

Select Aspects of My Hermeneutical Journey  
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## Introduction

Communication specialists identify three alternative purposes for an oral presentation. My presentation will involve all three, but in varying degrees.

### What Kind of Presentation Is This?

One kind of presentation seeks to inform. In this kind of presentation I would be seeking to explain, define, describe, report such a way as to broaden your information base about something. That will not be my governing objective today, but I will be informing you just a little. If you were to picture my purpose like a target, this would be the outside ring-not the central concern, not the bulls-eye if you will, but part of the target nonetheless.

Another kind of presentation seeks to persuade. In this kind of presentation I would be seeking to induce you to accept or yield to a particular point of view. In part, I am going to be doing this today-seeing to persuade you to consider experimenting with new approaches to hermeneutics. Again, if you were to picture my purpose as a target, this would be the next ring in from the outside, one step closer to the bulls-eye.

A third kind of presentation seeks to actuate. In this kind of presentation I would be seeking to mobilize or impel you to take some kind of action-to move you to initiate, to continue or to cease some form of behavior. In part, I am going to be doing this today as well. This is the bull's eye of my presentation: I want to provide information, persuade and mobilize you to consider that it is good to try different approaches to hermeneutics. And for my purposes, hermeneutics is simply discovering and attributing meaning to the Bible in whole or in part. What the Bible means as a whole, what a particular book means, what a particular text means and what this all means for us in the here and now.

### Why Bother?

Why am I doing this?

In part it is because I have been assigned the topic.

But also, upon research and reflection I have come to realize that I now approach Scripture somewhat differently than I did almost forty years ago when I first came to faith in Yeshua. In fact, I approach Scripture somewhat differently than I did fifteen, ten, five or even two years ago. I want to share with you a little bit of my story [informing you], so that you might perhaps see yourself in my story, that you might recognize the roots of your own attitude formation and begin to imagine how relating to Scripture differently could be freeing and exciting [that's persuasion]. Hopefully this will result in your opening the windows of your mind and heart a little to new perspectives and approaches to Scripture, which you might find renewing [actuating you].

I hope to give us some metaphors to help move our individual intuitions and transitional experiences from the subconscious to the conscious level, helping provide all of us attending this Forum with a context whereby can identify not only our differences but also our commonalities. I

suspect we may have more in common than our rhetoric reveals. But of course, that remains to be seen.

Just over a year ago I completed a two year major research project on hermeneutics which brought my own picture of what was happening in my life into 3-D and color. Consequently, in clarity and depth my convictions are more vivid now than they were before.

I want to suggest that some of the ways I formerly approached Scripture were safe but sterile. They were protective but not effective. They were defensive fortresses that hindered rather than helped communicating the faith to others and ministering the Word of G-d in the power of the Spirit. They were ways in which those of us who were insiders to the position being held could reassure ourselves that we still “us” and not “them.” Our positions were union cards we needed to maintain if we were to be considered part of the gang. I realize now that some of the approaches I took were founded in fear, shaped in insecurity, and annealed in defensiveness and bias. I had become a potter’s vessel better suited to being a cracked pot than an inviting jug of living water.

I submit that the same could be said for too many of us here today

“God Created the World Because He Loves Stories”

What then am I trying to do? I want to tell my story of engagement with Scripture in such a way as to persuade and motivate you to greater flexibility in your own approach to interacting with Scripture. I am going to tell my story by sharing a number of vignettes, scenes from my life. These vignettes embody what I am trying to say. They tell my story. And maybe some of you will find your own story imbedded in mine.

So begin with me with vignette number one.

Vignette Number One: Once Upon a Time

A Jewish Boy Became an Evangelical

I remember when I first came to faith. I was a nineteen years old. The world of gentile evangelicals in which I began to move was an entirely new world to me. And when you are in a new world, a new culture, everything is so different from what you have known. Instinctively you know you need to be very attentive to cues as to how things are done “around here,” how things are said, what things mean-both big things and little things. You need to learn the lingo and you pride yourself on developing a feel for nuance. And although some of this acculturation is learned through indoctrination and teaching, this is by no means the majority case. None of us wants to appear stupid, so as neophytes much of what we learn comes through observation and imitation rather than direct inquiry.

Some things about acculturating to the evangelical world we learned without realizing what was happening. This may be compared to a trip I took to Northern Ireland with the Liberated Wailing Wall in the late 1970’s. Before long, I discovered that without intending to, I began speaking with an Irish lilt. I wasn’t trying to imitate anyone, but as a visitor in a new culture who was trying to fit in, to understand and to communicate well, without realizing it, I found myself imitating the little things.

This happened in my religious life as well-on multiple levels and for many years. The church I attended when I came to faith was the Gospel Tabernacle Church of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in New York City. This was the home church of the denomination. Most of the icons in the church were former missionaries, usually transplants from Middle America via mission service

in China, or Viet Nam, South America, or exotic places like Irian Jaya and Mali, Upper Volta. Almost everyone was decades older than I was, very conservative, and totally unused to a Jewish sense of humor and style of relating even though they lived in one the world's greatest Jewish cities. They lived in New York but definitely in their own bubble. And in coming to faith, to an extent, their bubble became mine.

How did I learn that it wasn't considered "kosher" to whistle in church? No one told me. But I think I learned by noticing what people did and did not do, by noticing body language as people reacted when I did certain things. I learned by my making an educated guess as to the kinds of things that would go and the things that would not go. I remember that I first came to faith I wondered if I should cross myself when I prayed. Of course I didn't ask anyone about it: that would have been to risk appearing stupid. Instead, I observed, I imitated, I became acclimated to a new culture.

