

*This article originally appeared in *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 5, no. 1 (2012): 144-157.

“Searching for a Transformative Hermeneutic”

Leslie T. Hardin

Professor of New Testament
Johnson University Florida

At the heart of the hermeneutical endeavor is a desire to hold in balance two aspects of the Word of God: its historical context and its contemporary significance. The tension between what the text *said* and what it now *says*, what it *meant* and what it now *means*, has occupied our reading of Scripture since the Ten Commandments were written. The modern science of hermeneutics calls these two poles *exegesis* and *application*. Both are necessary, and both require difficult, painstaking work. The further we move chronologically away from the text, the more necessary it becomes to orient ourselves to the author’s culture, language, historical background, and readership in order to get a proper grasp on his intended meaning. Once the historical facts have been uncovered, the interpreter must then press forward, for the text’s historical realities must be allowed to address contemporary situations of a similar nature.

Finding the accurate balance and intersection of these two tasks has always proven difficult for me. I find that the modern structures embedded within our academic disciplines push us toward one end of the spectrum or the other. Anthony Thiselton, in his monumental *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, notes how these “two horizons” (that of the ancient text and that of the modern reader) are inherently separated from one another in modern academic disciplines. “If the peculiarities of the ‘first’ horizon of the biblical text provide a primary focus for biblical specialists,” he says, “the particularities of the ‘second’ horizon of present situations and readers offer a primary focus for pastoral specialists.”¹ These specializations can lead to isolation and prevent us (either through some explicit limitations set by editors or by some assumed pressure within the discipline) from crossing boundaries to entertain how one horizon might help the other to allow the Spirit of God to speak through his Word.

Perhaps the problem lies not with our specializations, but rather with our hermeneutic. For nearly two centuries the historical-grammatical approach has dominated (in an exclusive way) the reading of Scripture. But its weaknesses are coming more and more into view, and with the help of some ancient interpreters and forerunners in the faith, the spiritual reading of Scripture is reclaiming its rightful place in the life of the church and the academy. Spiritual reading is not without its inadequacies, however, and those in the historical-grammatical camp continually caution us to spurn subjective interpretations for those that are more objective and scientific. At the end of the day, I find both approaches necessary. One gets me to the historical realities of the *ancient* world while the other affords ancient authors opportunities to speak in the *modern*.

This paper explores whether or not it’s possible to hold these two extremes in balance—to see if we can put the two horizons together and allow the historical to speak to the contemporary, to allow the Spirit to have His say *through* the ancient text *into* the modern

¹ Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 556.

context. In short, I want to explore a methodology for a hermeneutic that is at its core *transformative*—that embraces both historical investigation and contemporary significance, then propels them both toward a third horizon: spiritual transformation. In order to ensure that we reach our intended destination, we must first consult our historical map to understand how we arrived at our present location.

The State of Modern Hermeneutics

The structures and procedures used to propagate the advanced study of Scripture have traditionally been relegated to the seminary. As I followed my calling to ministry, I needed training in the advanced study of Scripture to know what the text *really says*, and then have the means to communicate it to the congregation. So I went to seminary and found the training that I needed. I learned hermeneutics and exegesis, linguistics, grammar, syntax, and all the intricacies of the historical-grammatical approach. Texts like L. Berkhof's *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* and Bernard Ramm's *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* were formative for me, as was Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Works by literary critics such as Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III helped me to appreciate the beauty of the text.² These works (and others) helped me to focus in on the historical realities of the text and build a methodical, scientific approach to the study of Scripture. By and large, however, these texts (and their modern descendants³), while giving nod to the pragmatic relevance of the Scriptures for the modern reader, occupy themselves primarily with historical and literary types of criticism. Most give assent to the role of the Spirit in the interpretation of the Word, but few give that subject systematic treatment. The methodology I learned was entrenched in the historical-grammatical approach.

This kind of scientific and methodical approach to the interpretation of Holy Writ had been growing in our academic structures for some time. When the Supreme Court ruled that the Establishment clause does not prohibit study of the New Testament as literature in the state-funded universities, it ushered in an explosion of posts in biblical studies in those institutions in the 1960's and 1970's.⁴ Combined with the Vatican II position that the historical-critical method is the authoritative interpretive approach,⁵ it set the stage for the globalization of academic

² Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); see also *The Literary Study Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Philip Graham Ryken (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2007); Tremper Longman, III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, vol. 3, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

³ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction To Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991); Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

⁴ See Charles H. Cosgrove, "A History of New Testament Studies in the Twentieth Century," *Review and Expositor* 96 (1999): 369-381.

