

Towards An Ethnohermeneutics of Suffering

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Introduction

I was recently in a small apartment located in the heart of the inner city of Cairo, Egypt. One electric bulb swung haphazardly from the living room ceiling. All furniture had been pushed up against the wall in order to make room for the 60 or so Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees who had crammed into the room. Women, and children, mostly, with a few men—many Christian, some Muslim—huddled together on the floor in family groups awaiting a time of prayer and worship, followed by the distribution of plastic shopping bags filled with food and clothing. Every family group received a bag. Some of these families had escaped from the horrors of Sudan and South Sudan just recently; others had been in Cairo for a while. All eagerly welcomed this monthly distribution organized by a Christian group.

Earlier that same day, somewhere in the northern outskirts of Cairo, I had taught simple Bible interpretation methods to Sudanese pastors and missionaries in training—all who would eventually return to either Sudan or South Sudan. It was a small training school located on a large Christian compound. The students had copies, in Arabic, of my *Doing Bible Interpretation* book (Caldwell, 2016), and everything I said was translated into Arabic. While I was teaching, I couldn't help but think: "Just how much of this material are they actually understanding?" But this was a training school, and they seemed to be eager and willing students, so I assumed they were getting—or would get—something of value both from my book as well as from my teaching.

But now it was evening and I found myself in that crowded apartment along with another American colleague. All of these Sudanese and South Sudanese I was now with were desperately poor. All of them had the clothes on their backs and not much more. Some of the wives had lost husbands in the civil war. Some of the children had lost one or both parents. Most of them had not had access to much education; many did not know how to read. As the "token" foreigners gathered with them that evening my colleague and I had the distinct privilege of praying with each of the

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family groups: prayers for success in school, for health problems, for family members who were still missing. I was humbled.

Later, as they enthusiastically sang Arabic songs of worship to God, I couldn't help but contrast my morning experience with this evening one. In the morning I had been teaching Sudanese students how to interpret the Bible, stressing the need to both exegete the text as well as to exegete the context in which that text was to be communicated. We talked about using hermeneutical methods that were a part of the local Sudanese context; and while I didn't actually use the word, what we were talking about was how to do good ethnohermeneutics.² But now, this evening, I was worshipping with Sudanese and South Sudanese who had come out of those local Sudanese and South Sudanese contexts—many who had escaped with only their lives from that context—and I was wondering how helpful my morning teaching had really been. For while what I had taught involved good basic hermeneutical principles, my teaching had lacked something significant.

How so? Ethnohermeneutics, at its core, has two basic emphases: 1) it looks for and uses culturally appropriate hermeneutical methods that are already used by the local people in a culture; and 2) it attempts to communicate the truths of the Bible in receptor-oriented ways that will be best understood by the people within the culture. But what if the people are currently undergoing, or have recently undergone, extreme crisis? What happens to our hermeneutics then? This was the lack in my teaching: where was the receptor-oriented ethnohermeneutics that closely examined *the contexts of suffering* of the Sudanese and South Sudanese peoples that these future pastors and missionaries—some who had also come out of contexts of suffering—would soon return to? These peoples are desperately suffering, yet my teaching had not included any mention of the suffering aspect of their lives, nor how this context of suffering might impact both their understanding of the Bible and even its very interpretation. As a result, I had missed helping these students develop truly relevant Bible interpretation for their own people in desperate situations; in other words, I had failed to help these students develop a relevant ethnohermeneutics of suffering.