Now you must remember that as a cultural outsider seeking to become a cultural insider, I was especially tweaked and primed to learn as much as I could as quickly as possible. And I wasn't primed to argue with the prevailing wisdom. After all, I was the new kid on the block. I was so new and so young and so strange to this world. These people were missionaries for Christ's sake [pun intended], and they certainly knew the lay of the land a lot better than I did! So, on a subconscious level, and with great eagerness, I blended in, figuring that the explanations of the ins and outs would all become apparent in due time. Meanwhile, I needed to get with it and blend in well ASAP.

I was learning the ropes as a newcomer and trusting that the explanations and wisdom of the road most traveled would become apparent later. But as I mentioned, getting acculturated happened rather quickly and pervasively on multiple levels. This experience of feeling "They know better than I, who am I to question things right now?" this experience of foregoing asking questions so as not to appear stupid or impertinent, this experience of learning by observation and of absorbing the new religious culture subconsciously without realizing it [like discovering you're speaking with an Irish accent], this experience of imitation now, explanations later, all of this is equally true in how I became acclimated to the evangelical world in my approach to Scripture-my hermeneutics. And the same is true for all of us.

It is true that some of us went to Bible College or Seminary; and most of us, even apart from formal education, have read articles and books which taught us how to approach Scripture and why. But more foundationally, it was through our association with the evangelical and/or charismatic and/or fundamentalist and/or Messianic world that we imbibed assumptions and approaches through a natural process of learning the lay of the land and fitting in-accepting the assumptions held by others as our own. As a result, in many ways we have developed a culture-specific instinct for what is true and what is false, what is safe and what is not safe. In other words, we have internalized an entire evangelical worldview.

More illustrations: at the Gospel Tabernacle Church I learned quickly that real Christians did not do street demonstrations: that was for "liberals." I didn't exactly know what liberals were, but I knew they probably weren't Christians, and that it was best that I stay away from them and from the kinds of things they did-things like street demonstrations, baptizing babies, and liturgy. The same was true of social service: the people who did social service were liberals. It was our job to take the higher road of following Jesus and the Apostles and to preach the gospel, confident that G-d would bless our efforts and change lives supernaturally through our efforts. None of these things

were explained you see-no explanations were offered. And I didn't ask for explanations, as I was so young and new, and these people knew so much more than I did. But I developed evangelical sea-legs: and became skilled at keeping my balance in the shifting seas of New York's sub-cultures by remaining moored to certain evangelical cultural assumptions and absolutes

I also knew that evolution was bad and that verbal plenary inspiration was good. I knew that the Bible was G-d's book and that it was more perfect than anything else you could hold in your hand was. I knew that what the Rabbis wrote was not true, even though I had never read them. And I learned not to question what verbal plenary inspiration meant or did not mean. It certainly never occurred to me to question whether this was the way Jesus and the Apostles spoke of the Bible. And I just knew that evolution was bad: that no good real Christian believed in it. That was for liberals and pagans-neither of whom was born again, and neither of whom was to be trusted or imitated in any way. It was better to stay away from them and from everything they wrote or did. Better safe than sorry.

So to recap, let's distill this all into an observation: Our evangelical worldview about what is acceptable and what is off-limits is more often than not felt rather than "tell't." In other words, through the socialization we have received in our circles of association, we have developed a "feeling" for what is safe and what is not safe, for what is allowed and what is not allowed, for what is kosher and what is treife. And because these socially imbibed reflexes have been more often absorbed rather than consciously learned, they exert strong and pervasive control over how we react, feel, and think, how we form opinions, and over how we operate in and interact with the world around us.

Vignette Number Two: "Don't Bother Me With the Facts:  
My Mind is Made Up."

Another vignette-this one occurred in November of 2000 when I attended the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society held in Nashville, Tennessee. I decided to attend a workshop on Israel and the Nations. During the course of the workshop it became apparent that the presenter really saw no continuing place in the purposes of G-d for Israel as a people. I then asked him three rhetorical questions. First, as to whether Old Testament Israel was a political/ethnic entity, to which he answered in the affirmative. It then asked if he saw the church as a multi-individual entity comprised not only of Jews but also of those from among the gentiles. To this as well he responded in the affirmative. Third, I asked him if he saw any Divine purpose for the nations as nations now or in the eschaton. To this he responded, "No," that he didn't believe the Bible treats this. Indeed, he stated, how could we even know what that purpose is? He chuckled and asked rhetorically "How could I know what G-d's purpose is for this or that nation?" treating my question as unanswerable and thus nonsensical. To this I responded, "What about the sheep and the goats? [Matt 25]?" He said, "Well yes, the nations are mentioned there, but I still don't think G-d has a plan for the nations!"

At this point I felt as if my brain had become the main ingredient in a smoothie. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. What had just happened is that this fine Ph.D. who teaches in one of the finest seminaries was saying this: Point A, I have a position-that G-d has no plan for the nations as nations; Point B, You have just presented me with evidence from the Bible that I acknowledge contradicts what I just said; Point C, I still have a position-that G-d has no plan for the nations as nations."

I learned something very important at this workshop which I now share with you: Hermeneutics and theologizing is an irreducibly human enterprise, subject to all the foibles and follies of which people are capable. It is fallacious and incorrect to imagine that hermeneutics is some “pure science” out there in the ozone which we latch on to and which gives us nearly infallible interpretations.

Now you might say, of course, we know that. However, I dare say that too few people really keep this in mind. People act as though evangelical hermeneutics, also known as “historical grammatical exegesis” came down whole and entire from Mt Sinai as a sort of Oral Torah which is itself authoritative and dependable, or perhaps that these principles were discovered in the Hill Cumorah by Joseph Smith, and were infallibly translated from the Reformed Egyptian with the aid of holy spectacles!

Still you might be tempted to say; “Of course we know that.” However, I subscribe that in practice, very few of us actually act as though Bible interpretation is a fully human endeavor.