⁵ See The Pontifical Biblical Commission's treatise, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 500: "The historical-critical method is the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts. Holy Scripture, inasmuch as it is the 'Word of God in human language,' has been composed by human authors in all its various parts and in all the sources that lie behind them. Because of this, its proper understanding not only admits the use of this method,

studies in a single vein which then rose to prominence in our day as the most scientific study of the Word of God ever systematized.⁶ This scientific approach dominated the hermeneutical landscape in recent times, but admittedly from a genuine desire by the people of God to uncover the text's realities.

Over the last few decades, however, many within the academy are beginning to notice that it's not working. The historical-grammatical approach leads to a *knowledge* of the text, but often simply for knowledge's sake, and in this Paul's counsel is accurate: "Knowledge puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1). Simply dealing with the text doesn't guarantee that the interpreter will be *transformed* by the text (or rather by the Spirit of God through His counsel). The structures and methods used to interpret the Bible are prone to a knowledge-based elitism. It has the danger of dominating the cognitive sphere alone while ignoring the affective and behavioral realms.

Consider J. L. Houlden's comment about the state of New Testament studies among the universities in Great Britain. Speaking for the University of London's Ethel M. Wood Lecture, Houlden made the following remark in the presence of his peers and colleagues in biblical studies: "Go to any gathering of British New Testament scholars, and you would be hard put to it, not only to distinguish denominational loyalties, but also to tell Christian believers from non-believers."⁷ Houlden's speech wholly intended to demonstrate that the establishment of nearly seventy positions in the study of the New Testament in the universities in Great Britain had failed to solicit the lifestyle results that one would expect from those devoted to the study of the Word of God. Scot McKnight quips that his academic training has conditioned him to think of the text this way, and that "Scripture, I sometimes have to tell myself, is not designed just to be exegeted and probed and pulled apart until it yields its (gnostic-like) secrets to those who know its languages and its interpretive traditions and who can then divulge their gleanings behind pulpits on Sunday mornings or in monographs and academic journals (very few care to read)."⁸ The problem is not limited to North America or to Western industrialized societies either. Elsa Tamez of the Latin American Biblical University notes that seminarians schooled in the historical-grammatical approach in Latin America demonstrate a marked disparity in spirituality from those in the church community and tend to place scholarship above the spiritual formation of themselves and their parishioners.⁹

In reaction to those who espouse a purely exegetical and scientific approach to study of Scripture emerged an entire set of disciplines within the field that sought to address concerns at the other end of the spectrum: contemporary significance. They sought modern application of the divine oracles without historical investigation. Chief among them were the proponents of reader-

but actually requires it" (emphasis mine). For a survey of the interpretation of the Bible in Roman Catholicism see John D. Morrison, "The Nature of Holy Scripture in Roman Catholic Discussion from Vatican II to the New Catechism," in *Trinity Journal* 24 (2003): 259-282.

⁶ Bruce Waltke, "Exegesis and the Spiritual Life: Theology as Spiritual Formation," *Crux* 30, no. 3 (1994), 29 also attributes the "emphasis on unaided human reason and the scientific method" embedded within the Enlightenment as a contributing factor to the rise of the historical-grammatical approach.

⁷ J. L. Houlden, "Enlightenment, Establishment and the Word" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 78 (2000): 79.

⁸ Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 147.

⁹ Elsa Tamez, "Spiritual Formation and Critical Study of the Bible: A Case Study," in *Ministerial Formation* 47 (1989): 21-25.

response criticism. Originating in part in the works of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, reader-response theory claims that no meaning can be extracted from the text, only brought to the text by the reader.¹⁰ As it applies to biblical studies, the meaning of any portion of Scripture and the manner in which the Spirit leads to transformation is void of any historical consideration, for the reader cannot ultimately know what the author meant to say. The more popular expressions of reader-response criticism are the small-group studies and serendipitous spiritualities that mostly ignore the importance of historical investigation for contemporary significance and application. The question, “What do you think it means?”—or its selfish cousin, “What does this mean *to you*?”—is inherently oblivious to the historical context of the given passage.

