

Missional Engagement and Bible Interpretation: The Need for Cultural Exegesis

Larry W. Caldwell, PhD¹

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Introduction

Bible interpretation for evangelicals has typically been viewed through the lens of biblical exegesis, primarily through applying grammatical-historical methods to the biblical text. While biblical exegesis can be very helpful, such Bible interpretation involves much time and effort spent in analyzing the biblical text, especially before it is preached or taught. By and large, little time in this approach is given to analyzing the audience and the cultural context in which the biblical text is going to be preached or taught. Following the author's recent book, *The Bible in Culture* (Caldwell 2025), this paper argues that such a low emphasis on the audience and their culture is a key loss for a true missional engagement with the biblical text. This paper briefly explores the relationship between the biblical text (biblical exegesis) and the cultural context in which that text is to be communicated (cultural exegesis). Why explore this relationship? Because there is more to good Bible interpretation than biblical exegesis alone.

Beginning with an extended illustration to demonstrate the need for cultural exegesis, Part One of the paper continues by examining the relationship between biblical text and cultural context through what I refer to as the "Bible in Culture Ethnohermeneutical Grid." The Ethnohermeneutical Grid is a guide that helps us determine whether our interpretations are *both* biblically as well as culturally appropriate. With those thoughts in mind, Part Two of the paper then begins to explain concepts particularly important for good theological anthropology and missional engagement: "cultural exegesis" and "cultural texts." Here it is argued that audience and culture analysis, or "cultural exegesis," is just as important in the preaching and teaching tasks as is biblical exegesis. Finally, the paper concludes with implications for those of us attempting to missionally engage cultures today, especially as we do Bible interpretation.

¹ Larry W. Caldwell is Chief Academic Officer, and Professor of Intercultural Studies and Bible Interpretation, at Kairos University, Sioux Falls, SD. He is also Senior Missiologist for Converge Worldwide (formerly Baptist General Conference). He can be contacted at lcaldwell@kairos.edu.

Part One: **The Relationship Between Biblical Text and Cultural Context**

The Need for Cultural Exegesis

Let me begin with an illustration from my own previous teaching ministry in the Philippines which I think well proves the need for cultural exegesis. This illustration shows, in microcosm, what often transpired in my Filipino classroom in the early years of my ministry.

In a theology class entitled, “The Doctrine of Humanity and Salvation,” I lectured one day on the nature of guilt in relationship to human sin. As a part of my lecture I followed good biblical exegesis procedure and outlined for my Filipino students the words used in the Bible that speak of guilt for sin. One of the words I explained in detail was the Hebrew verb used in the Old Testament to describe a sinful act for which a person was deemed guilty: *’asham* (אָשָׁם). I carefully explained to my students that this word meant “to commit an offense, to do a wrong, or to inflict an injury.” I went on to explain how the word was used in its various Old Testament contexts. I pointed out that this type of sin involved a wrong being done to someone resulting in consequences where the perpetrator of the sin had to be punished or the victim of the sin compensated. In my Western understanding of sin as an individualistic act between human and human and/or between human and God, I dwelled on the restitution aspect of *’asham*, explaining how the guilt for this act of sin could only be dealt with if restitution was made. I verified this by showing how *’asham*, in about one-third of the cases in the Old Testament where the word occurs, is used in relationship to a sin offering. Having completed my word study and contextual analysis, I stopped the lecture for feedback from my students.

My Filipino students were not convinced. Their responses went something like this:

What is all this talk about guilt? We don’t feel guilty about much of anything. But we do feel shame. We feel shame because the relationship between human and human and/or human and God is broken. The Hebrew word used in the Old Testament, *’asham*, seems to be just as easily talking about the need to restore a relationship—to do away with the shame. Yes, the perpetrator needs to be punished or the victim compensated, but not merely to relieve the perpetrator’s guilt but rather to restore the broken relationship.

My own Western cultural assumptions, presuppositions and cognitive environment had led me to believe that my lecture—as initially conceived and prepared using the biblical exegesis tools of word study and meticulous contextual analysis—would help my Filipino students better understand the Old Testament concept of guilt. Prior to giving it, I felt good about the lecture. Much of the content of this lecture was based upon my own Seminary class notes on the topic. That Seminary class lecture had made sense and been helpful to me and my other fellow American students. I was sure that my lecture to my Filipino students would do the same. I was not aware that in its final form my lecture, as well as the hermeneutical

approach upon which it was based, reflected my own Western individualistic cultural understanding of guilt. That possibility had never entered into my mind.