“Jerry” (a pseudonym), is a brilliant and talented young man, a former member of Jews for Jesus staff who no longer believes in Yeshua. In part, this departure from the faith is due to his absorbing secularizing post-modernistic assumptions through his wife’s participation in a series of seminars offered by a group called “The Landmark Forum,” a spin-off of Erhardt Seminars Training, more commonly known as est. But the seeds of his departure predate his indoctrination by the Landmark Forum. Note this excerpt from e-mail correspondence with a number of us who once served in the same organization.

“I think my Moody Bible Training eventually did me in. We were carefully taught that folks who question one jot and tittle of the Bible (like the folks at Fuller according to Harold Lindell) have thrown out the whole basis of authority and might as well become full blown liberals, or atheists, or even Democrats. I never figured out how to be a thinking believer. I know believe mode, and I know think mode, and I don’t know how to have them both on at the same time. I observe that other people do it but I don’t know how they do it.”

For me and for others who know and love Jerry, this makes for poignant reading. But the standard responses of fundamentalist hermeneutics will not do the job of winning him back to the faith, not that some have not tried. One of the other ex-Jews for Jesus people responded to him this way:

“The disciplines of exegesis and the principles of hermeneutics are designed to distance us from our normal assumptions by forcing us to read a passage in a very unnatural, but “scientific” way. The very awareness that we all have prejudices can enable the conscientious interpreter to challenge his own cultural baggage to a significant degree. Having a couple of friends from different cultures to interact with (or, better yet, immersing oneself in a foreign culture for an extended period of time) can help as well.”

In this correspondence, the writer, a bright Dallas Seminary Graduate, assumes that a culture-neutral and dependable hermeneutic is achievable and will go a long way toward solving Jerry’s problem. My response was as follows:

“Just a little comment here. The very idea that hermeneutics should be done in a “scientific way” is itself a Western cultural bias. I am afraid your making this statement proves (Jerry’s) point. Here you were unaware of your own cultural presuppositions, which were invisible to you. In addition, universal evangelical fealty to “historical grammatical exegesis” is also falling on hard times in evangelical circles. One example, the book by Dallas Grad James deYoung and Sarah Hurty

entitled “Beyond the Obvious” where they point out that the problem with historical grammatical exegesis is that it is not demonstrated in the exegesis of the apostles, while the approaches they DO use are not validated or employed by the evangelical community!”

Some get very upset with talk like this. This is in part due to our overdeveloped need for certitude. Uncertainty makes many of us very nervous and upset. But here is my point: Hermeneutics and theologizing is an irreducibly human enterprise, subject to all the foibles and follies of which people are capable. It is fallacious and incorrect to imagine that hermeneutics is some “pure science” out there in the ozone which we latch on to and which guarantees us authoritative and/or infallible interpretations

### **Vignette Number Three: Wishing Doesn't Make It So**

When I expressed some of these ideas with our cronies in the UMJC readers' list, one of our number responded in the following manner:

“Please forgive me but I have some trouble with this. I know the issues you raise, I have heard them many times from people who I feel are copping out of their “necessary response “ to the REVEALED WILL OF G-D. Is it arrogant of me to bring up such a thing as the revelation of G-d to us? I think not. We may have the limitations you speak of, but G-D IS ABLE to bring us beyond the place of “speculative guess-work” into a settled place of . . . (excuse me for any perceived ‘culture-shift’) “Blessed Assurance”. The “breakdown” on the human end of the equation does keep us all humble enough to realize that we are looking “through a glass darkly” because “it does not yet appear what we shall be”, BUT do we not serve a G-d who CAN and SHOULD and DOES choose to give to us “all we need to abound unto every good work”? Is He unable to communicate with His creatures? Has He not bared His Holy Arm? Has He not (and will He not continue to) open up to us any mysteries of the written word through the agency of the Spirit? If we cannot be “relatively” certain that we DO have an understanding here and now, for us, in our time, what fools we really are? Seriously, I'm no genius, but really?? What are our true imperatives then ?? Why any sense of urgency about anything related to the Kingdom if we “can't REALLY” know anyway what G-d IS wanting to say to us and what response He REALLY wants?

Allow me to dissect this line of reasoning for you: “We need for G-d to communicate with us, and G-d would not leave us with any lack of certitude as to his will for us as expressed in His word. Therefore, he must have communicated to us clearly and given us adequate rules for interpreting his word to us. And finally, anyone who says otherwise is departing from the faith once for all delivered to the saints.”

Even staunch evangelical conservatives like Grant Osborne and Kevin Vanhoozer acknowledge that interpreting textual meaning is anything but an objective slam-dunk, regardless of the principles employed.

Critiquing E.D. Hirsch, Osborne freely admits that we cannot ignore the fact that we see Scripture through lenses ground by our own proclivities, experiences and culture, all of which create a matrix of pre-understanding which we bring to the text. And he points out that all of us employ reading strategies which themselves predetermine what we are going to find and how we are going to interpret it [Osborne 1991:393-394].

Osborne indicates that the boundary between meaning and significance is somewhat “subjective.” The key word here is “somewhat.” We ought not to assume that it is impossible to ascertain or to

get close to the meaning the author intended. But we shoot for this particular bullseye while wearing smoked glasses, and only a smug fool would suggest that hitting the bullseye is a foregone conclusion, no matter what “shooting” (hermeneutical) techniques are employed. There is no room for smugness in our hermeneutics. We all see “through a glass darkly,” and must always temper our conclusions with a strong dose of humility.

Evangelical Kevin Vanhoozer’s book, *Is There a Meaning in the Text?* is certainly the most detailed and brilliant defense available for authorial intent as the ground of meaning. Yet, he himself forthrightly admits the imperfect nature of even our best hermeneutical endeavors. His language bears repeating and remembering.

