

# Part I: Reconsidering Our Biblical Roots

## Bible Interpretation, the Apostle Paul and Mission Today

by *Larry W. Caldwell*

### *Introduction*

**T**he interpretation of Scripture runs silent and deep across the frontiers of mission. As evangelicals we value the role of hermeneutics in the mission of the church, and we expect the Bible to be read and interpreted properly as the gospel gains new ground. It's no surprise that our differences over belief and practice in mission settings force us back to our hermeneutical assumptions, for we know that one's interpretive compass will direct what one believes to be correct practice in church and mission.

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

### *The Western "Two Step"*

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

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hermeneutical methodology that has dominated the discussion is one that has two simple steps.

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

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

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

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

- Should the Two Step approach be so universally used?
- Should a hermeneutical method that arose out of the cultural milieu of the Western world

be presumed to be appropriate for use in the multiplicity of hermeneutical milieus of the non-Western world?

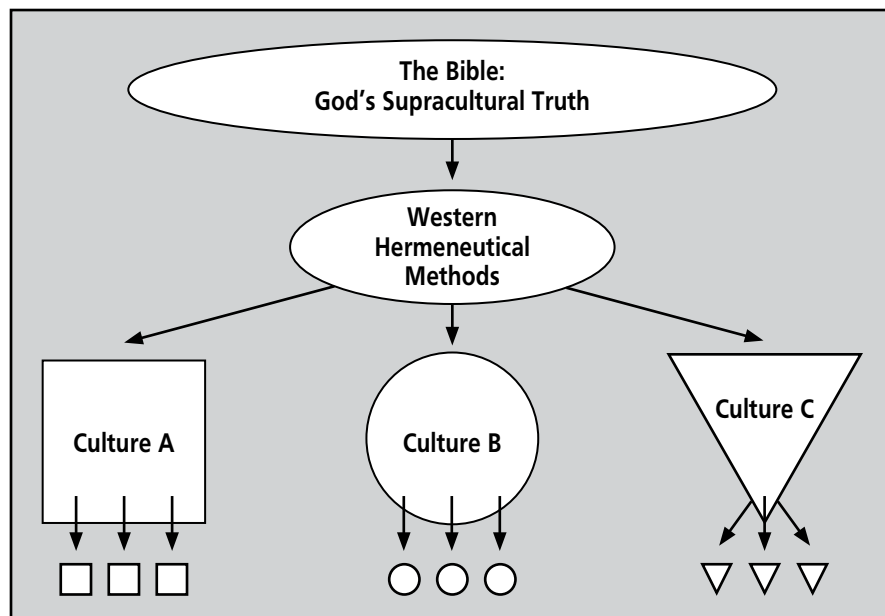
- Would it not be better for those from other cultural contexts to search for indigenous hermeneutical methods by which the biblical message can best be understood in their own unique cultural settings?
- And, finally, is the Two Step approach, as good as it is, the *best* approach for the whole church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

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

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

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

Figure 1. *Presupposition: Western Hermeneutical Methods Work for All Cultures*



precedence over what the biblical text itself is saying (always the danger of reader-response criticism); the Bible always takes precedence over any reader/hearer and that person's cognitive environment. Despite this disclaimer, we do well to examine carefully the cognitive environment of ourselves as interpreters, as well as the cognitive environment—including their indigenous hermeneutical methods—of the audiences with which we do mission.

Higgins speaks of cognitive environment especially in terms of Bible translation. I would like to take his discussion down to the foundational level of Bible interpretation and the hermeneutical assumptions that affect that interpretation, for, in my view, all Bible translation is founded upon pre-existing hermeneutical assumptions.<sup>6</sup> As a result, I believe that we can gain great insight into “proper” Bible interpretation today—whether done by Western or non-Western Bible interpreters—by first examining closely the cognitive environment of the New Testament, in this case the hermeneutical milieu and methods of the apostle Paul. Such an examination will help guard against the previously described tendency of Western missionaries to assume that Western Bible interpretation methods are universal methods that will, by default, work in any cultural context. This article will show that the apostle Paul's own hermeneutical methods—which he used when he interpreted the Old Testament—defy this Western assumption.