But I had missed the mark. I hadn't done my cultural exegesis homework on the Filipino context in which I was living. I did not yet realize that my Filipino students came from a different worldview and cognitive environment from mine: a "shame" culture where relationships between people are primary and anyone who does something to break a relationship feels great shame. Thus, despite my careful biblical exegesis of the Old Testament texts, my Filipino students dwelled on the relationship aspect of *'asham* instead of on the restitution aspect. In so doing they interpreted these Old Testament texts, employing a midrashic "that is this" approach, in light of their own cultural understanding of sin. In retrospect, that only made sense given the cultural realities of their culture. Of course, the use of *'asham* in the Old Testament deals with relationship as well as with restitution! The Hebrew culture was also a culture where relationships were primary. Unfortunately, I did not gain an appreciation for this aspect of *'asham* based on my biblical exegesis. Rather I gained this understanding from my first-year Filipino students who as yet knew very little about biblical exegesis but who were experts in understanding their own cultural context. Their interpretation, in a very real sense, was not only more receptor-oriented than mine, it reflected the more holistic Hebrew understanding of *'asham* that I was not able to see.

I believe that in the above example *both of our particular cultural practices and hermeneutical approaches* blended together to make a more "complete" understanding of the Old Testament concept of the sin using the Hebrew word *'asham*. On the one hand, my approach, based upon my own Western (particularly American) cognitive environment—including the grammatical-historical tools of biblical exegesis—was correct as far as my handling of the Word of God; my interpretations of the Old Testament texts were biblical. Unfortunately, my Western culture's individualistic understanding of guilt for *'asham* caused the results of my hermeneutical approach to be very unsatisfactory for the non-Western Filipino culture for which I had developed the lecture in the first place. It's no wonder that it was unsatisfactory since I had not attempted to do any cultural exegesis. On the other hand, my Filipino students, based upon their Asian cognitive environment, used a midrashic "that is this" hermeneutical approach that was also correct in terms of the Word of God; their interpretations of the Old Testament texts were also biblical. They understood sin and *'asham* more in terms of their more non-Western culture's group-oriented understandings of shame. As a result, their approach was more oriented towards their own particular culture and made more sense for them. Good biblical exegesis takes the text seriously; good cultural exegesis takes the culture of the local people just as seriously. Paying attention to the local people, respecting their personhood and their cultural identity, should inform our missional practice.

This above example dramatically illustrates how cognitive environments work differently in different cultural contexts and hence the need for cultural exegesis. In essence, I expected that my own cognitive environment was the same as that of my Filipino students. I assumed, wrongly, that everyone understood reality like I did. Fortunately, my Filipino students had the courage to use their own cognitive