And yet—there is no question that the bond between word and world has become problematic. On the one hand, in a fallen world language no longer infallibly does what it was designed for. There is no question of returning to the innocence of Eden. Cartesian certainty, an absolute knowledge grounded in the knowing subject, is neither possible nor Christian. A little lower than the angels, we humans know only in part., through the glass of language, darkly—not because of some defect in language but because of our unseeing eyes and unclean lips. One should never be too casual, therefore, in claiming understanding. When it comes to interpreting texts, honesty forbids certainty. Human knowing, of books and of the Book of Nature, is mediate and approximate. Here Christians can agree with chastened postmoderns. On the other hand, we must not forget that humans were created with the ability to communicate and to understand by means of language. It is therefore no little part of our Christian vocation to bear witness to the trustworthiness of the institution of language by being responsible authors and responsible readers [1998:207].

All of this demonstrates how very human is our hermeneutical enterprise. Hermeneutics and theologizing are more culturally determined than most of us ever imagine them to be and pretending it isn’t so may be more comfortable but takes us away from the truth. “It ain’t necessarily so! It ain’t necessarily so! The things that you’re liable to say ‘bout the Bible, it ain’t necessarily so!”

### **Vignette Number Four: My Aluminum Walker Ministry**

After nearly four decades as a believer in Yeshua, I have gone through a paradigm shift—a fundamental change of perspective where I have moved from defending my doctrine of Scripture to depending upon G-d’s power through Scripture.

If I were to visually portray for you the way I formerly encountered the world as a witnessing believer in Yeshua, I would wheel out here before you a rickety aluminum walker such as we have all seen propping up elderly people. Only this flimsy walker would be a little different. It would have bells, whistles, horns, cymbals and sirens as well as other devices attached to it so that whoever was wheeling it around could become something of a one-man band.

For too many years, my interface with the world involved wheeling out my handy evangelical models, my constructs, complete with attached proof-texts, and then pointing to each horn, whistle, wheel, and gong, explaining why it was there, what it was for, and playing on it for a while. The people to whom I was witnessing became the audience, but the focus was on the gizmo—the contraption that had become the substance of my witness.

You see, I didn’t really trust G-d in all this: actually, I trusted my arguments and explanations—at least I attempted to trust them. But as C.S. Lewis stated. “There is no doctrine of Scripture which

we are so apt to doubt as the one we have just defended.” Having an explanation-centered ministry is quite perilous—for every time you truck out your aluminum walker and play your little tune, you risk exposing yourself and your arguments to criticism and ridicule. And, whether you realize it or not, your attention has shifted from the people you claim to be trying to reach to the contraption you are attempting to justify.

I remember one glaring example of this kind of contraption-oriented “ministry.” I was in Los Angeles in 1972, with my Jews for Jesus cronies, handing out literature. I came upon a young man whom I had veritably verbally nailed to a wall where I was barraging him with my best explanations and spiritual gizmos, my bells and my whistles. Moishe Rosen happened to be there that night. He saw what was going on, came over and tapped me on the shoulder, saying, “Excuse me.” He then stepped up to the fellow I had been nailing and asked him a marvelous question that had never occurred to me. The question was this: “What’s your name?” You see, I was so contraption centered, the person to whom I was speaking was only a peripheral concern. I hadn’t even bothered to get his name.

Now the same is true in our relationship to Scripture. When we should be employing the Scripture and trusting its author to breathe life through it into our various encounters, we are instead too often contraption-focussed. Too often we are so wrapped up in declaring and defending our doctrine of Scripture, giving a perfect presentation of our perfect system of truth, that we leave no room to let it fly. We are more prepared to trust our arguments than we are to trust the Spirit. I submit that too often there is a tightness and a combative defensiveness in our so-called “witness,” instead of the freedom of people who are experiencing the overcoming presence of the Spirit in the midst of the encounter.

And we don’t realize how much our contraptions [our world-view] and their bells, whistles and horns [models and paradigms] condition what we see and what we don’t see.

Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock in their excellent book, *Progressive Dispensationalism* give one dandy example, as they speak of the medieval presupposition that the earth is the center of the Universe. With such a pre-understanding, passages in the Bible that speak of the sun making its circuit around the heavens [Psalm 19] clearly mean exactly what they say. For the medieval Christian there was no hermeneutical rule which could dislodge this interpretation. Even though one could have said to such a person, “The Psalms are poetry; remember the genre! You need to realize that the psalmist uses metaphor and anthropomorphic language,” the medieval Christian would have said, “But not all language in the Psalms is metaphorical, and we all know that the earth is at the center—get back to reality, Buster!” [1991:59-60]

The point is, then, that we all bring our own sense of reality to the table when we inspect Scripture, we bring with us what “we all know.” And we are unaware of the ways in which our version of reality is partial and even entirely false. Our bells and whistles, our horns and sirens may in fact may not be G-d’s bells and whistles, horns and sirens at all.

This is unsettling, I know, but it should cure us of absolutism, that rock-hard place of certitude from which we declare the truth to others and from which we expose and attack all viewpoints which differ from our own.

I suggest that a healthy dose of self-awareness can and indeed should cure us of such absolutism. But for those willing to part from this fetish, three treasures are waiting. The first is a new humility, the second is a new openness to new ideas, and the third is a new freedom. Sadly, in the



area of hermeneutics, as in other areas, evangelicals are often lacking in all three of these: we evidence stridency, judgmentalism and pride instead of humility, defensiveness and factionalizing instead of openness to new ideas, and a fortress mentality within our own shrinking circles of association instead of freedom.

We can and should move from defensiveness to dependence. It is time to depend more upon the Spirit and less upon our constructs about bibliology.

One more example. I know a man who is as Sefardic Rabbi, complete with credentials. He came to faith in Yeshua about fifteen years ago while living in B'nei Brak. The modes of argument that won him to faith are for people like us a hermeneutical nightmare. For example, in the beginning of the gospel of John we read, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with G-d and the Word was G-d. But what does this mean.