Over the past couple of weeks, since my return to the USA, I've struggled with what an ethnohermeneutics of suffering might entail. This paper is the result of that struggle. It ties directly into the overall theme of the Evangelical Missiological Society this year: "Mission Amid Global Crises." Indeed, how is Bible interpretation effected by the global crises found in so many places in the world today? This question is germane for all global Christian workers who seek to do relevant theologizing in local contexts of suffering, or among people who have emerged from

² Here is a formal definition of ethnohermeneutics: "Bible interpretation done in cross-cultural, multi-cultural and multi-generational contexts that, whenever possible, uses culturally appropriate dynamic hermeneutical methods already in place in the culture; the primary goal being to interpret the Bible, as well as to communicate the truths of the Bible, in ways that will be best understood from within the worldview of the receptor culture." For more information on the discipline of ethnohermeneutics see, for example, Caldwell (1999) and (2005).

such contexts. This is especially true for those of us who call ourselves “evangelicals.” For the reality is that many Christians who are outside of the evangelical camp have been raising some of these issues for decades.³ But we evangelicals, especially evangelicals in North America, generally lag far behind in such efforts.

Some of us evangelicals might answer this question by saying that the techniques of Bible interpretation themselves are quite neutral and not subject to the varieties of whatever the local situation is. Such an answer, however, is shallow at best. Evangelical global Christian workers must come to realize that doing Bible interpretation the same “tried and true” way (typically using imported and highly academic Western Bible interpretation methods) might oftentimes have little relevance for those believers who are desperately seeking truths from the Bible that will help them in the immediacy of their sufferings in the midst of global crises.

This paper is a work in progress; hence the word “towards” in the title. I’m still learning. And the reality is that a white, rich, highly educated, Western, male should probably not be the one addressing this issue. But at least I can get the conversation going here and then hope that those evangelicals coming from global contexts of suffering—and ministering in those contexts—can really give us the answers that we need. At the same time I believe that the discipline of ethnohermeneutics can help global workers better connect the contexts of the Bible, which speak so much of suffering, to the daily lives of believers caught up in local contexts of suffering. Here I will put forth three observations that I believe any attempt at an ethnohermeneutics of suffering should address: 1) hermeneutics as work done with our hands; 2) hermeneutics as work done by the local community; and 3) hermeneutics as a return to midrash. I will take each observation in turn, concluding with some implications for global workers who do ministry in contexts of suffering.

1. Hermeneutics as “Work Done with Our Hands”

My first observation is this: an ethnohermeneutics of suffering will be messy. Stanley Hauerwas, speaking at the Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, said the following in regards to the relationship between theological education and the students that are taught:

Too often I fear we associate education with teaching students how to think. We think, moreover, that thinking is a linguistic activity. Education certainly involves learning how to think, and we do think linguistically, but it is important that we not think of thinking as something that goes on in our “minds.” . . . I hope to show why learning to think, as well as learning a language constitutive of thinking, is rightly understood as work done with our hands. (2007, 2)

³ See, for example, Smith-Christopher (1995); Segovia and Tolbert (1995); Segovia, (2000); Sugirtharajah (2006); West (2007); Kittredge, Aitken, and Draper (2008); Fortman, Martens, and Salih (2009); and Tapie and McClain (2015).

I believe that these perceptive words of Hauerwas—especially the last sentence in the quote above—speak as well to us who would do hermeneutics. We could rephrase his words something like this: “Learning to do hermeneutics, as well as learning a language constitutive of hermeneutics, is rightly understood as work done with our hands.” For too long we have allowed hermeneutics, and the learning that goes with it, to rest on hermeneutical knowledge and expertise primarily gained in the classroom, in “teaching students how to think.” We have, often to our detriment, left out the “work done with our hands” aspect of hermeneutics, relying far too often upon classroom work and neglecting the equally important hermeneutical work that must be done in contexts of ministry, “as work done with our hands.” This is where the hard work truly lies. Correctly parsing a Greek or Hebrew word pales in comparison to correctly parsing the hermeneutical milieu of our ministry context, especially of the oppressed, marginalized, and those in contexts of global crisis. Such work is messy. It moves us far beyond the ivy walls of academia or the plush leather chair of the pastor’s study. It behooves us to get down and dirty with real people with real needs, where our priority regarding a “correct” interpretation of a Scripture text may be a very low priority indeed for those individual Christians who find themselves in crisis.