Embedded within these kinds of approaches to Scripture is a genuine desire for contemporary significance, a desire to know, not only what the text said in the first century A.D., or the 8th century B.C., but rather what those millennia-old oracles have to do with the twenty-first century. Toward that end, they are good. They help us wrestle with the “living” Word of God (Heb. 4:12). But like the historical-grammatical approach, focus on one aspect of interpretation to the exclusion of the other leads to its own set of problems—quoting the Scriptures out of context, applying them to situations they were never meant to address, and manipulating the meaning for personal gain—all under an infallible, unquestionable umbrella: “That’s how the Spirit led me to understand it.”

Searching for a Transformative Hermeneutic

These two ends of the spectrum—historical investigation and contemporary significance—have dominated the recent landscape of Scripture study. While there are dangers inherent at both ends, these two approaches to Scripture are seeking something important. The one seeks to know what the text *said*, the other what it *says*. The one seeks to know what the text *meant back then* and the other what it *means today*. The one is concerned with historical investigation, the other with contemporary significance.

Is there a way to put the two together? Can we find a mediating approach, one that fully embraces *both* ends of the spectrum, or rather holds them in balance with one another? I think there is, and the key to holding them in balance is the *goal* of Scripture study: Spiritual transformation.

The goal of Scripture study is *transformation*—transformation of the heart, mind, and will to the desires and goals of God, in praise of Christ, through the assistance of the Spirit. I recently read the educational philosophy of one of my colleagues (a biblical studies professor at a Christian university) who described the goal of biblical studies in the academy as preparing and enabling the student to do more seminary-level biblical studies. But this is not how Paul saw it. For Paul, the study of Scripture was to lead to holiness and righteousness. He told the Philippians that their love was to grow in knowledge (*epignōsis*, “intellectual perception”) and depth of insight (*aisthēsis*, “insight” or “experience”)¹¹ so that they may be able to discern right from

¹⁰ See Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Methuen, Inc, 1984), 53-106. The most notable proponent for our purposes is Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 43. Fish states at the very outset his belief that “the reader’s response is not *to* the meaning; it *is* the meaning” (p. 3, emphasis his).

¹¹ “*aisthēsis*,” in W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker’s *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Univeristy

wrong and appear before Christ pure and blameless, filled with righteousness (Phil. 1:9-11). Paul believed that the Scriptures were “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16), a “tutor” (*paidagōgos*, Gal. 3:24) to educate us and protect us, and that they are inherently “spiritual” (Rom. 7:14). In this he held the view of his Lord, who counseled us to “Search the Scriptures, for in them you seem to have life” (John 5:39; translation mine).

If the goal of Bible study is transformation, then it’s time we begin exploring whether or not a transformative hermeneutic is feasible for both church and academy, and what such a hermeneutic might entail. Throughout history our fathers have counseled us to interpret Scripture in a way that is sensitive to both historical investigation and contemporary significance—one that doesn’t neglect either, but rather includes them both.¹²

What does a transformative hermeneutic require? At least four components emerge from a survey of the pertinent literature:

1. *Openness*

Several decades ago the Trappist monk Thomas Merton penned a tiny book entitled *Opening the Bible*. In the opening pages of the book Merton proposed that anyone who comes to the text asking, “What is this book?” is immediately confronted by the question, “Who is this that reads it?”¹³ He believed that the Bible “challenges the reader and demands of him a personal engagement, a decision and commitment of his freedom, a judgment regarding an ultimate question.”¹⁴ In other words, a way of reading the Bible that leads to transformation is one that *begins* with an openness to what the Spirit wants to do in a person *through* those Scriptures. Merton was an example of his own advice, for even after writing the manuscript of *Opening the Bible*, he remarked, “I sincerely doubt my own capacity to write anything worthwhile on the Bible. I am not a pro.”¹⁵ This kind of humility, openness, and receptivity is essential for a transformative hermeneutic.