My friend knows what this means because the one who witnessed to him showed him. The first word in the beginning of the Bible is "b'reishit" which begins with the letters beit, reish and aleph. Those three letters stand for "ben," "ruach" and "av," Son, Spirit and Father. For my Sephardic friend this is clearly the meaning of the phrase "in the beginning was the Word-the Son."

Now for us, this is horrid hermeneutics. But are we prepared to realize that the Holy Spirit can use such evidentiary approaches with people for whom they have credibility due to their own cultural assumptions, like my mystically oriented friend? Or does our evangelical system demand that we say, "No! G-d would never use such a hermeneutical approach. He can and will only use grammatical historical exegesis." Oh really? Where does he use that approach in the Bible?

In my major research project I discovered the open secret that the Apostles do not use the grammatical historical method in approaching Scripture. Richard Longenecker recognizes this, James deYoung and Sarah Hurty recognize it as well. Dallas Seminary educated deYoung, who taught grammatical historical exegesis for many years, points out in his book *Beyond the Obvious* that not only did the apostles not use this approach which evangelicals declare a non-negotiable; the approaches they did use are generally discounted by evangelicals. In other words we ground our faith on doctrine arrived at through hermeneutical methods we condemn, while failing to employ the hermeneutical approaches used to establish the foundations of our faith.

Richard Longenecker gets around this conundrum by stating that the Apostles were special cases who, by virtue of their encounter with the risen Messiah, were authorized to use approaches to Scripture denied to the rest of us., Richard B. Hays finds this most unsatisfactory stating, "I would contend, however, that the position recommended by Longenecker is inherently unstable: it commits us to a peculiar intellectual schizophrenia in which we arbitrarily grant privileged status to past interpretations that we deem unjustifiable with regard to normal, sober hermeneutical canons. (Let us not deceive ourselves about this: Paul would flunk our introductory exegesis courses) (1989:181).

In this dramatic fashion he states what he skillfully demonstrates throughout his masterful book *Echoes of Scripture in the Writings of Paul*, that Paul did not use a historical grammatical approach to his exegesis of Older Testament texts. Contra Longenecker and in agreement with deYoung and Hurty, Hays contends that we must also make Paul's methods our own: "There is no possibility of accepting Paul's message while simultaneously rejecting the legitimacy of the scriptural interpretation that sustains it. . . . If . . . his material claims are in any sense true, then we must go back and learn from him how to read Scripture (1989:182).

Buy I am getting a bit ahead of myself here. For now the principle is this: I suggest we need to consider moving from defending our approach to Scripture, fixating on our contraption-like explanations, moving toward a greater freedom of approach and a dependence upon G-d's empowerment of that Scripture as we seek to honor Messiah in the power of the Spirit.

### **Vignette Number Five - Superman in the Manger**

When I was first a believer and attended the Gospel Tabernacle Church, there was a wonderful man there named Jack, an ex-smuggler who was wanted by Interpol, but who had mightily come to faith, worked with Open Air Campaigners, an evangelistic street ministry, and also taught the Hispanic kids in the church Sunday School. This church was located near the Hell's Kitchen area of Manhattan, at 44<sup>th</sup> Street and Eighth Avenue, a very needy neighborhood with Broadway Theaters to the east of it and tenements to the west,. Jack taught the tenement kids.

One day I overheard him talking about Jesus. (I don't think he knew the word "Yeshua")! He was telling a group of wide-eyed kids that because Jesus was the perfect man, Jack was quite convinced that he was probably the strongest man that ever lived, stronger than any circus strong man, stronger even than superman. Not only that, Jack said that when he was lying in the manger, Jesus was probably thinking about how he created the stars and the entire universe! Even though I was the new kid on the block, something about this didn't ring true for me-I expect the same is true for the rest of you.

What was wrong? Jack was making a common mistake. He was letting Yeshua's deity eclipse his true humanity. Jack's Jesus was not bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, but someone who was just G-d in a man suit. He left no room at all for Yeshua's true humanity and for the ordinary process of growth that he had to undergo. Jack's view left out the Yeshua who being found in human form humbled himself and took on the fullness of our humanity, yet without sin. He missed seeing what the writer to the Hebrews saw: that it behooved him to be in all points like as we are, yet without sin, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest to people like us.

What has this to do with hermeneutics? Very much indeed. One of the positive principles I seek to follow in my ongoing attitude toward Scripture is to compare Scripture to the Incarnation. Just as Messiah was fully G-d and fully man-yes truly human-yet without sin, so Scripture is both fully Divine and also truly fully human. It is a human document with all that entails, yet without compromising its divine effectiveness and authority in matters pertaining to our walk with G-d and man. This doctrine of Scripture is not static, but very dynamic. Preserving the full deity and full humanity of the text calls for constant adjustments and vigilance.

This is what is known as an antinomy: a proposition that involves holding two seemingly contradictory truths in tension. Subconsciously, many of us seek to resolve the tension by either swallowing up the divinity of Scripture in its humanity, or swallowing up the humanity of Scripture in its divinity. Neither position is allowable. Both positions are true, and neither should ever be considered apart from the other. The Messiah is truly Deity but no less human; He is truly human but no less Deity. The Scripture is fully divine but no less a human work; it is fully a human work, but no less Divine.

Vignette Number Six - Sometimes the Growing Edge  
is Located at the End of Your Rope

In 1986 I was teaching and studying in Israel under the auspices of Jews for Jesus. I was also seriously contemplating suicide.

