

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.

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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.”⁴¹ 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 epistolary genre, both the letters written to churches and individuals. Paul quotes

from the Old Testament 93 times.⁴² Old Testament quotes are found in all of his letters except for Philemon.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

Paul clearly uses this proem *midrash* technique in verses 9:6-29 as seen below:⁴⁵

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 will 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-

tion? 23 What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—24 even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? 25 As he says in Hosea: “I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one,” 26 and, “It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”

27 Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: “Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. 28 For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality.”

29 It is just as Isaiah said previously: “Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.”

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 *καλεῖν* and *υἱός* (“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

Unlike many scholars today, Jewish-Christian readers at Rome would not have been troubled by Paul’s hermeneutical methods.

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 quandry 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.⁴⁷ 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?

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 reinterprets 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

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.⁴⁹ 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 *duyuy* (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.

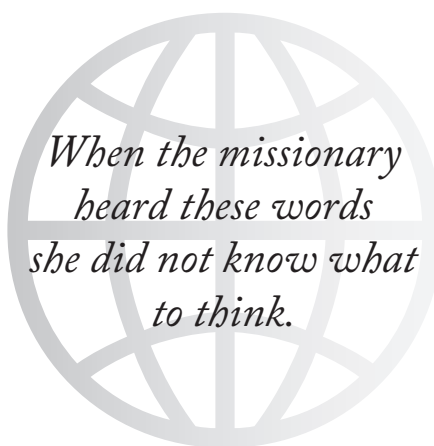
This example involves a newly arrived missionary to the Cotobato Manobo who heard the tribal leader speak the following words while in dialogue with another man:

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, 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* is used. Throughout this conversation figurative speech was interpreted according to what it symbolized (a wedding proposal). All of the wedding arrangements were made without mentioning the actual details, but the conversation was understood by the speaker and hearer because they both knew what was being referred to by the figurative speech. Awareness of 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.⁵⁰

Hermeneutics among the Builsa of Ghana

The second example comes from the Builsa people of Ghana, West Africa.⁵¹ Many proverbs are useful for expressing Christian truth and these Builsa people have a tremendous number of indigenous proverbs. These old proverbs often express values that have been adopted as part of their Builsa 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), "*Nurubiik a labri 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, a Builsa will feel safe or protected as long as there are fowls around the house; hence, they feel they can "hide inside the feathers of the fowl."

Joe was catching on slowly, "So the chicken is an essential part of the Builsa culture. It is used to solve problems so that the chicken receives the brunt of the problem and it will not reach us. If we have chickens around our homes, then we feel safe from dangers that may come. Is that right?"

"Yes, Joe, chickens help us to feel safe and protected. They are sacrificed or sold for us. They take our problems upon them and we hide safely in their feathers. They also help us initiate friendships," responded Kofi. "If I want to start a friendship with someone, then I offer them a chicken for us to share a meal together, or I offer them a chicken to take home with them."

Are you sure that's in the Bible? Let me read that." The missionary was learning new things from Scripture that he had overlooked before.

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."

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. *Naaw-en Wani* (the Bible) says that *Naaw-en* (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. That is a closer friend than I have ever known!"

Kofi's eyes lit up, "Are you sure that is in *Naaw-en 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 dii 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 *Naaw-en's* feathers, *Naaw-en* 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.

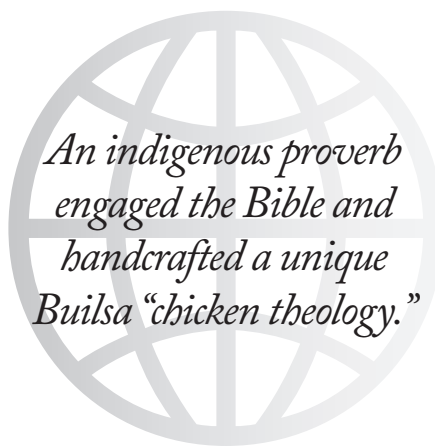
Hermeneutics among a Multi-Lingual Community of Muslim Followers of Isa

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.⁵² 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!



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 misdrashed 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.