By examining Paul's hermeneutical methods from an anthropological standpoint, this article will show that Paul's interpretation methods in regards to the Old Testament were methods arising directly out of the cultural milieu of the first century AD, i.e., his cognitive environment. As a result, the use of such culturally-specific Bible interpretation methods

## **T**he apostle Paul's own hermeneutical methods—*which he used when he interpreted the Old Testament—defy this Western assumption.*

by Paul should give both Westerners and non-Westerners greater freedom in attempting to use interpretation methods that reflect their own cultural contexts and cognitive environments, and a greater confidence to interpret the Bible with more relevancy for their own specific cross-cultural and multi-cultural situations. There will be a new recognition that such culturally specific interpretation methods may, in the final analysis, be more authentically biblical than using the Two Step approach.

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

Part One of this article, comprising Sections 1 and 2, will continue below. Part Two of this article, comprising Sections 3 and 4, will continue in the next issue of *IJFM* (29:3, July-September 2012).<sup>7</sup>

### **Section 1: One First Century AD Hermeneutical Method—Midrash**

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

#### **Midrash: Towards a Definition**

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

Midrashic interpretation . . . takes its departure from the biblical text itself . . . and seeks to explicate the hidden meanings contained therein by means of agreed upon hermeneutical rules in order to contemporize the revelation of God for the people of God. It may

be briefly characterized by the maxim: "That has relevance to This"; i.e., What is written in Scripture has relevance to our present situation.<sup>8</sup>

Longenecker's reference to the present contextual situation of the audience as the primary motivational component underlying the midrashic technique was first developed by Renée Bloch.<sup>9</sup> She viewed the genre of *midrash* as "the most characteristic and yet the least understood of the Bible."<sup>10</sup>

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

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

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.<sup>12</sup>


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

This is a natural corollary. Since the sacred text was read in the synagogue and had to be commented upon in a homily relating to it, attempts were made to understand it better. Because of this it was studied diligently, that it

might be understood and its obscurities made clear. This concern of the rabbis meant that they often began their inquiry by asking the question: why? . . . The principal method by which the rabbis clarify the sacred text and probe its depths is by recourse to parallel passages. The Bible forms a unit; it comes from God in all of its parts and it therefore offers a broad context to which one should always return.<sup>13</sup>

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

If midrashic exegesis consists primarily in attentive study of the texts, it does not stop there. Its aim is not



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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 re-interpret 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.<sup>14</sup>

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

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

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."<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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

In summary, *midrash* is a hermeneutical method that begins with Scripture and ends with specific applications to the present realities facing the people of God. But how did the midrashic interpreters arrive at their specific applications? In other words, what did

they do with the biblical text in order to arrive at their actualized interpretations? The answer to these questions cannot be fully understood apart from briefly reviewing the historical and cultural climate out of which midrashic interpretation initially arose. To that topic we turn next.

## The Historical and Cultural Climate from which *Midrash* Developed

### *People of the Book*

From the time period during and especially after the Captivity in Babylon (587 to 538 BC) the ways in which Jews understood their sacred Scripture changed dramatically. Once Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed the Jewish people were no longer a people with a centralized religious worship center or a people with a centralized worship cultus. All that had once represented the Jewish people and their religion now lay in ruins. What, then, was to replace it? This was the worst crisis that the Jewish faith had yet faced. How would these now scattered and captive peoples hold on to their Jewishness? Their response was deceptively simple: they became the people of the Book.<sup>18</sup>