Even though I had been a believer for well over two decades, and involved in “ministry” for most of that time, my life was not working. And it wasn’t getting any better but only worse. There were fundamental contradictions in my life for which no solution or resolution could be found. I was very much done: I was planning to check out of the Life Hotel

My family and I were staying in the Old City at Christ Church Hospice. They had a bookstore there, and I borrowed from that store copies of some books, which I read that summer. One was called *Bursting the Wineskins* by Michael Cassidy, a South African Anglican Charismatic. It was his testimony of how he was brought to make greater room in his life for the work of the Spirit. The second was *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster.

As I read Foster, I began to entertain a new thought, a thought that had never occurred to me as a card carrying evangelical, and as a professional religious worker. Here was the thought: perhaps when I spent time in prayer, G-d might have something that He wanted to say. I had accepted the standard evangelical paradigm that stated “In Bible study God speaks to us, and in prayer we speak to God.” But was it possible that G-d might have something to say to me that wasn’t simply in the Book of Books? This was a new thought! A dangerous thought! But I was at a dangerous time in my life. None of the approaches I had employed, not Bible study, not prayer, not fasting, not therapy, had sprung me from the collapsing walls of my personal prison. Perhaps I should try something new.

So with nothing to lose, I began to experiment with a different kind of prayer. Every afternoon we had a break. During that time I would go into the church next door and set up two chairs: one for me to sit in, and the other for the Messiah. Imagining that the Messiah was in that other chair, I simply began to pour out my heart. I had no shopping list-no suggestions as to what He might do for me. I was well beyond that. My life had become so complicated, it was like a know where one cannot even figure out where to begin loosening and untying it. I had no suggestions for him.

During that time I became aware that I needed to seek out and speak to three people. The first was Jack, a man who had been an elder in a house church where I had been involved before moving to California twelve years previously. The awareness that I needed to speak to him first came as the dimmest of intuitions. In a visual image, I saw myself as in an entirely dark cave with no available light-the kind of darkness where one can hold one’s hand six inches before one’s eyes and yet see precisely nothing. Yet, off in the distance is the tiniest pinhole of light. At that point one knows that the only way out of the darkness is to walk toward that light: any other direction is only further into the darkness.

For me, walking toward the light meant going back to New York and seeking out Jack. At the end of my rope and with nothing but my own desperation and an intuition to guide me, I sought him out. It turned out that one year previously, G-d had revealed to his wife and himself the nature of my dilemma, and they had been praying for me. At that point I knew two things: I knew that they had heard from G-d and I knew that in Israel I had heard from G-d, for it was no accident that of all the people I knew on the face of the earth, he was the first person I sought out at this time.

After receiving very specific ministry at that time, the log jam of my life blew apart and everything that had ground to a halt started moving again. I recognized that even though I was in “the religion biz,” that intimacy with G-d had for decades ceased to be the center of my life. I realized that

arguably the reason for the Messiah's coming was to provide the basis for that intimacy, not only in the life to come, but in this life as well. I came to recognize that it was possible to hear from G-d in ways that I formerly had discounted with disdain. And I realized that I knew next to nothing about the Holy Spirit-but I was going to learn! I was learning the lesson that Hamlet taught his friend: "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dream't of in your philosophy, Horatio!"

Why am I telling you this and what does it have to do with hermeneutics? Just this: this transformation of my life and spiritual experience only became possible as I became open to a fundamental shift in understanding. First I needed to come to the unavoidable awareness that my old paradigms weren't working-my old ways of conceiving of and operating my spiritual life were not large enough. In the words of J.B. Phillips, my G-d was too small. Second, I needed to receive credible input from others whose experience was both wider than my own and credible. This was provided by Michael Cassidy, David Watson, Richard Foster, and my friend Jack. Third, I needed to experiment with a new approaches, new paradigms, in order to discover and experience dynamics unavailable to me in my former approaches. This is what happened for me in Israel and has continued to be my experience ever since.

So for all of us. As long as we continue to view standard evangelical models of hermeneutics and of association as being totally adequate and blessedly safe, nothing will change. It is only as we begin to recognize that the truth is bigger than our familiar constructs, that in some manner and to some degree our constructs are just not working, that others are experiencing a greater degree of G-d-given freedom than we are, that there is something new to be discovered which we need to discover, that it is not only O.K., but positively crucial that we experiment with different approaches-it is only as these things occur that we will be in the market for any substantive change.

Perhaps the end of your rope is woven of the awareness that your hermeneutical approaches fail to communicate with Jewish people. Or perhaps one strand of that rope is the awareness that New Testament writers seem more imbued with the Spirit and less concerned with hard-liner rules of Scripture interpretation. Perhaps one strand of your rope is the awareness that standard evangelical approaches to the Scripture tend to disenfranchise the Jewish people and Jewish life. Whatever the strands, it is when you come to the end of your rope and realize that the old approaches are no longer entirely sufficient, that new approaches become possible. And it is only as we tire of the old product that we become customers for the new.

Vignette Number Seven - The Day God Dropped His Standards and Sent Me to Fuller!

In 1989, after a long period of transition, I first entertained the prospect of leaving Jews for Jesus. This came as the result of a period of protracted prayer with the support of select others, during which time what had been subconsciously at work in my life for some time became apparent: G-d had been moving me out of Jews for Jesus for at least three years, but I had been unaware of it until then. In January or February of that year I asked G-d, "Do you have somewhere else you want me to go?" To my astonishment, and through unmistakable means, he made it clear that he wanted me to go to the School of World Mission at Fuller Seminary.

If I had chosen a seminary I would have gone to Trinity. I knew Walter Kaiser, who was the Dean there at the time. And Trinity was "safer." It had a more standard-brand evangelical image, and if

was going to go anywhere, it would have been there. But G-d had another idea-he wanted me to go to Fuller.

What had happened here? Had G-d gone liberal? Not exactly.

In point of fact, Fuller has been very good for me. It was not at all the dangerous place I expected. Indeed, my relational, intellectual, academic and spiritual life blossomed there.