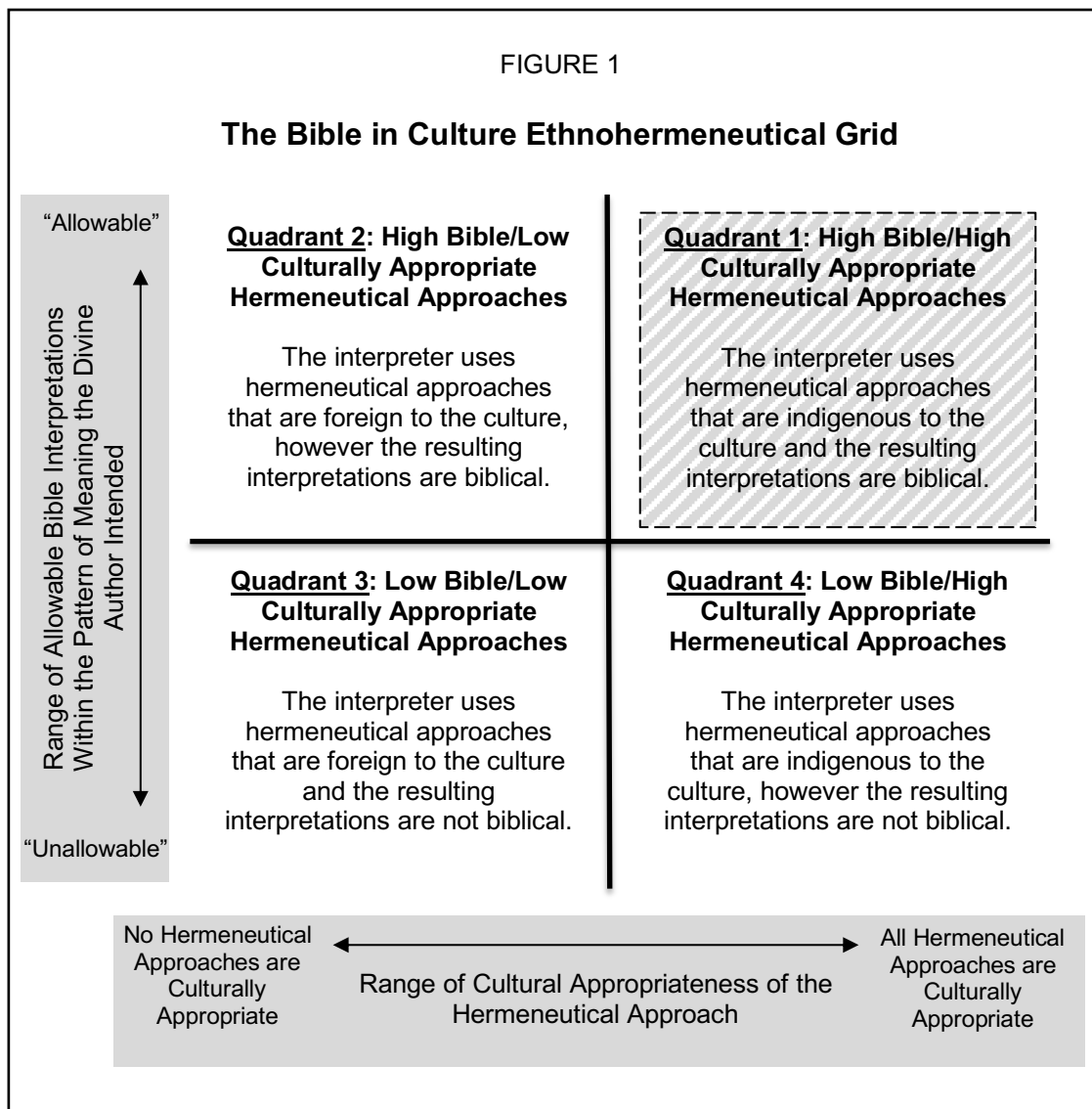
environments to communicate the truths of the Bible from their own perspective. All of us must come to see that we all have unique cognitive environments—especially when it comes to the Bible’s interpretation as well as to its communication. What we have said so often before applies here: no one cognitive environment or one hermeneutical approach can be privileged over all other cognitive environments and hermeneutical approaches. Instead we must all work to understand and to value our different cognitive environments, as well as our different hermeneutical approaches. By so doing, we will see how different hermeneutical approaches to the biblical text can help all of us gain a better, or more complete, understanding of that biblical text.

The Bible in Culture Ethnohermeneutical Grid

In the above example from the Philippines I used a hermeneutical approach that I was more comfortable with and my Filipino students used a hermeneutical approach that they were more comfortable with. The main difference was that my hermeneutical approach was not one that my Filipino students were very familiar with, while their hermeneutical approach was one that came out of their own culture. In the final analysis, *both* of our hermeneutical approaches ended up with interpretations that were true to God’s Word in that *both* approaches gave equally good insights into what the word ‘*asham*’ is all about. There are both guilt and shame elements to the word. But it took culturally appropriate hermeneutical efforts *on both our parts* to see the word in its totality.

Some of the complexities of the above example can be illustrated in the “Bible in Culture Ethnohermeneutical Grid” found in figure 1. This Ethnohermeneutical Grid helps us to see the relationship between the Bible, the receptor culture, the hermeneutical approach(es) used, and the resulting Bible interpretations. Let’s examine the Ethnohermeneutical Grid in detail.

FIGURE 1



The Ethnohermeneutical Grid contains both a vertical axis and a horizontal axis. The vertical axis of the Grid—the Bible axis—shows the range of possibilities in interpreting the Bible, ranging from “allowable” to “unallowable.” While there will be disagreement over what particular Bible interpretations are allowable or not, the reality is that not every interpretation of the Bible is orthodox or true to God’s Word. Some will be meanings that are invalid and lie outside of the pattern of meaning that the Divine Author intended. In relationship to the Grid, I simply refer to interpretations as either “biblical” or “not biblical” depending upon whether or not such interpretations fall within the range of valid possibilities within the pattern of meaning. The horizontal axis of the Grid—the Culture axis—shows the range of possibilities in the hermeneutical approaches used, from paying attention to the local culture and thus using culturally appropriate hermeneutical approaches, to not paying attention to the local culture and therefore not using such approaches. Again,

