles on the subjects of insider movements and familial terms.

58 For the appropriateness of teaching Western methods in non-Western theological institutions see my *“How Asian is Asian Theological Education?”*; cf. also my “Interpreting the Bible With the Poor,” in *The Church and Poverty in Asia*, ed. Lee Wannak (Manila, RP: OMFI Literature, 2008), 171–180.