Of course Scripture (*Torah*) had always played an important role in the Jewish people's religious identity prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The importance of the twice daily recitation of the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-9) is evidence enough of this. But Scripture was not always at the apex of the Jewish religious life prior to the Captivity. While the importance of the *Torah* was clearly recognized early on, the fact that much of the rest of Jewish Scripture was still at various stages of composition, collection and canonization—not to mention that some of it had not even been spoken or written yet—helped account for the relatively secondary position which Scripture, in fact, occupied. In contrast, it was the geographical center of Jerusalem and the physical structure of the

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Temple—especially the latter—which stood in ascendancy, though even this cultic center was occasionally neglected. Indeed, King Josiah even had to rediscover the “Book of the Law” (commonly thought of as the book of Deuteronomy) during the course of the repairing of the Temple (621 BC), some 30 years before the ultimate destruction at the hands of the Babylonians (2 Kgs. 22:8-10; 2 Chron. 34:8-18). Obviously their Scripture, even the *Torah*, was not always important to the Jews.

The Captivity changed all of that. Now the only threads of commonality and corporateness in the lives of the Jewish people were the words of Scripture. As a result, a whole new way of handling Scripture began at this time, that is, writing down the various oral traditions that were not yet written down, collecting the various traditions, beginning the complicated canonization process, and so on.<sup>19</sup> Going hand-in-hand with all of this was the placing of more emphasis upon the “correct” interpretation of the Scripture they already had, now for a new generation of exiled Jews with little understanding of the religious cultus prior to the Exile. Moreover, the role of the religious professional—one who could best offer the “correct” interpretation—subsequently took on increasing importance. One individual who represented this new religious role was Ezra.

Ezra was “a teacher [*sofer*] well versed in the Law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6; cf. 7:11) who “had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). Once back in Jerusalem he and his Levite associates “instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing

there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.” (Neh. 8:7-8; cf. 8:1-18)

By making the Scripture clear and giving it meaning, Ezra and the Levites were, in Bloch's words, actualizing the Law for the new immediate situation of these returned Jews.<sup>20</sup>

### *Halakah and Haggadah*

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

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

Scholarly interpreters of the written tradition had largely replaced the priests as guardians of the heritage and experts on legal matters. They

had developed an elaborate hermeneutical mechanism with which to make sense of sacred texts, to fit them into a harmonious whole, and to apply them to the realities of life in the Greco-Roman world. Specific interpretive traditions had grown up, some with roots far back into the postbiblical era and beyond. Exegesis had become a primary mode of intellectual discourse.<sup>21</sup>

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

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

### The Middoth

What were these interpretation rules? These exegetical rules, or *middoth* (*middot*), were instituted by the rabbi Hillel (60 BC to 20 AD?) around the year 30 BC. We do not know whether Hillel established these rules or merely transmitted them from someone else.<sup>22</sup> There is also much debate concerning how much these seven rules were derived from Hellenistic rhetoric found in Alexan-

dria in the first century BC.<sup>23</sup> Some maintain that the *middoth* arose from the practical need of the Pharisees for authority. Since they lacked automatic religious status because of no proper heredity or professional training, the Pharisees had to develop their authority from some other means, in this case through elaborate interpretation rules.<sup>24</sup>

Whatever their origin, Hillel's seven *middoth* had wide influence in Judaism in the first century AD and beyond.<sup>25</sup> These seven exegetical rules were as follows:<sup>26</sup>

1. An inference drawn from a minor premise to a major and vice versa (*Kal wa-homer* = "light and heavy"). [In other

*There is also much debate concerning how much these seven rules were derived from Hellenistic rhetoric.*

words, what has been previously applied to a less important matter will certainly be applicable to a more serious matter.]

2. An inference drawn from analogy of expressions, that is from similar words and phrases elsewhere (*Gezera Shawa* = "an equivalent regulation").
3. A general principle established on the basis of a teaching contained in one verse (*Binyan Av mi-katuw 'ehad* = "constructing a leading rule from one passage").
4. A general principle established on the basis of a teaching contained in two verses (*Binyan Av mi-shenei ketuim* = "con-

structing a leading rule from two passages").