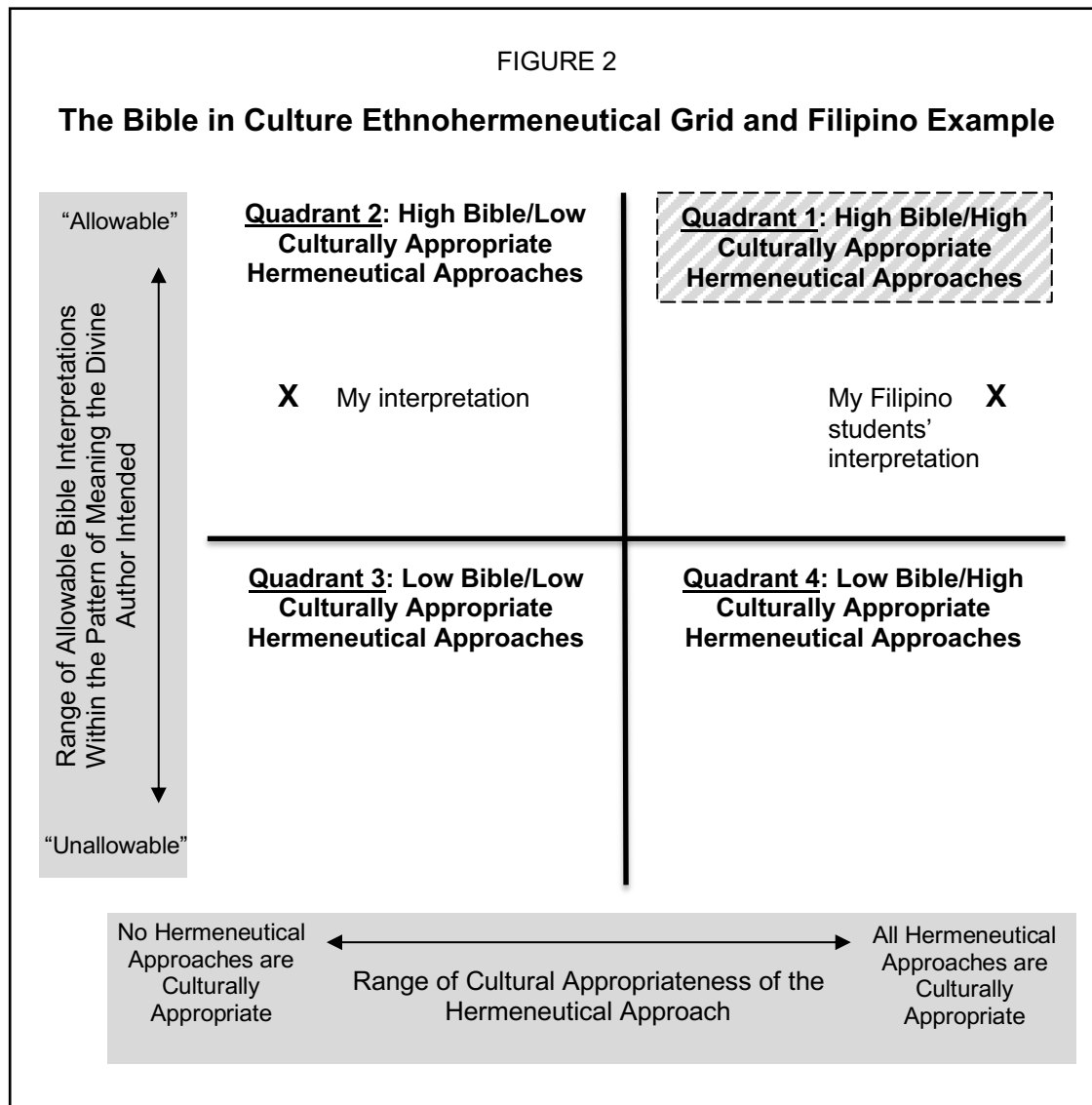
there will be disagreement over which particular hermeneutical approaches are culturally appropriate; the reality is that not every hermeneutical approach is culturally appropriate. In relationship to the Grid, I simply refer to approaches as either “indigenous” or “foreign” depending upon whether such approaches naturally emerge from the culture or whether they have been mostly imported from outside the culture.

The Ethnohermeneutical Grid is divided into four quadrants. Each quadrant represents the range of hermeneutical possibilities in relationship to the vertical and horizontal axes of the Grid. The numbering of the four Quadrants results in a “C” shape, with the right top of the C in Quadrant 1 representing high Bible and high culturally appropriate Bible interpretations and the bottom left of the C in Quadrant 4 representing low Bible but high culturally appropriate Bible interpretations. Quadrants 2 and 3 fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Of the four hermeneutical choices, the ideal choice is found in Quadrant 1 of the Grid; it has consequently been highlighted. This choice is what we should always strive for as we interpret the Bible with all the world.