I thought that I knew a little bit about what hermeneutics “as work done with our hands” was all about. After all, I had for many years taught Bible interpretation courses with urban pastors working in disadvantaged low-income settlements in Manila, Philippines. I had even written articles directed towards the topic.⁴ In my teaching and writing I had dealt with the many aspects of culturally appropriate hermeneutics, like the need for “lower-based” training programs and “border” pedagogies and “reading” strategies verses “relating” strategies, and so on.⁵ I had also distinguished between issues of “surface level” and “deep level” when speaking

⁴ See, for example, Caldwell (2013).

⁵ See, for example, Caldwell (2013, 181) where I write:

When talking about strategies for exegeting the culture, what I am referring to are relating strategies to use when interpreting the Bible with a particular people group. Relating strategies are simply the tools that interpreters need to properly communicate the understood text to the people with whom they are ministering. These interpreters include both those who are insiders to the culture as well as those who are outsiders. The insiders need to consider these relating strategies to insure that the Bible is indeed communicated in ways that are appropriate to their own culture. The outsiders need to learn and understand these relating strategies so that they communicate the Bible in ways that the insiders can truly understand.

Such relating strategies, once again, range from minimal to maximal. Minimal relating strategies range from learning their mother-tongue language, to understanding their felt needs, life questions and specific history, to discovering their worldview presuppositions. More mid-level relating strategies range from understanding how their formal and informal educational systems work, to learning how they react to and interpret different kinds of information, to discovering their methods of perceiving, interpreting and evaluating issues. Maximal relating strategies range from telling stories in culturally appropriate ways, to communicating biblical truth in culturally appropriate ways, to dialoging with local oral and written holy material and/or sacred texts.

of ethnohermeneutics.⁶ But I had not dealt with some of the messier “deep level” aspects of a culturally appropriate hermeneutics—like adequate food, clothing, and shelter—that those living in contexts of suffering have to deal with on a daily basis.

But as Hauerwas demonstrates, “work done with our hands,” especially hermeneutical work, must by its very nature be messy work. It must move out of the relatively antiseptic classrooms and into the hustle and bustle of the local hermeneutical context. As such, it forces us to not think in merely theoretical and abstract ways about the Bible but in ways that will make the most sense for our suffering contexts. This is difficult for many of us evangelicals in North America. We often prefer distance and isolation. Distance and isolation from the realities of suffering peoples, however, can lead us to false, or at least incorrect, understandings of Scripture. It can often reinforce the interests of those in power and the status quo.

Steven J. Friesen (2008), in his thought-provoking chapter, “The Blessings of Hegemony: Poverty, Paul’s Assemblies, and the Class Interests of the Professoriate,” carefully outlines how this has occurred over the past 50 years in New Testament Pauline studies. Here Friesen provides “a series of representative quotes from a broad spectrum of New Testament introductions published throughout the twentieth century.” What he discovers is that “the dominant discourse in Pauline studies discusses individual social status, not structures of economic inequality. Theories of oppression are relegated to ‘politicized’ studies on the margins of the discipline. Paul is still portrayed as a thinker, not as an activist” (2008, 127). After this survey Friesen remarks:

It should be deeply troubling to us [New Testament scholars] that for at least a century, poverty, and economic inequality have not been important topics in Pauline studies, even though we have agreed that most of the early believers were poor. A survey of twentieth-century New Testament introductions also sheds some light on this absence of reflection on economic inequality, showing ... the marginalization of first-century poor people in twentieth-century scholarship. (2008, 121-122)

Friesen then concludes with some frank words: “What benefits will studies of Paul’s first-century assemblies offer to twenty-first century audiences? Will such studies be bound to the class interests of the professoriate? Or will they make substantive contributions to our understanding of religion and economic inequality?” (2008, 128). Friesen’s conclusion has implications for all of us, whether as theologians or as missiologists. To rephrase Friesen: What benefits will biblical, or theological, or missiological studies contribute to the understanding of the Bible in contexts of suffering?