5. An inference drawn from a general principle in the text to a specific example and vice versa (*Kelal u-ferat* = "general and particular" and *perat u-khelal*). [In other words, this is an attempt either to expand or to limit the inference.]
6. An inference drawn from an analogous passage elsewhere (*Kayotse bo mi-makom aber* = "something similar in another passage"). [In other words, an attempt to solve more difficult problems by comparing them with another passage in Scripture.]
7. An interpretation of a word or passage from its context (*Davar balamed me-inyano* = "explanation from the context").<sup>27</sup>

The implications of these *middoth* for the apostle Paul's hermeneutical methods, as well as New Testament examples of their use, will be discussed in Sections 2 and 3. The purpose of including them here is again to attempt to identify a bit more clearly the overall historical and cultural climate out of which *midrash* developed. Having done this I want to briefly investigate the use of *midrash* in the speeches and letters of Paul. The apostle Paul's use of the Old Testament is especially important to analyze since he interpreted Scripture for both Jewish and Gentile audiences in the early Christian churches. We turn first to some examples of the use of *midrash* in the speeches of Paul found in the book of Acts.

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

Since the publication of H. St. J. Thackeray's *The Relation of St. Paul to Contemporary Jewish Thought* in 1900, biblical scholars over the last one hundred years or so have observed that Paul's hermeneutical methodology was highly influenced by the

rabbinical interpretative techniques of his time.<sup>28</sup> By now this observation should not be surprising. These biblical scholars discovered what this article is trying to demonstrate: the apostle Paul was a product of the overall hermeneutical milieu of his day and age. As E. Earle Ellis notes concerning Paul and his Jewish hermeneutical background:

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

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

At the outset of this discussion of Paul's use of the Old Testament it must be stressed, once again, that Paul used many hermeneutical techniques in his speeches and writings. *Midrash* was not his sole choice. From the evidence to be presented shortly, however, it will be seen that Paul was intimately

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acquainted with several of the various facets of midrashic interpretative techniques used during the first century AD. What follows is a brief analysis of five examples of Paul's use of the Old Testament. In this first part, three examples are taken from Luke's record of Paul's first missionary speech recorded in Acts, and in the following article, two are taken from the writings of Paul himself.<sup>30</sup>

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

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

#### *Acts 13:22*

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

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

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

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

These words of Ps. 89, recording the promises made by God to David, were written in a day when disaster had overtaken David's house, and the psalmist was bewildered by the contrast between the divine promises and the sorry sight that met his eyes—the crown of David profaned and cast to the ground. . . . In later days, however, when the sovereignty of the house of David seemed to have passed away for ever, so far as human agency was concerned, it came to be recognized that the promises made to David would be completely fulfilled in a ruler of David's line whom God would Himself raise up. . . . As the post-exilic centuries passed, and especially after the brief space of national independence under the Hasmoneans was followed by the Roman conquest, the longing for this messianic deliverer became more intense than ever.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, Paul here is quoting from these familiar contexts to build up to his preliminary conclusion in this first part of his speech.<sup>32</sup> This conclusion immediately follows in 13:23: "From this man's

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

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

#### Acts 13:32-36

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

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

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

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

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

So it is stated elsewhere:

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

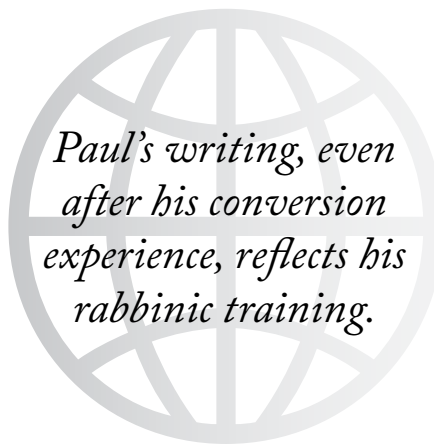
For when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