John Goldingay, in his *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*, lists a number of areas that this “openness” can aid in the spirituality of hermeneutics, in creating within the reader of Scripture a demeanor which allows the text to penetrate not only the mind but also the heart. The interpreter is counseled to begin by becoming aware of his own needs and wants, of the world around him, and his vested interests which may hinder his listening to the Spirit through the text. The interpreter is to be “open and expectant” to fresh readings of the text, to the questions it

of Chicago Press, 2000), 25; cf. Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1987), 66-67.

¹² For example, Origen’s allegorical method was far from “allegorizing” (i.e., making up meanings that weren’t latent within the text), but instead drew upon the author’s intended meaning to then extract spiritual principles. His blending of original language work and the practical benefits of it are fully on display in his *Homily 27 on Numbers*. So also Augustine, who distinguished between the *ipsissima verba* (“actual words”) and the *ipsissima vox* (“authentic voice”) of Scripture: “the real requisite in order to get at the knowledge of the truth is just to make sure of the things really meant, whatever may be the precise words in which they happen to be expressed” (*Harmony of the Gospels* 2.12.27-28).

¹³ Merton, *Opening the Bible*, 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁵ Robert E. Stone, II, “Introduction,” to *Opening the Bible*, 7.

raises (for both the individual and the believing community), to the costly demands of obedience the text calls for, and to the impact of the text on one's entire being rather than just the mind. Goldingay concludes, "Remember that freshness of approach—not inventiveness but openness and expectancy—is of key importance in the Bible student."¹⁶

This openness comes neither easily nor naturally. Our tendency is to read with control. Robert Mulholland observes that we tend to read the text either to gain information or to control it for our own personal gain.¹⁷ He notes that "the text is an object 'out there' for us to control and/or manipulate according to our own purposes, intentions, or desires."¹⁸ Eugene Peterson calls attention to our tendency to personalize our reading of the text around "my Holy Wants, my Holy Needs, and my Holy Feelings."¹⁹ A way of reading the Bible that leads to transformation begins with an understanding of these weaknesses and begins with an open heart and mind—open not to radical and heretical ideas, but rather to the possibility of "knowing in wonder" instead of "knowing in power."²⁰ This openness, or receptivity, is one of the primary attitudes necessary for a proper accommodation of the Spirit's influence. It is the openness to being formed *by* the text rather than *manipulating* the text for one's own personal agenda.

2. Historical Investigation

Openness run amok, however, can lead to heresy. Opening ourselves to the leading of the Spirit also opens us to the possibility of being led by the spirits. Because we are called to "test the spirits" (1 John 4:1), there are those standing in the wings begging us not to abandon historical investigation. Though they understand our desire for personal transformation through the Word, they beseech us to give at least some consideration to an *informed* understanding of the world in which the biblical text is set.

So as I begin reading Galatians, I must do some historical investigation to determine whether "works of the law" refers to the commands laid down in the Old Testament or to boundary-marking practices which set Jews apart from Gentiles. Jesus is the "Word" (*logos*, John 1:1, 14) which "speaks" in my life. But historical investigation may reveal that *logos* is not a term of speech-act, but may also reflect either a substitute for the name of God in the Aramaic Targums or the all-pervading essence of the Gnostic-Greek universe. Linguistic studies will help me understand whether "faith" is a "gift of God" (as some English versions of Eph. 2:8 imply) or not (as the Greek syntax bears out).²¹ Historical and linguistic studies cannot be abandoned, for they help to guide us into what is actually true about the text.

¹⁶ John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 283-287.

¹⁷ M. Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1985), 21-25, 49-53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁹ Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 31-35

²⁰ Waltke, "Exegesis and the Spiritual Life," 31.

²¹ The neuter term *touto* ("this") matches neither *charis* ("grace," feminine), nor *pistis* ("faith," feminine), but only the *dōra* ("gift," neuter), implying that what is bestowed upon us freely by God is not faith, but the entire blessing of being offered grace through faith in Christ Jesus.

3. *The Involvement of the Holy Spirit*

Which begs the question: what is the Holy Spirit's role in all of this? A transformative hermeneutic is certainly one in which the Spirit takes the lead and we keep in step (Gal. 5:25). What, then, is the role and leadership of the Spirit in a method of interpreting the text that explicitly seeks integration of the soul to the Spirit?