So how does the Ethnohermeneutical Grid relate to the above example of my Filipino experience? In the example, my hermeneutical approach to understanding the Hebrew word *‘asham*, though appropriate in a more academic Western context, was not really all that receptor-oriented for the cultural context of my Filipino students, thus it falls within the left side of the Culture axis. At the same time, however, my resulting interpretation of *‘asham* was solidly biblical. My Western culture’s individualistic understanding of guilt for *‘asham* is certainly one aspect of this Hebrew word and fits within the pattern of meaning. As a result, it falls within the upper half of the Bible axis, though only half-way up the axis since my interpretation was still an incomplete understanding of what *‘asham* is all about. Taken all together, my work with *‘asham* in the example would place it squarely within Quadrant 2 of the Grid: I used a hermeneutical approach that was not culturally appropriate but my resulting interpretation of *‘asham* as guilt was allowed by God’s Word.

How about my Filipino students? Their more midrashic (“that is this”) hermeneutical approach to *‘asham* was appropriate for their Filipino cultural context, thus it falls within the right side of the Culture axis. At the same time, their interpretation of *‘asham* in terms of their culture’s more group-oriented understandings of shame was also solidly biblical since shame is one aspect of *‘asham* and fits within the pattern of meaning. As a result, it falls within the upper half of the Bible axis, though again only half-way up the axis since their interpretation was still an incomplete understanding of what *‘asham* is all about. Thus, taken all together, their work with *‘asham* would place it squarely within Quadrant 1 of the Grid: they used a hermeneutical approach that was culturally appropriate and their resulting interpretation of *‘asham* as shame was allowed by God’s Word. However, as I have already stated above, we both (American teacher and Filipino students) needed the hermeneutical insights garnered from each approach to gain a more complete and holistic, indeed a more biblical, understanding of *‘asham*.

Note the placement of our two approaches in Quadrants 1 and 2 of the Ethnohermeneutical Grid in figure 2.



So, what's the point? Both my example from the Philippines, as well as the Ethnohermeneutical Grid, are trying to show that there are many possibilities in the hermeneutical process. Some possibilities are more culturally astute and use more culturally appropriate hermeneutical approaches. Other possibilities not so much. Some hermeneutical approaches result in interpretations that are valid: they fall inside of the pattern of meaning that the Divine Author intended. Other approaches result in interpretations that are invalid: they fall outside of the pattern of meaning that the Divine Author intended. Both I, and my Filipino students, used culturally appropriate hermeneutics (mine for a Western audience, theirs for a Filipino audience). Our approaches led to different hermeneutical conclusions, yet both conclusions were allowed by God's Word. Neither I, nor my Filipino students, had a

complete understanding of what a more holistic understanding of *'asham* entailed. In the process we discovered many things. We discovered that we both came to different conclusions. We discovered that neither of us had a complete understanding of *'asham*. We discovered that many meanings are possible with a particular Bible text. And finally, we discovered that the individual culture that we each belong to is valid and can help us communicate the truths of the Bible to our own people. This last point is especially crucial as we attempt to carry out good theological anthropology for missional engagement.

Part Two: Cultural Exegesis and Cultural Texts

As the example from the Philippines and the Ethnohermeneutical Grid both demonstrate, there is indeed more to Bible interpretation than just the biblical text. Good Bible interpretation requires both good biblical exegesis as well as good cultural exegesis. The Ethnohermeneutical Grid gives us a “snapshot” of where our Bible interpretation efforts stand. Understanding whether our interpretations are high or low Bible is worked out through our biblical exegesis efforts (oftentimes using grammatical-historical tools). Understanding whether our interpretations are high or low in terms of cultural appropriateness, likewise, is worked out through our cultural exegesis efforts. Both biblical exegesis and cultural exegesis are important elements of the overall hermeneutical task, which I refer to as “holistic hermeneutics.” As we have seen, good biblical exegesis, coupled with good cultural exegesis, will help us more quickly move to Quadrant 1 of the Ethnohermeneutical Grid.

Most of us are familiar with biblical exegesis. However, the phrase “cultural exegesis” is less known and understood. There are lots of different terms for, and approaches to, cultural exegesis: contextual hermeneutics, vernacular hermeneutics, inculturation hermeneutics, community hermeneutics, congregational hermeneutics, and my own ethnohermeneutics, to name a few of the most well-known. The common theme to these terms and approaches is the emphasis upon *the need for the Bible interpreter to better understand the local group or community to whom he or she is communicating the biblical text.*

So just what is cultural exegesis? To understand this phrase let’s briefly discuss a few words. First, “exegesis” is the interpretation of any text, for us it is the interpretation of the Bible, or what is referred to as “biblical exegesis.” Second, “culture” is the “patterns of learned and shared behavior and beliefs of a particular social, ethnic, or age group.” Thus, when you put these two definitions together you get “cultural exegesis”: cultural exegesis is the interpretation of the patterns of learned and shared behavior and beliefs of a particular social, ethnic, or age group.