What's my point? Just this: if I had simply maintained my old categories of "conservative," which means good, godly, and safe, versus "liberal," which means bad, ungodly and dangerous, I would have missed out on one of the most fruitful and fulfilling periods in my entire life. In fact, I would have missed out on the will of G-d.

I think it is past time for us to retire the terms conservative and liberal. I dare say that of us have found that there are statements by conservative theologians that we cannot agree with, and there are statements by so-called liberals that make us want to stand up and cheer. When I worked with Jews for Jesus, Paul Van Buren was entirely off limits, Now I read some of his stuff and underline it complete with exclamation points and hosannas in the margins! Is it because I have defected from the faith? Not exactly. It is because I have discovered that the old categories are in some ways misleading.

I don't remember where I heard this nor from whom, but a seminary professor remarked to me a couple of years ago that in point of fact, the professors in various seminaries are often interchangeable-that their areas of agreement far outweigh their areas of disagreement, even where their schools are in strongly divergent camps.

In my two years of intensive hermeneutics research I discovered that I could not agree with some of the positions held by evangelical icons, like my friend Walter Kaiser. On the other hand, reading Richard Hays on Paul's use of the Older Testament was thrilling! "It ain't necessarily so! It ain't necessarily so! The things that you're liable to think about Liberals, it ain't necessarily so!"

Not only are G-d's ways not like our ways: more than we care to admit, his categories are not like our categories, and the sooner we recognize that, the sooner we will move closer to his will and his ways.

## **Vignette Number Eight - Andrew Murray, Apartheid, and Me**

This vignette is closely related to the previous one, but explores a necessary corollary.

For decades in my life as a believer I could only read authors with whom I agreed. There were safe authors and safe publishers. InterVarsity was good, Fortress Press was bad. Walter Kaiser was good, Karl Barth was bad. Evangelical was good. Pentecostal was bad. And if I ever read a book by someone where I read something I considered really off-base, I not only could not read the rest of the book, I would avoid reading anything else by that author.

An example, the church where I first attended was fundamentalist, and had a large Christian bookstore next door. For people who know me well, that should come as no surprise-I love books. Andrew Murray was one of the authors some of the old saints around there read. However, one day, one of my mentors there told me that Andrew Murray was a South African who had been involved in the apartheid system. I realize now that this could not be true as apartheid became a state policy after Murray was already dead. At any rate, once I heard that Murray had been involved in this, I could no longer read anything written by him.

It sounds foolish now, certainly so. But everything was very categorical. There were good authors and bad authors. There was truth and there was error. There was safe and dangerous. And very little in between.

Whether this was due to my own neuroses, to my evangelical conditioning, or to a combination of the two, I leave it to you to judge. But I am sure all of us have encountered this mentality of being warned away from certain ideas, schools, authors and associations, and shunted over toward others, as if truth, safety and growth were simply a matter of reading only the “right” authors and going to the “right” schools. It’s not at all so simple. Not only are G-d’s ways not like our ways: more than we care to admit, his categories are not ours, and the sooner we recognize that, the sooner we will move closer to his will and his ways.

## **Vignette Number Nine - Finding the Right Vessel for Kosher Wine**

It is one thing to be told something. It is another to really hear it. It is yet a third thing to discover something for oneself. Undoubtedly this last alternative makes the most indelible impression. We learn best what we discover for ourselves.

Although I had been told for a long time that much Christian theologizing disenfranchises the Jewish people, it has been quite another thing to discover this for myself. As with most of you here, I really heard this message loud and clear in R.K. Soulen’s *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, but as I’ve been spending time researching hermeneutics and the priesthood in the Older and New Testaments, the scope of Christian supersessionism and the reality of unaddressed particularities of the Messianic Jewish community have hit me with tremendous force.

Let’s look first at the depth and nuances of Christian supersessionism.

Most Christian theologizing and hermeneutics ignores the future of Israel. But this problem is much deeper than a bad attitude toward Jews. Rather, Christian hermeneutics and theologizing fails to perceive that community and nationality of any kind is of any lasting significance.

In part this is due to the monolithically individualistic worldview of western Christian theologizing. In Christian thought, the church is almost always viewed as being comprised of individuals from every people, tongue, tribe and nation, but the prevailing assumption is that once within the church, matters of national origin and ethnic identity are secondary. “Once you came from the Rumanian people, but now you are a Christian and that’s really all that matters, isn’t it?” Not only that, but maintaining one’s sense of ethnic or national particularity is regarded as an impediment to the kind of unity and perfection toward which God is moving the church.

We have all heard statements such as “We are all one in Christ Jesus, and isn’t that wonderful? Let’s be sure not to rebuild the middle wall of partition!” Such comments ignore the fact that Paul is arguing not against ethnic particularism, but against ethnic superiority and a denial of status on the basis of national origin.

In point of fact, national particularity remains a reality throughout the eschaton, a fact most commentators ignore because they simply do not see it. And the reason they do not see it is that it is not part of their worldview. Consider, for example, the repeated statements in the Book of Revelation indicating the presence of nations in the eschaton. [5:9; 7:9; 13:7; 14:6; 15:3-4; 17:15; 21:24, 26; 22:2]. In general, commentators have no trouble seeing these references as referring to individuals from various nations. But western Christian commentators fail to consider that G-d is talking about various peoples as collective entities. Most translations of Rev 21:3 favor the less

likely singular reference to “people” rather than the better attested and more theologically pregnant translation, “See, the home of G-d is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their G-d; they will be his peoples” [NRSV].

It is in the context of this ethnic diversity into the eschaton that G-d’s particular dealings with the nation of Israel maintain their rightful place in our theological thinking. Most Christian theologizing has no room for the nation of Israel in part because of blindness to the reality of collective ethnic identity, or nationhood, into the eschaton. The problem is one of an ecclesiology that effectively negates ethnic particularity across the board.