The Old written Covenant was a system of rules and codes that were carved on tablets of stone, and all of Old Covenant history supports Paul's claim that, void of the Spirit, it only brought death and condemnation (2 Cor. 3:7). When the text is read void of the Spirit, there is a veil that covers the mind of the reader, making the mind dull to the inherent truth of God (2 Cor. 3:12-14). "The *gramma* kills," he says, "but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6). When the text is read with the aid of the Spirit the veil is taken away and the Spirit begins to transform the reader into the likeness of Christ (2 Cor. 3:16-18).

A quick glance at the teaching of the Spirit's role in the New Testament reveals that it is primarily about leading us into the truth of God found in Christ, and leading us to knowledge and understanding of His will. Jesus describes Him as the "Spirit of truth" (John 14:17, 15:26), and describes His role as teaching us all things (John 14:26), guiding us into all truth (John 16:13), and convicting us of guilt, sin, and judgment—all of which has righteousness as its goal (John 16:8-9). Paul confirms these things, telling us that the Spirit reveals wisdom (1 Cor. 2:6-10) and is given that we might understand the things of God (1 Cor. 2:12). He works these things in us, not for His own self-glorification, but to bring righteousness (2 Cor. 3:9), life, and peace (Rom. 8:6). All of this is commensurate with Isaiah's description of Him as the "Spirit of wisdom, and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the spirit of knowledge" who works in righteousness and justice (Isaiah 11:2-5).

Any method of interpreting Scripture that has transformation as its goal must include the involvement of the Spirit. That the Spirit's role is to guide us into truth and knowledge keeps us firmly anchored in historical investigation, to know exactly what "truth" Paul, or Luke, or Jesus is speaking. So also the Spirit's role to produce within us righteousness, life, and peace suggests that our interpretations of Scripture must go beyond mere historical investigation and consider how the Spirit is using the very words of life to affix his signature upon the interpreter's heart and mind. "The object of reading the Bible is that we should proceed from a discovery of what the text says to where we seize and are grasped by its truth and its consequences for life and ministry. We do not read the text out of mere historical interest but for purposes of transformation, in order that the Scriptures might become a revelatory text for us. The Spirit must be at work for this to happen."²²

Paul cautioned the Galatians that any life void of the Spirit only leads to acts of idolatry, hatred, discord, jealousy, selfishness, dissention, and factions ("and such"; Gal. 5:19-21). Life which includes the Spirit leads to a disposition of love, peace, and goodness (Gal. 5:22-23). The same is equally true for our hermeneutic.

²² Clark Pinnock, "The Role of the Spirit in Interpretation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36 (Dec. 1993), 493. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 235, notes for those interpreting for preaching and teaching, that "we must in all good conscience point to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit as the source of any confidence that we might have in our message even after we have acted most responsibly in the study and preparation of the text for proclamation."

4. Contextualization

The final component in our proposed transformative hermeneutic is that of “contextualization.”²³ Contextualization is more than just application. Application, as a general rule, takes the principle that is handed down by a certain text and applies that *principle* to a generic situation that may or may not reflect the original context of the pericope or saying. For example, Jesus’ statement that “where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them” (Matt. 18:20) is often applied to worship: where two or three believers are gathered to sing praise to Christ, His presence is there. In this case the saying becomes a generic principle that is allowed to speak in a situation that is dissimilar to the original context. Matthew 18 (in which the saying appears) is concerned with discipline among the people of God and whether or not the leadership will retain sins or forgive them. He evokes the Deuteronomic principle of the “testimony of two or three witnesses” (Matt. 18:16) where those who testify before the priests and judges do in fact stand before God (Deut. 19:15-17). As God was present to the priests and judges, so Jesus will be present with church leaders as they adjudicate similar disciplinary matters. Jesus wasn’t addressing worship scenarios in that instance, and the application of “where we gather, Jesus appears,” while certainly noted in other texts, is (in this instance) incommensurate with the context in which the saying is set.

Contextualization incorporates the original meaning by understanding the historical context/narrative (knowing the situation it was intended to address), letting that text find a home within the heart and mind of the believer, and then allowing that text to surface for the purposes of transformation in situations that are commensurate with the original context. In the example mentioned above, a proper contextualization of Jesus’ saying might occur when the church elders gather to determine the fate of a sexually immoral minister. As they gather in the name of Jesus to mete out discipline (seeking restoration and repentance), Christ is there. Application has a tendency to ignore the historical as it seeks to make connections between the words of Scripture and the *sitz im leben* of the reader. Contextualization seeks to apply *more* than just the words, but the entire *contextual sphere* of an author’s intended meaning.