As we do biblical exegesis we learn that there are various approaches to the biblical text that assist us in better understanding the text. So, too, with cultural exegesis: there are various approaches to a culture that assist us in better understanding the culture, including our own. Such approaches help the Bible interpreter communicate to their audience the truth of the Bible passage as clearly

and relevantly as possible, in ways that their audience will best understand. Here's where an understanding of the local community of believers and their local context is so important.

Cultural exegesis helps the Bible interpreter answer two key questions in relationship to a Bible passage:

- How can the Bible passage's original meaning be best communicated to the interpreter's modern audience today?
- How can the Bible passage's original meaning be made relevant using modern words/terms/means/ways of understanding?

As a result, it is important that the Bible interpreter understands his/her community very well. Among some of the questions the Bible interpreter should have answers to are these:

- Why do they believe the way they do?
- Why do they think the way they do?
- What are their core values?
- What are those things that shape their worldview (the way they think about the world)?
- What kinds of ideas influence them and their decision-making process?

In connection with the actual Bible passage being communicated, here are some questions that might also be asked in the cultural exegesis process:

1. How does the local community of believers understand some of the same concepts/ideas/ways of thinking that are found in the Bible passage that is being communicated?
2. Have there been any recent local events or incidents that have occurred within the local community of believers in the recent past (especially in the last 6 months or so) that might give insights into how they might interpret or understand a particular passage?
3. How will the truths of the Bible passage be communicated to the community of believers? What media (movie, TV show, song, indigenous drama or story, and so on), artifact (an object unique to the culture, such as jewelry or household item), or practice (a tradition unique to the culture, such as a certain funeral rite or holiday tradition) will help explain what the Bible passage is speaking about?

It's especially in this third question where an understanding of the local culture can help us better communicate the truths of the biblical text. Anthropologist Karin Barber (2007) captures the essence of this third question when she speaks of "texts" which are parts of all cultures whether they be oral cultures or written cultures, and thus not limited to just written documents:

Texts are the means by which people say things (about experience, society, the past, other people) and do things (affirm their existence, build and dismantle reputations, make demands, imagine communities, convene publics). And texts also *are* things—by which I mean that they are social and historical facts whose forms, transformation and dispersal can be studied empirically. (200)

Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer (2007) moves beyond Barber in his reference to "texts" as "cultural texts":

Why "texts"? Because a text is intentional human action, a work that communicates meaning and calls for interpretation. This is exactly what cultural works do. Cultural texts include everything from the Sears Tower and Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" to soccer moms, *The Simpsons*, and shaving cream. Each of these signs has meaning to the extent that it communicates something about our values, our concerns, and our self-understanding. (26)

Following Vanhoozer, pastor and theologian Dustin Conner (2019) elaborates further concerning cultural texts:

Cultural texts often comprise words and phrases but are not limited to just products containing alphanumeric symbols composing an idea. They can include any product created by the receptor culture that portrays a baseline cultural narrative such as, but not limited to: printed literature (fiction, non-fiction, historical, self-help, religious, academic articles, civil documents, etc.), poetry, the lyrics and composition of music, movies, commercials, self-published videos (such as those put on social media sites such as YouTube™ and Instagram™) blogs, websites, social media forms, artwork (digital and physical), consumer product labels, newspapers, billboards and other advertisements, magazines, pottery, quilts, clothing, tools, architecture, and rituals such as weddings and funerals. (113)

What is particularly important to see, whether one is speaking like Barber of "texts" or like Vanhoozer of "cultural texts," is that such texts can be, and often are, midrashed ("that is this"). In other words, cultural texts can be interpreted in light of the here and now; like *midrash* they can be actualized for the present context. As a result, the "that is this" midrashing of a cultural text allows, in Barber's words, for people to "*simultaneously* conserve culture and generate new things out of it." (2007:68) This is important for Bible interpretation because it

allows the Bible interpreter to not only refer to the historicity inherent in the “that” of the cultural text but also to give new meaning to the cultural text in light of the “this” of the interpreter’s audience or context.

Cultural texts, furthermore, will resonate with people differently and the one using cultural texts to communicate biblical truth will need to keep such differences in mind. For example, different generations will value cultural texts in different ways, depending on their personal identification and experience with the cultural text, even if the cultural text itself spans the generations. This is likewise true for different cultures. For example, cultural texts that resonate with people from North America may or may not resonate with those living outside of the North American context, or who have recently arrived to live in a North American context.

Furthermore, every culture or sub-culture has cultural texts that are unique to itself.