Additionally, we owe to R.K. Soulen a debt of gratitude for pointing out to us the reality and nature of Christian disenfranchisement of the people of Israel in particular.

Consequently, on two levels, the general and the particular, the people of Israel disappear from view. There are more levels as well, but that is beyond the scope of this presentation.

Having looked at the reality of Christian supersessionism, let’s look briefly at the reality of how the particularities of the Messianic Movements concern are systemically neglected in Christian theologizing and hermeneutics. Note that I said “systemically” rather than “systematically.” The latter term would have indicated that there exists a purposeful and planned neglect of Messianic Jewish concerns in Christian theologizing and hermeneutics. That is not my contention. Rather I believe that Christian theologizing and hermeneutics as a system cannot meet our communal needs.

My studies in hermeneutics have demonstrated that Christian hermeneutics and theology does not come up with Jewish answers because it does not ask Jewish questions. It is only as we come to the Scripture with our particular experiences as a people, our own perspective and our own questions, that we will find our answers and even take note of those aspects of the text which address those concerns.

A case in point came to my attention as I was reading two volumes on Hermeneutics by Dr. John Goldingay, who teaches at Fuller Seminary’s School of Theology.

Goldingay quotes St. Augustine of Hippo when he laments the way people can argue about interpretation of scripture, “not because they are godly and have seen in your servant’s heart what they say, but rather they are proud and have not considered Moses’ meaning but only love their own-not because it is true but because it is their own” (Confessions XII.25, quoted in Goldingay 1994:91). This brings to mind a sobering question: To what extent do Reformed Theology, Dispensationalism, and other Christian theologies hear only the echoes of their own theological voices when they study the Torah, rather than really hearing the voice of Moses? And to what extent has the historic Jewish community heard the voice of Moses more faithfully than they have? This is a question of great import to us as Messianic Jews-a question others will neither think of nor ask.

Here is our question on this matter: Is it conceivable that Moses believed that he was writing for an audience which would eventually rightly view the commandments of Torah as no longer binding? And if he never imagined this, is Reformed Theology or Dispensationalism right to interpret his texts in this manner?

These are questions that Messianic Jews are sensitive to but which do not exist for most evangelical scholars. And because the questions are not real to them, they do not devise rules and approaches to go after the answers.

Only our own hermeneutic will be a fit vessel for our particular kosher wine.

## **Vignette Number Ten - Of Dirty Words and Clean Theology**

I don't know about you, but I am very much different from the person than I was years ago. At one time I reacted to charismatic people as if they were an infectious fungus-you'd better keep your distance. Now I regularly pray for the sick and seek guidance from God when counseling people. Once I couldn't read a book unless I was first certain that I would find nothing disagreeable in it. Now I read widely and rejoice in the truth wherever it is found, separating the wheat from the chaff.

I have begun to learn by experience what the writer to the Hebrews meant when he described mature people as those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil [5:14].

Through my readings and considerations I have gone through some paradigm shifts, some fundamental changes in perspective. I spoke of one of these when I described how G-d brought to my attention the fact that I didn't know what it meant to listen when I prayed, and I had long before ceased pursuing intimacy with G-d.

Recently I have even begun exploring another theological avenue I thought I would never investigate, something which includes the "D" word a very dirty word with most people I know, and a word I seldom spoke. I have begun reading progressive dispensationalists, especially Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock. Why is this? Is it because I have been told "This is safe for you to investigate?" No, not at all. It is because my investigations have created in me a hunger to discover theological systems that leave greater room for G-d's dealings with the Jewish people. I still cannot take classic dispensationalism seriously. I find the system too arbitrary and categorical. But these people who call themselves progressive dispensationalists have also seen the deficiencies in the system they inherited, and while seeking to avoid what is evil, are trying to hold fast to that which is good. And they have made some adjustments and additions that seem to me to give better answers than other theological perspectives I been encountering.

You see, what I am saying here is that I allowed myself to get dissatisfied-I allowed myself to investigate widely, to discover truth and error. And continuing to seek a better expression of the truth has brought me into territory that even I myself had stigmatized. But that is O.K. And I may move beyond this particular camp after finding it inadequate. That is O.K. too. And I may pick up something here, and combine it with aspects of Jewish theology I pick up from people like Michael Wyschogrod. That too is O.K.

Paul Hiebert calls this being a critical realist: a person who, while holding to some model of reality, knows that G-d's reality is bigger and in some respect other than his own human approximation. So the process of learning involves checking our personal models of reality against the data we receive, constantly adjusting-fine tuning our model of reality so that increasingly what we hold to be true more closely matches reality as G-d sees it.

We need to learn that as beloved as our constructs are, they are not themselves reality-they are only our educated guesses. And sometimes we can get so used to seeing things a certain way, we fail to see reality as it is.

I am reminded of a friend I had when I was first a believer. George lived with his parents in the same Brooklyn apartment building as my parents and I. Due apparently to either polio or a deformed hip, George's mother had a very pronounced limp. One day, when we were both about



twenty years of age, he was talking with me about his family, and about how his parents met and married. He mentioned that his mother's family had been very grateful that his father had married her. I responded, "Well that's not hard to understand, considering the fact she was crippled and all." To this he turned to me in shock and said, "What?" It turned out that he was unaware of his mother's limp-something anyone else could see from three blocks away.

He had been living with his mother all his life, but he had never come to terms with the fact that she had a limp. He simply did not see it!

This is a true story. And equally true is the fact that our hermeneutical approaches, attitudes and circles of association may also have a limp, but we have gotten used to not seeing it.

Let's not be afraid to take another look at what we have been living with for so long. And let us also not be afraid to look beyond our familiar approaches. We just may discover transforming truth in unexpected ways and unexpected places.

It happens to me all the time!

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