One example from Jesus’ ministry will both illustrate how contextualization works and prevent us from digressing into a long, complicated articulation of contextualization theory. Consider Jesus’ use of the story of Jonah. Jesus used the story of Jonah on at least two separate occasions, each of them in very different ways, but both completely faithful to the Jonah narrative. On one occasion Jesus was pressed for a sign proving his identity (Matt. 12:38). Jesus’ response was that they were wicked for even asking (because he had done numerous miracles to prove his identity already, with little convincing) and that the only sign they would be given was the “sign of Jonah”: like Jonah, Jesus would be down three days and then regurgitated (Matt. 12:39-40). The comparison at that point was only in regard to Jonah’s being swallowed and then spit out. But when the crowds questioned his identity, Jesus used the Jonah story to convict them about their lack of repentance at his preaching. Jonah was a “sign” to the Ninevites, for he

²³ I do not intentionally use this term in the way that missiologists use it, as a way of translating and teaching the Gospel message in language and terms that are native to their target people groups. “Contextualization” in missiology has come to mean “the capacity to respond meaningfully to the gospel within the framework of one’s own situation.” See Dean Gilliland, “Contextualization,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau, Harold Netland, and Charles Van Engen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 225.

(Jonah, the Jewish prophet) preached to the Ninevites (Gentiles) and they repented. Now someone²⁴ greater than Jonah (Jesus, another Jewish prophet) has come preaching, and his own people (Jews) refuse to listen (Luke 11:29-32). In one case Jonah's fish-story provides the point of contextualization, in the other his experience of preaching the truth of God to willing participants. In *both* cases Jesus contextualized his use of the "sign of Jonah" in ways that were completely faithful to the text.

Case Study: The Shema

More theory is probably less helpful at this point. Seeing this hermetic in action may do more to demonstrate the inner workings of a transformative kind of reading than a recitation of esoteric theory. So in the paragraphs that follow I put this transformative hermeneutic into action by submitting Israel's most identity-forming creed to these four components in an attempt to show how the process works.

I had known Israel's creedal prayer, *The Shema* (Deut. 6:4-5), since I was a teenager. I was raised in a Scriptural environment and came to know the basic form: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength." But I came to new understanding of it when I was seriously investigating Jesus' prayer life, trying to determine in what ways my Brother (Heb. 2:17) could be imitated.²⁵ Coming to the ancient text with an open mind, I quickly learned that Jesus, as a faithful Jew, learned this prayer as a child and recited it twice a day for most of his life.²⁶ I began to be open to the question: Should I recite *The Shema* regularly? Perhaps something was out of kilter in my life that required a liturgical adjustment, and reciting *The Shema* might help to align it in a more disciplined way.

So I began to investigate the text. I discovered that *The Shema* is plural in its original Hebrew. A literal translation reads, "Y'all will love Yahweh y'all's God with all y'all's heart, and all y'all's soul, and all y'all's strength." I dug into the Hebrew text and found that the term "one" (*echad*) probably has the sense of "alone" rather than "one": "Listen, Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh *alone*."²⁷ I discovered that the parallelism within the text suggests a love for God that embraces my whole being, that the term "*Shema*" is imperative ("Listen!"), and that the call to "love" has to do less with good emotional feelings toward God and more with demonstrable action in every sphere of life.

Knowing that Jesus also quoted this multiple times during his ministry, I turned to *The Shema* as it appears in the Greek New Testament. I began to discover that Jesus contextualized

²⁴ Literally "something greater than Jonah is here." The term *pleion* is in the neuter. But D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 296-297, argues that the point of comparison for Jesus is with Jonah (the person) and therefore Jesus (the person) is the sign to his generation as Jonah was to the people of Nineveh. The point of comparison is, in this instance, not how each of them was delivered.

²⁵ See my *The Spirituality of Jesus* (Kregel, 2009), 30-37.