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

What are the midrashic elements in this series of verses? These three Old

Testament quotes are being used according to the seven *middoth* of Hillel examined in Section 1. Since Hillel was either the father or grandfather of Gamaliel, Paul’s rabbinic teacher,<sup>33</sup> it is not surprising that Paul’s writing, even after his conversion experience, reflects his rabbinic training. As J. W. Doeve (1954, 175) comments:

... in the argument of Acts 13 the work of a schooled rabbi is quite perceptible. If one is familiar with the working methods of a rabbinic expositor and able to assess the value of this exegesis, then one can hardly deny that Acts 13 offers a sound and well-built argument, arresting by its exegetical ingenuity.<sup>34</sup>



The exegetical rule of *Kal wa-homer* (light and heavy) is being used by Paul here in this section of his sermon. He does this by combining the Isaiah 55:3 phrase with the Psalms 16:10 passage by means of their common adjective ὁσιος. In its substantival form this word “can mean either “divine decrees” (τὰ ὅσια) as in Isaiah 55:3 or “holy one” (τον ὁσιον) as in Psalm 16:10.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the first reference from Isaiah 55:3 is the “light” aspect of the *Kal wa-homer* exegetical rule and the reference from Psalm 16 is the “heavy” because of this common adjective. What has previously applied to a less important matter (Isaiah 55:3) will certainly be applicable to a more serious matter (Psalm 16:10). In other words, if it is

indeed true (as Paul has already clearly given evidence) that God raised Jesus from the dead, and this raised one without doubt has been given the holy and sure blessings previously promised to David, then it naturally follows that this Holy One will never see decay since this promise has also been clearly stated in God’s Word.

The other Old Testament text quoted earlier here in this section, Psalm 2:7, also gives evidence for the use of the *middoth* exegetical rules, but in this instance as *Gezera Shawwa* (an inference drawn from analogy). This exegetical rule makes the connections between Old Testament texts less obvious than the more explicit examples just examined. In this particular case Paul is most likely joining, by means of analogy, this Psalm 2:7 text with that found in 2 Samuel 7:14a: “I will be his father, and he will be my son.” As Longenecker explains it:

... 2 Samuel 7:6-16 undoubtedly formed the biblical basis for Paul’s historical résumé in Acts 13:17-22. And in Acts 13:33, the first explicit citation following that recitation of God’s dealings with his people, the apostle quotes from Psalm 2:7 ... Probably their union was originally based on the fact that they both portray God as speaking of “my son,” and on that basis (*gezerah shawah*) it was considered appropriate to treat them together (1975, 98).<sup>36</sup>

Though this exegetical rule of analogy is not nearly as obvious as one might like it to be, there seems to be sufficient evidence for its use by Paul here relative to this quote from the second Psalm.<sup>37</sup>

#### Acts 13:38-41

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

Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of



Moses. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: 'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'

Here Paul's reference to "the prophets" is actually a quotation of Habakkuk 1:5, taken from the Septuagint.<sup>38</sup> The original context of the Habakkuk quote concerns the imminent rise to world power of Nebuchadnezzar and the Chaldeans as God's answer to the tyranny of the world by the Assyrians. The Chaldeans will deliver the world from Assyrian tyranny and all the nations of the world will be amazed.

The hermeneutical method underlying Paul's use of this quotation from Habakkuk is the "this is that" understanding inherent to the midrashic *pesher* style.<sup>39</sup> Paul pays scant attention to the details of the original Habakkuk context except for the theme of deliverance inherent in it. Paul, however, does not totally divorce the Habakkuk quotation from its original context. For the "this" is found in the overall deliverance context of Habakkuk 1:5, but now it is more completely revealed in light of the "that" context of the deliverance offered through Jesus Christ. According to Bruce, Paul applies Habakkuk 1:5 "to the new situation in which God is offering deliverance through the greatest of all His mighty works. Great as was the disaster that overtook those who ignored the warnings of the prophets, an even greater disaster will fall upon those who refuse the gospel."<sup>40</sup> It is imperative, then, for Paul's audience to realize that the deliverance now offered through Jesus Christ be given the hearing it justly deserves.