⁶ See, for example, Caldwell (2005, 171-172) where I refer to *surface level* ethnohermeneutics as “using culturally appropriate methods to *communicate* the truths of the Bible” in contrast to *deep level* ethnohermeneutics as “using culturally appropriate interpretation methods to *discover* the truths of the Bible.”

Only by “working with our hands” in local contexts of suffering will we be able to make our hermeneutics as relevant as possible for those living in contexts of suffering. This, I believe, is a first major piece towards an ethnohermeneutics of suffering.

2. Hermeneutics as Work Done By the Local Community

My second observation is this: an ethnohermeneutics of suffering must be done by the local community—done in the context of those who are suffering, by those who are suffering. An isolated hermeneutic done for others by Bible interpreters relatively unaffected by the suffering—which seems to be all too common with global crises—is only going half-way and may in fact be totally missing the mark. Instead, it must be a hermeneutic *of* the people done *with* and *by* the people. This local community may be a local church, a small group or cell group, or a cluster of individual Christians who gather together during or after the crisis to seek answers from the Bible.

Pablo Richard (1998) calls such Bible interpretation a “communitarian reading” of the Bible.⁷ Though thoroughly rooted in Liberation Theology, and the Base Christian Communities of the Catholic Church of late 20th century Latin America, nevertheless Richard’s insights warrant careful observation by evangelicals.

Richard first argues for the formation of a new hermeneutical space: “A ‘hermeneutical space’ is an institutional *location*, in which a specific *subject* is identified, proper to that place and different from other subjects, who produces a concrete *interpretation* of the Bible, proper to that place and different from those emerging from other hermeneutical spaces” (1998, 275, emphasis his). According to Richard, such hermeneutical space is in contrast to what is typically accepted as traditional hermeneutical space: the *academic space* of the theological schools and the *liturgico-institutional space* of the churches. Within the academic space “the subject of biblical interpretation is the expert—the exegete; the professor of Bible; the individual learned in the biblical sciences and related human sciences. The academic interpretation of the Bible is grounded in the correct use of scientific tools and the authority of the authors cited” (275). Within the liturgico-institutional space “the Bible is interpreted according to the liturgical and teaching norms of the churches themselves. This space is supported by the work of academic exegesis, but is transformed according to the canons of the liturgy and the teaching of the faith in the context of the churches” (275). Both of these spaces are legitimate and necessary but, according to Richard, there is still need for a third space “just as legitimate and necessary for a correct interpretation of and witness to the Word of God” (276). This is a communitarian space. “It involves the reading and interpretation of the Bible in community... This interpretation of the Bible in

⁷ For more recent contributions to an understanding hermeneutics in community see Lawrence (2009) and Rogers (2015).

community reveals different characteristics than those of either the academic or liturgico-institutional type of interpretation” (276).

So what are some of the components of this third space? Richard says:

To begin with, the community represents a space for full participation—a space that not only includes those individuals who cannot take part in society (the poor; the marginalized; young people; women; and so forth), but also is present in those areas normally beyond the reach of the great institutions. ... Within this communitarian space the subject of interpretation is neither the expert nor the ordained minister, but the community itself. The community functions as an interpreting subject in the name of the greater subject, the people of God, inserted as it is within the civil society of its own historical context. Within the community one finds a communitarian reading and interpretation of the Bible that is participatory, creative, popular, pastoral . . . (1998, 276)

It is in this third space of the community of believers—oftentimes out of reach of both the academy and the institutional church—where Bible interpretation happens. This is especially true of those emerging from or remaining in contexts of suffering. Such a community reading of the Bible entails a hermeneutics that is extremely relevant for these local communities and addresses heart-felt issues that they themselves have experienced or are experiencing. And, as Richard points out, such hermeneutics often must be done outside both the academy and the church.