Look at the following list of cultural texts, in no particular order, that I’ve identified below that mostly can be attributed to my own American cultural background:

- Declaration of Independence
- 9/11
- “Lord of the Rings” books and movies
- Donald Trump
- “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps”
- Watergate
- Free will
- George Floyd
- “The Road Not Taken” poem by Robert Frost
- Pearl Harbor
- The Exorcist movie
- Gandhi
- Snoopy cartoon character
- John 3:16
- Gettysburg Address
- “Friends” TV show
- TikTok
- Michael Jordan
- “Where’s the beef?” commercial
- Adolf Hitler
- HIV/AIDS
- “Star-Spangled Banner” song
- Black Lives Matter
- Fruit of the Spirit
- “Avengers” movies
- Taylor Swift
- “Imagine” song by John Lennon
- Facebook
- Golden Arches
- “Amazing Grace” hymn
- John F. Kennedy’s assassination
- Madonna
- COVID-19
- “Titanic” movie
- D-Day
- Prince
- Capitalism
- Justification by faith
- Billy Graham
- Predestination
- Mother Teresa
- “Mean Joe Green” Coke commercial
- “Dallas” TV show
- Abortion
- The Great Depression

A quick perusal of this list shows that the selected cultural texts will have different impacts on people depending on their age, ethnic identity, and location around the world. For example, many of the older generation, despite their nationalities, will

likely resonate with some of the same cultural texts (like Adolf Hitler, the Depression, Gandhi, and democracy), while younger people, though may have some familiarity with the cultural texts of their elders will likely resonate with more modern cultural texts (like “Avengers” movies and TikTok). Those who self-identify as Christians will likely resonate with the Christian-themed cultural texts (like “Amazing Grace” hymn, John 3:16, fruit of the Spirit, and Billy Graham). Some of the cultural texts are narrower and thus will be understood by a narrower group of people both across generations and across cultures (like “Lord of the Rings” books and movies, “Dallas” TV show, and Madonna). Most everybody will identify with some of the cultural texts (like COVID-19, Facebook, Golden Arches, and HIV/AIDS). Most sports fans worldwide identify with Michael Jordan and Tiger. Very few, either in the United States or around the world, will identify with the cultural texts that were once very powerful but still resonate with some (“The Road Not Taken” poem by Robert Frost, the “Mean Joe Green” and “Where’s the Beef?” commercials, and Snoopy the cartoon character).

Each local group will have different cultural texts. Let’s take Filipinos as an example. While most Filipinos can easily relate to some of the cultural texts listed above because of: 1) their common humanity with the rest of the world, including the United States (like Facebook, Black Lives Matter, Mother Teresa, capitalism, Donald Trump, COVID-19, 9/11, Lady Di’s death, HIV/AIDS, and George Floyd); 2) their having been colonized by the United States for half a century (like democracy, Declaration of Independence, Gettysburg Address, Pearl Harbor); and their exposure to Western media and advertising (like Friends TV show, Avengers movies, Golden Arches, “Imagine” song by John Lennon, Madonna, Titanic movie, and Tiger). But at the same time there are cultural texts that are unique to Filipinos that naturally are not on my list (like the EDSA revolution, Manny Pacquiao, the concept of the go-between, Marcos, and Corregidor, to name but a few). As a result, any person attempting to communicate to Filipinos will need to learn and understand how these cultural texts function within Filipino culture.

By now this much should be clear: *different groups will resonate with different cultural texts in different ways*. The burden, therefore, is on communicators to know the cultural texts of their local group and to be able to appropriately use those cultural texts. For Vanhoozer, cultural texts are the key to interpreting culture, they “serve as the lens through which we view everything else and as the compass that orients us toward the good life.” (36) Furthermore, for Vanhoozer cultural texts are important to cultural exegesis in looking for answers to the following questions:

- Who made this cultural text and why?
- What does the cultural text mean and how does it work within the culture?
- What effect does the cultural text have on those who receive, use, or consume it? (48)

Vanhoozer advocates for “reading cultural texts on their own terms and in light of the biblical text. The goal of such reading is the understanding of faith: discerning the meaning of cultural texts and trends in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” (44) Vanhoozer lists ten guidelines for understanding cultural texts:

1. Try to comprehend a cultural text on its own terms (grasp its communicative intent) before you “interpret” it (explore its broader social, political, sexual or religious significance).
2. Attend to what a cultural text is doing as well as saying by clarifying its illocutionary act.
3. Consider the world behind (e.g., medieval, modern), of (i.e., the world displayed by the cultural text), and in front of (i.e., its proposal for your world) the cultural text.
4. Determine what “powers” are served by particular cultural texts or trends by discovering whose material interests are served.
5. Seek the “world hypothesis” and/or “root metaphor” implied by a cultural text.
6. Be comprehensive in your interpretation of a cultural text; find corroborative evidence that makes best sense of the whole as well as the parts.
7. Give “thick” descriptions of the cultural text that are non-reductive and sensitive to the various levels of communicative action.
8. Articulate the way of being human to which a cultural text directly or indirectly bears witness and gives commendation.
9. Discern what faith a cultural text directly or indirectly expresses. To what convictions about God, the world, and ourselves does a cultural text and/or trend commit us?
10. Locate the cultural text in the biblical creation-fall-redemption schema and make sure that biblical rather than cultural texts have the lead role in shaping your imagination and hence your interpretation framework for your experience. (59-60; cf. 44-59)