²⁶ Although, J. D. G. Dunn, "Prayer," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. J. B. Green and S. McKnight (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), suggests that it may have been as many as three times a day.

²⁷ H. Wolf, "'*ehad*," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, eds. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, and B. K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), I:30; see also N. Lohfink and J. Bergman, "'*echādh*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 1:193-197.

this creed for his own purposes. When questioned by a lawyer about the greatest commandment, Jesus replied in the singular: “You [Mr. Lawyer] are to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and all of your soul, and all of your mind, and all of your strength” (Mk. 12:30 // Matt. 22:37). Jesus also added the words “with your whole mind.” One might argue that, since Jesus changed the pronouns and added this phrase to *The Shema*, He *changed* the words of Scripture to suit his own purposes. But if the entire community was to love God in totality of being, then it stood to reason that every *individual* within that community was called to do the same. If the leader was receptive to the Spirit’s leading, he would soon understand these realities. Jesus’ contextualization of the command was completely in line with the historical realities embedded within the text and a fitting application of the text’s meaning and intent to his own contemporary situation.

Through study the Spirit led me to the truth of this passage and how “creedal” it became for the Jewish people. But on a personal level, the Spirit began to raise the question of whether or not I was loving God with my whole being, and whether that love was being demonstrated with action. Were there areas in my life that weren’t given over to a total devotion to God? Was I really loving God with my whole heart, mind, soul, and strength? I thought so. But in order to facilitate a greater openness to the Spirit’s leading, I undertook a disciplined meditation on *The Shema*. I memorized it again, and began writing it down in meditation at least twice a week—in Hebrew to orient myself with the original form, in Greek to acquaint myself with Jesus’ contextualized form, and in English to make sure that I wasn’t just performing an esoteric vanity exercise.

Over the course of the next two years the historical realities of *The Shema* began to find opportunities to speak into my own modern context. Most notable among them was a discipling situation with a porn-addicted student. Knowing that *The Shema* is about the *whole being* (historical investigation, parallelism) and that God was calling Israel to repent of her idolatry and *act* in ways that demonstrate love for Him (for which the Spirit must be involved), I began to understand how the proclamation of *The Shema* could call a young man to repent of his sin and begin loving God with all of his heart, mind, cell phone, computer, etc. Just as Jesus contextualized it for his own hearers (who needed to be reminded of God’s call to love Him with their *whole being*—which includes individual aspects), so also I found occasion to contextualize it for this young man and call him to repentance. The Spirit helped him in his weakness, for he repented (with demonstrated action) and found grace. On a personal level, recitation of *The Shema* causes me to ask questions of my own devotion. Do I love God with my whole schedule? With my whole wallet? With my whole mind? The historical realities of *The Shema*, once studied and understood, were allowed through the Spirit’s prompting to speak into the modern context of both me and my student and bring about righteousness, holiness, and justice. This is the essence of a transformative hermeneutic.

Conclusion

I am finding these four components—an attitude of openness, serious historical investigation, the involvement of the Holy Spirit, and the contextualization of the text—helpful as I search for a way of reading the Scriptures that is, at its very core, *transformative*. As I come to the text with an open heart and mind, I do the hard work of historical investigation and allow the Spirit of God to use that information to change me—my thinking, demeanor, response, lifestyle, even my theology if necessary—but always in ways that lead to holiness. Once I allow the Spirit to bring to my mind (through the fruit of historical investigation) the meaning of the

text, I then begin to allow that text to rise up and challenge situations in my own life that are similar to those from which the text originated and into which it was spoken.

The church is in desperate need of a transformative hermeneutic. The structures and methodologies inherent within the historical-grammatical approach, while good and necessary in and of themselves, lead to a dry, lifeless interpretation of the living oracles. Perhaps as a reaction to more subjective models which evoke meanings that the author never intended, the historical-grammatical approach took us to the other end of the spectrum. What the church and the academy—yea, even the world—needs now is a transformative hermeneutic, one which involves both historical investigation and contemporary relevance. Only when we, as students of Scripture, open ourselves to the leading of the Spirit of God will we be able to contextualize the Word in ways that are *both* historically accurate and contemporarily significant—ways that speak to both the mind and the heart of the individual and the community of faith—and then lead to righteousness, holiness, and Spiritual maturity.