Here the example of John Wesley may be helpful. Wesley, in his sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, wrote, “I shall endeavor to show that Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary relation is indeed to destroy it” (as quoted in Long 2015, 248). Bible interpretation done in and with society is critical for Wesley; it cannot be done in solitude. As D. Stephen Long writes, on Wesley’s understandings of meekness and peacemaking:

Notice how Wesley uses Scripture here. He takes two beatitudes, meekness and peacemaking, and asks what the social conditions are for being able to exercise them. He answers that they require communication with others. If we were not placed in social conditions where peacemaking was necessary or meekness possible, then there would be no real possibility for us to inhabit those holy dispositions. Reading scripture well, then, requires not merely the act of reading scripture, but reading it so that it takes root in our social interactions. (2015, 249)

Is it no wonder that Wesley and his “Methodism” had so much influence among the poor and downtrodden of Great Britain in the 18th century?

In like manner, those who would seek to exegete both text and cultural context among suffering peoples today must take note of the place of Scripture in society, asking what the social conditions of the cultural context are and how Scripture can best help believers live out the truths of Scripture in relationship with others—both believers and unbelievers—who all find themselves in that suffering context. This is hermeneutics done in community, with and by and for those in the midst of suffering within the community. Only then will the Bible be able to speak with

power into the lives of those undergoing suffering and answer for them the question, “How then shall we live?” This community hermeneutics, I believe, is a second major piece towards an ethnohermeneutics of suffering.

3. Hermeneutics as a Return to Midrash

My third observation is this: an ethnohermeneutics of suffering—as work done with our hands and done primarily by the local community—will be a hermeneutics of significant simplicity; it will be a hermeneutics of midrash. I have chosen the phrase “a hermeneutics of significant simplicity” carefully. Such hermeneutics done by the suffering community will be a significant hermeneutics since it returns to a basic hermeneutical method used by Jesus, Paul and other New Testament writers, namely midrash. Such hermeneutics will involve simplicity because midrash, at its most basic form, is a simple hermeneutical method.

I have written at length on midrash and its relationship to ethnohermeneutics elsewhere, so I will here only go into the details most pertinent to this study.⁸

“Midrash” (mdrś) 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 and was subsequently used by Jesus and the New Testament writers as well. The overarching purpose of midrash is to better interpret the Old Testament text. What are some of the essential principles of midrash? Richard Longenecker (1999) 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 characterized by the maxim “that has relevance to this”—that is, what is written in Scripture has relevance to our present situation. (1999, 22)

Longenecker’s reference to the present contextual situation of the audience as the primary motivational component underlying the midrashic technique—“that has relevance to this”—was first developed by Renée Bloch.⁹ She viewed the literary genre of midrash as “the most characteristic and yet the least understood of the Bible” (1957/1978, 50). Bloch cites five “essential and fundamental characteristics” of midrash, of which the first, second and fourth are significant to this study.

First, the point of departure of midrash is Scripture. This is what contributes to its exclusive use within the overall confines of Judaism. As Bloch says:

⁸ See, for example, Caldwell (2012a) and (2012b).

⁹ See Bloch (1957/1978). This major article by Bloch appeared posthumously in French in 1957 and was translated into English by Mary Callaway in 1978. Bloch was one of the first proponents for studying midrash as a hermeneutical method.

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. (1957/1978, 31)

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” (1957/1978, 31).

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. Again Bloch:

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. (1957/1978, 32-33)

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” (1957/1979, 33). 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. (1957/1978, 33)

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” (1957/1978, 29). 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” (1957/1978, 33).

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.

So how does midrash relate to an ethnohermeneutics of suffering? Complicated, “book-learned” hermeneutical methods will not work in communities coming out of, or currently in, contexts of deep suffering and global crisis. Instead, simple hermeneutics, employing a “that is this” comparison between text and the suffering context, will mirror the hermeneutics of many of the New Testament contexts where the followers of Jesus were also suffering. The midrashic actualization of the text directly and immediately to the suffering context will of necessity trump more elaborate and time-consuming academic hermeneutical attempts to look for original context and authorial intent.