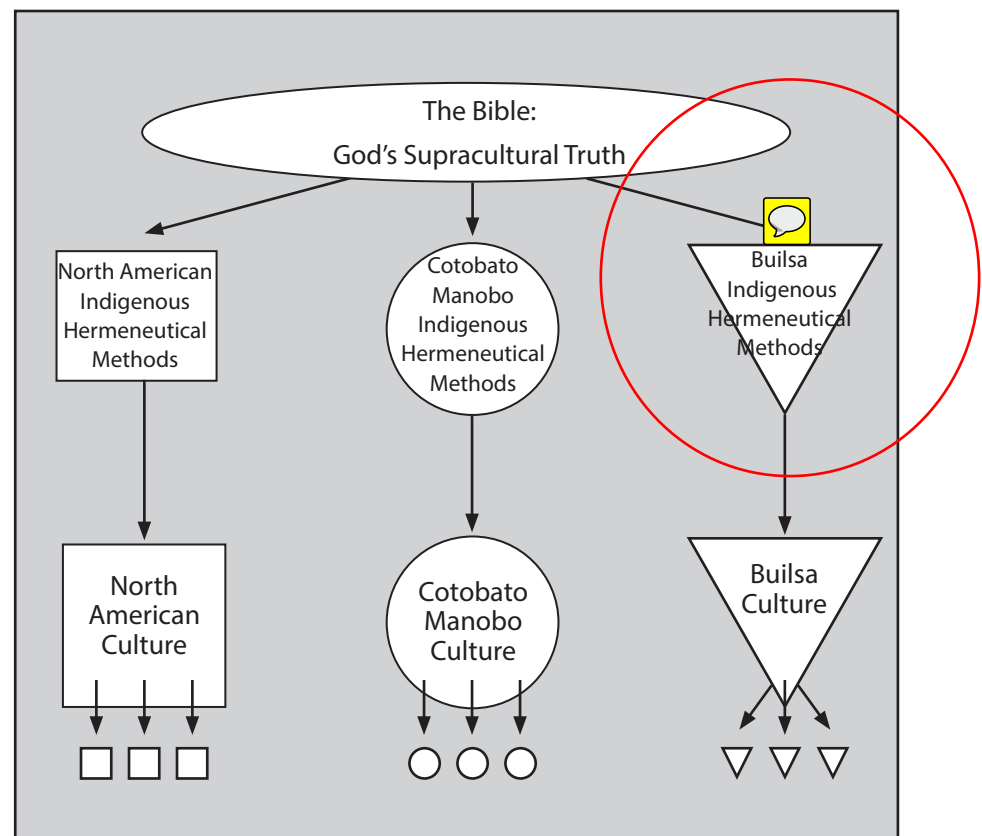
T*his sensitivity to interpretive method is modeled for us in the Bible itself. That's where the very roots of ethnohermeneutics are found.*

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 pro-

cesses 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.

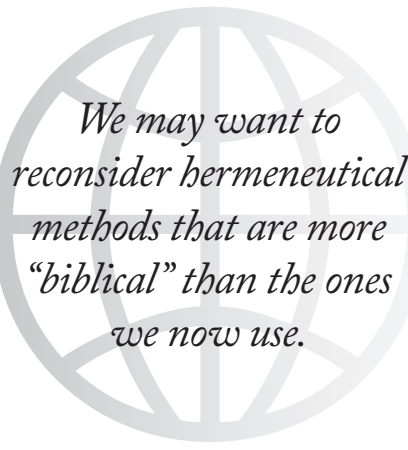
Figure 2. Different Hermeneutical Methods for Different Cultures



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.⁵⁶ 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
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.⁵⁸ At the very least it should involve supplementing the



We may want to reconsider hermeneutical methods that are more “biblical” than the ones we now use.

methods based upon historical criticism and the Two Step approach? I believe that some of our current dialogues concerning “insider movements” and the translation of familiar biblical terms⁵⁷ would benefit from this understanding.

Two Step approach 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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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. **IJFM**

Endnotes

⁴¹ Kevin Higgins, “Diverse Voices: Hearing Scripture Speak in a Multicultural Movement.” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 27:4, (Winter 2010), 190.

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

Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, originally published in 1902 (New York, NY: KTAV, 1968), 392. About one-third of all the Old Testament quotes in the New Testament are made by Paul.

⁴³ For a more detailed examination of Paul's quotations from the Old Testament see Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*, 10–37.

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).

⁴⁵ Cf. Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*, 46, and his *Prophecy and Hermeneutic*, 154 and 219; see also William Richard Stegner, "Romans 9:6–29—A Midrash," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 22 (1984), 37–52.

⁴⁶ Adapted from the example given by Earl E. Ellis, "How the New Testament Uses the Old," in *New Testament Interpretation. Essays on Principals and Methods*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 155. Jesus also used a modified proem *midrash* technique in the parable of the Good Samaritan as found in Luke 10:25–37; cf. Ellis, 158.

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.

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, trans. R. Mackenzie, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance. Originally published in 1540 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 224.

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.

⁵¹ This example is taken adapted from W. Jay Moon's *African Proverbs Reveal Christianity in Culture. A Narrative Portrayal of Builsa Proverbs Contextualizing Christianity in Ghana*. American Society of Missiology Monograph Series 5 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 111–113.

⁵² Higgins, "Diverse Voices," 193.

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 Tappeiner 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 Tu'a-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 *tu'a* (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,"² (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.

⁵⁶ For an analysis and examples of how Jesus interpreted the Old Testament see my *Receptor-Oriented Hermeneutics: Reclaiming the Hermeneutical Methodologies of the New Testament for Bible Interpreters in the Twenty-First Century*. Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission, Pasadena, CA (1990).

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 Wanak (Manila, RP: OMF Literature, 2008), 171–180.

⁵⁹ Roland Allan, *Missionary Methods. St Paul's or Ours?* Originally published in 1912 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962).

⁶⁰ Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 145.