### Preliminary Summary

These first two sections have attempted to show, however briefly, that the hermeneutical milieu of the first century AD was one that significantly influenced the apostle Paul and his own cognitive environment. It is not

**T**he "two step" method we are so familiar with in our modern milieu was not the primary lens through which Paul interpreted Scripture when he preached.

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

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

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The strengths of this Two Step approach are several. This approach takes the Bible seriously and allows the biblical text to always take precedence over the world of the interpreter and his/her culture. The approach deals honestly with the context of the original text and attempts to understand as much as possible the original author's intended meaning. This approach looks at the strengths and weaknesses of the interpretation of the Bible throughout church history and learns from it. This approach takes the best of evangelical scholarship and uses it for better understandings of the biblical text and its context. The weaknesses of this Two Step approach are also several. This approach assumes the universal nature of western hermeneutical methods that may not necessarily be

applicable in all non-western contexts. This approach has grammatical-historical roots with a possible anti-God and anti-Bible bias. This approach is costly to implement and maintain (requiring books and libraries and/or access to them) and thus is oftentimes limited to more wealthy cultures. Furthermore, this approach is very complicated to learn; it assumes a high educational level and takes years of advanced training to effectively handle the approach. For a more thorough analysis of the weaknesses of the Two Step approach, especially in non-western cross-cultural situations, see my "Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics: Questioning the Relevancy of Western Hermeneutical Methods in the Asian Context." *Journal of Asian Mission* 1:1, (1999), 21-43.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Higgins, "Diverse Voices: Hearing Scripture Speak in a Multicultural Movement." *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 27:4, (Winter 2010), 189-196.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Second edition (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1995), 46.

<sup>4</sup> Higgins, "Diverse Voices," 190.

<sup>5</sup> Higgins, "Diverse Voices," 191.

<sup>6</sup> Higgins essentially agrees when he says that the reality is "that translation is itself an iterative, interpretive process," 191.

<sup>7</sup> Note that what follows in Sections 1 through 4 is simply an attempt to paint in very broad strokes both the hermeneutical milieu of the first century AD as well as the apostle Paul's use of *midrash*. It does not presume in any way to be exhaustive. See the bibliographical references for more thorough discussions.

<sup>8</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 37.

<sup>9</sup> See Renée Bloch, "Midrash," trans. by Mary Callaway. In *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, ed. W. S. Green (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978). This major article by Bloch appeared posthumously in French in 1957. Bloch was one of the first proponents for studying *midrash* as a hermeneutical method.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>18</sup> Again, what is described here has been greatly simplified. In actuality the answer of the Jewish people was simple but the process underlying the answer was incredibly complex.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Ibid., 34-36.

<sup>20</sup> Allowance, though, must be made for the possibility that this “making it clear and giving the meaning” may not have involved midrashic interpretation at all, but rather translation from Aramaic to the local dialect; cf. Geza Vermes, “Bible and Midrash: Early Jewish Exegesis,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible. From the Beginnings to Jerome*. Vol. 1, eds. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 201. The entire context of this passage, however, along with the several times it appears the interpretation was given—“making it clear,” “giving the meaning,” “so that the people could understand”—seems to imply more than mere translation. For a thorough analysis of the influence of Aramaic on Jesus and the New Testament church see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Semitic Background of the New Testament*. Combined edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis. Christological Interpretations of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988), 32.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. J. W. Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptics and Acts* (Assen, NL: Van Gorcum, 1954), 61.

<sup>23</sup> 23. Cf. Daniel Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic in Palestine* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1975), 112-115.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Vermes, “Bible and Midrash,” 221. Possibly the *middoth* were the result of attempts to put some kind of limits upon the freer midrashic hermeneutical forms in vogue around this time period.