For example, the Bible has much to say concerning suffering and its corollary, lament; formal training in how to interpret these passages are often not necessary for those who know well such similar suffering. Those who have undergone such suffering can apply the simple midrashic “that is this” hermeneutic to both the context of the text as well as to the context of their suffering. In so doing they will have a full understanding of how that actualized text relates to their personal context. I believe that such a midrashic hermeneutic is a third major piece towards an ethnohermeneutics of suffering.

Some Implications

There are many implications of this study for both those who minister in crisis contexts of suffering (and for those who teach students who are doing or will do so) as well as for those who have emerged, are emerging, or are still in, such suffering contexts around the globe. I will address a few of the most pertinent implications. Of course, those individuals who have been most effected by contexts of suffering will never read this, but such implications will hopefully help the rest of us better relate to individuals from and in such suffering contexts.

Implications For Those Who Minister in Contexts of Suffering:

1. **Get your hands dirty.** For those of you ministering in contexts of suffering, this is obvious. But it is surprising how many development workers, medical professionals, and others who work in such contexts, oftentimes have little actual sustained contact with those suffering except within the confines of aid truck or clinic. A hermeneutics of suffering demands difficult, messy, hands-on work with the local people. Only then will you have any hope of truly understanding their context and thus properly using the Bible in relationship to their suffering. And for those of you training others for such a task: get to know suffering peoples in your own local community. Most refugees who have relocated to North America come from contexts of suffering. Talk with them. Befriend them. Invite them into your homes. Do

some homework on suffering and trauma.¹⁰ Only then will your teaching be truly relevant.

2. Let the community be the expert. It is so easy for outsiders to take the lead in Bible studies, prayer sessions, and the like. Instead, let the local people be in charge and lead. They are the best ones to not only set the agenda but be able to figure out, together as a community, how the Bible best relates to their suffering and how it might be used. They have lived, or are still living, through the crisis and they will therefore be best able to actualize the biblical text to the needs of their local community.
3. Use simple hermeneutics. Most Christians, even in the West, use midrash when they interpret a biblical text. In many cases the “that is this” of midrash becomes what I call “the seven last words of Bible interpretation”: “this is what it means to me.” Simple hermeneutics, like midrash, will best help the community make sense of those Scripture passages that relate to their contexts of suffering.

Implications For Those Who Are From or In Contexts of Suffering:

1. Acknowledge your context of suffering. Many of you are, or have been, in a very bad place, both physically and emotionally. You are, or have, suffered greatly. Recognize the reality of that suffering and the trauma that has gone with it. Get help when it is available. Recognize also that the Bible has much to say both about suffering as well as about those who are going through suffering. Despite everything, God is for you; God is on your side. Lament is necessary; it is biblical. Restoration to wholeness is possible. It happened often throughout the Old and New Testaments and it can happen for you as well.
2. Work with each other in community. It is so easy for outsiders to take the lead in Bible studies, prayer sessions, and the like. Instead, you take the lead in the context of your own local community. You are the experts on suffering and you, as a suffering community, need to take the lead in seeing how the Bible relates to your specific situations.
3. Your hermeneutics are valid. When you interpret the Bible in your contexts of suffering, don’t worry about what the academics or the pastors in the churches will say. Your simple hermeneutic of “that is this” in applying the text to your suffering context is valid. This is how Jesus, Paul, and other New Testament writers often interpreted the Old Testament. You will do well to follow their example.

¹⁰ There is a vast literature on trauma, whether it be war, ethnic conflict, floods, car accidents, domestic abuse or crime. Two helpful resources for me have been Hill et al. (2016) and Lloyd and Nyamutera (2010).

Conclusion

The three observations touched upon in this paper concerning an ethnohermeneutics of suffering are just a beginning; there is much more work to be done. However, as I reflect back on my recent experiences with Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees in Egypt, I know that I will do things a bit differently next time, especially if I ever get a chance to once again teach hermeneutics to future Sudanese and South Sudanese pastors and missionaries who will be ministering in contexts of suffering. May all of us pay more attention concerning where our audiences are coming from—whether they be our students, church members, or local populations—as we help them better develop an ethnohermeneutics for their own contexts.

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