An understanding of cultural texts is key, I believe, in unlocking the meaning of the biblical text in a way that helps our community of believers to not only understand the biblical text but understand it more completely in light of their own cultural context. That is, if we are open to using such cultural texts.

Conclusion and Implications for Bible Interpretation that Is Missionally Engaged

The Necessity for *Both* Biblical Exegesis and Cultural Exegesis

Biblical exegesis is one thing. Cultural exegesis that attempts to use culturally appropriate means to best communicate the text of the Bible is another. Exegeting the text is highly stressed in most Bible interpretation approaches and academic programs. Exegeting the culture is usually not mentioned much at all; it is a part of the overall exegetical task that has largely been neglected, especially by evangelicals. Instead, any attempts at cultural relevancy are typically left to the very end of the Bible interpretation process, usually referred to as “applying” the text. While application of the biblical text is crucial to any good Bible interpretation, application is but one aspect of exegeting the culture. By using the phrase “exegeting the culture” I mean that the Bible interpreter understands his or her target group or culture so well that the results of the reading strategies used in the process of biblical exegesis will be clearly communicated in culturally appropriate ways. Such application, now in the form of the appropriate communication of the biblical text, helps complete the overall task of Bible interpretation.

While most students of Bible interpretation are very familiar with what is necessary to properly exegete a biblical text, they are often not prepared to effectively communicate the results of that exegesis to the people they are ministering with. While their exegetical results of the text are true to God’s word, their results often are not very receptor-oriented. As a result, it is crucial that Bible training institutions look carefully at their existing curriculums and ask the difficult questions concerning whether the training that they offer adequately equips their graduates to properly exegete their own culture, as well as the culture of the people group to which they will be ministering. They must emphasize both the biblical and cultural elements of the exegetical process. This is, in my opinion, the “last frontier” of Bible interpretation that must be addressed to ensure that truly relevant and applicable Bible interpretation happens. Unfortunately, all too often in most training institutions worldwide most of the curriculum deals with issues relating to the exegesis of the biblical text and correspondingly little time is spent on how to interpret that text for those who so desperately need to hear it. In my own classes on Bible interpretation, I argue from the very first day of class: “Bible interpretation is missions, is evangelism, is discipleship.” Until Bible training institutions clearly recognize the missional implications of the Bible interpretation task, the need to exegete the culture or group receiving the biblical text will continue to be largely overlooked.

Implications for Missionally Engaged Bible Interpretation

There are many implications for those of us who want to truly be missionally engaged in our Bible interpretation. Here are a few of the most pertinent.

1. Biblical exegesis (particularly using the grammatical-historical tools) is necessary for good Bible interpretation but it is only one part of the hermeneutical task. The other part involves paying deep attention to the

culture in which that Bible interpretation is happening. Such attention will result in more holistic Bible interpretation. Such holistic Bible interpretation will be more missionally engaged.

2. Cultural exegesis needs to be taught more in our Bible schools, seminaries and missionary training programs. There are typically several courses related to biblical exegesis but hardly any courses related to the task of cultural exegesis. This curriculum imbalance must be brought into better balance in order for true missional engagement to occur.
3. Cultural exegesis takes time. A pastor, teacher, or missionary must take the time necessary to understand the culture of the group that they are ministering among, whether that group is part of a cross-cultural, multi-cultural, or multi-generational context. Missional engagement takes time.

Both biblical exegesis and cultural exegesis are crucial elements of the task of Bible interpretation. They are the two sides of the same “exegetical coin.” Good biblical exegesis takes the biblical text very seriously. In like manner, good cultural exegesis takes the cultural context of the local people just as seriously. Today we desperately need both sides of the coin as we read the Bible.

Most Bible interpretation approaches emphasize the importance of the biblical exegesis of Scripture. While this is an important part of any Bible interpretation approach, it is not complete in and of itself. What is also of equal importance is the cultural exegesis of those to whom the results of the biblical exegesis are to be communicated. Both approaches are crucial for everyone who does Bible interpretation in cross-cultural, multi-cultural and multi-generational contexts today. The goal is to have interpretations that are both true to God’s Word as well as interpretations that are culturally appropriate and make sense to the local people receiving those interpretations.

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