<sup>25</sup> Hillel’s seven *middoth* were later expanded by others to total a standardized 32 *middoth* by 160 AD.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted from Earl E. Ellis, “Biblical Interpretation in the New Testament,” in *Mikra, Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity. Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder (Assen, NL/Philadelphia, PA: Van Gorcum/Fortress, 1988), 699; bracketed

explanations are my own. For more details as well as numerous examples see Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics*, 66-75.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly enough, this seventh *middoth* is a hermeneutical method that parallels to some extent some modern historical-critical hermeneutical techniques. Note, however, that though this *middoth* was readily available to the New Testament writers they seldom chose to use it.

<sup>28</sup> For a historical chronicling of various scholars’ understandings (since 1900) of this relationship between Paul and the rabbinical hermeneutical methods of his time see Dan Cohn-Sherbok, “Paul and Rabbinic Exegesis.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35 (1981).

<sup>29</sup> Earl E. Ellis, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 38.

<sup>30</sup> With regard to the examples from Acts, while the probability of Luke’s redaction of these Pauline speeches to reflect Luke’s own overall theological agenda must be acknowledged, nevertheless the overall tenor of Paul’s hermeneutical methodology in these speeches is easily discerned.

<sup>31</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The New International Bible Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 273-274.

<sup>32</sup> Paul’s additional phrases, “son of Jesse” and “he will do everything I want him to do,” are inconsequential. They may merely be targumic comments upon the Old Testament texts or they could reflect the possibility that Paul (or the Pisidian Antioch congregation) had a text that included these phrases. Note that the longer phrase occurs in the Targum of Jonathan; cf. F. F. Bruce, “Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Acts,” in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne with Otto Betz (Grand Rapids, MI/Tubingen, WG: Eerdmans/Mohr, 1987), 72.

<sup>33</sup> See Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 33-34, n. 50, concerning sources for further debate over this issue. It is interesting to note that Paul’s teacher, Gamaliel—according to H. E. Dana and R. E. Glaze, Jr., *Interpreting the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1961), 19—“was broad-minded and considerate in his interpretation of the Law, having been characterized very much by the spirit of his grandfather. The remarkable liberality of his attitude may be seen in the fact that he studied and taught Greek literature and contended for the inherent rights and privileges of the Gentiles. He was, nevertheless, held in high regard by the Jews of his own and later generations . . .”; cf.

Henry M. Shires, *Finding the Old Testament in the New* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1974), 55-56.

<sup>34</sup> Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics*, 175.

<sup>35</sup> Concerning this linking of these two passages, Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 97, n. 63, observes that “Paul’s sermon in the synagogue to Diaspora Jews was probably delivered in Greek, so that such a play on the word ὄσιος would be midrashically understandable and fitting.”

<sup>36</sup> Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 98, following Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics*, 172.

<sup>37</sup> Note that this same text from Psalm 2:7 is used differently in the Synoptics, where it refers to the experience of the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus at the Jordan river (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; and Luke 3:22; cf. also Heb. 1:5, 5:5). This example underscores the fact that each New Testament interpreter’s own contextual situation determined his use of specific Old Testament texts.

<sup>38</sup> The Septuagint differs from the Masoretic text when it substitutes “you scoffers” for “the nations” and adds “perish” (ἀφανίσθητε). However, the fact that Paul omits the phrase, which the Septuagint includes, may mean that Paul is using a text closer to the Masoretic text than is commonly thought (cf. Gleason L. Archer and G. C. Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament: A Complete Survey* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1983), 159. But note that the Qumran text of *1QpHab* 2:1-10 presupposes the above substitution, thus offering further support for the Septuagint translation.

<sup>39</sup> Though not strictly following the ordinary *pesher* structure—in other words, the technical moniker, *pesher*, is not used by Paul—the context surrounding the use of this Habakkuk text clearly places the text in the realm of the theological purpose of midrashic *pesher*: a text which can now only be fully understood in relation to the present context.

<sup>40</sup> Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 279.