A Missionary Hermeneutic:
Understanding Scripture in the Light of World Mission

Without doubt the Bible is the basis for missions. But how about the other way around:
Is missions also the basis for the Bible? If this is true then we have a new hermeneutic—“a
missionary hermeneutic.” Without this specific mission pre-understanding much of the
Bible will remain a mystery, or be misinterpreted.

By David J. Hesselgrave

“I’ve never seen it that way before. This
will change the rest of my life.” He was
one of a dozen or so people who came
to the front of the sanctuary after the
morning service. His eyes were moist;
his voice strained; his grip firm and un-
yielding. Briefly he told of the success of
his business and how God had blessed
him and his family. He considered him-
self to be a true Christian and a faithful
steward. But never before had he re-
viewed his commitment to Christ in
quite this way. Never had he “seen it
this way before.” I did not have time to
explain that I had been in Christ’s ser-
vice both at home and abroad for al-
most 50 years, and only recently had I
begun to “see it this way” myself.

Many if not most of us sought to un-
derstand the Christian mission in the
light of Scripture. Look at the relevant
literature. See how it goes about the
task of establishing mission in various
Gospel texts and especially the Great
Commission. See how it proceeds to an
examination of missions in the history
of the early church and especially in the
ministry of the apostle Paul. In more ex-
tended treatments, see how certain au-
thors go back to the call of Abraham
and lay a foundation for Christian mis-
ion in various passages of the Old Test-
ament.

All of that is well and good. And it is
necessary. But what that businessman
saw a few months ago, and what I be-
gan to see several years ago, was some-
ting still different and larger. It had to
do, not just with interpreting mission in
the light of Scripture, but with interpret-
ing Scripture in the light of mission.
Stated another way, it made mission not
just a valid teaching of Scripture, but
also a principle for valid and meaning-
ful interpretation of Scripture.

Hermeneutics—Interpreting Scripture

It should be made clear that, as far as
I know, what I have in mind is not dis-
covetable in any of the standard text-
books on Bible interpretation. In fact, I
recently reviewed one of the finest of
such books for a well-known journal
and in the process discovered that the
word “mission” did not even appear in
the subject index (though it did appear
several times in the text itself).

What is clear in books on hermeneu-
tics is that some basic principles of
interpretation are characterized by “circu-
larity”—that is, they grow out of the
educating of many, many Bible texts and
then become foundational for under-
standing the whole of Scripture. What I
will call a “missionary hermeneutic” is
like that. By whatever name, the mis-
ionary purpose of God is so much an
expression of his nature, so much in evi-
dence in the giving of his revelation,
and so interwoven with the entire fabric
of God’s plan as revealed in the Bible
that it becomes a pre-understanding for
the interpretation of the whole Bible. In
a profound sense, it becomes important
even to an understanding of those bibli-
oc texts that do not deal explicitly with
missions per se.

Succinctly put, a pre-understanding of
the missionary hermeneutic is this: It
is God’s expressed purpose to bring
glory to himself through the creative,
redemptive and punitive work of his
Son, and especially in this age by bring-
ing men and women of all peoples to
reputation and faith in Christ. (It
should be noted that the biblical em-
phasis on God’s glory is not because—
forget the expression—God is the su-
preme egoist, but rather because only
when he is God to all his creatures can
the justice, righteousness and peace for
which the universe waits be finally real-
ized.)

Perhaps the best way to explain what
is involved in the discovery and appli-
cation of this hermeneutical pre-
understanding or principle is to provide
some illustrations. But first let me sim-
ply mention some basic prods to this
way of thinking. No doubt there are
others, but five readily come to mind:

1) As alluded to above, the more that
Bible scholars examine world mission in
the whole of Scripture, the more appar-
tent it becomes that the entire Bible itself
is a missionary book, a missionary
chronicle, a missionary “tract.” It makes
sense, then, to think that in addition to
the historical, literary, theological and
other pre-understandings enumerated
by hermeneuticians, one might be justi-
fied in adding a teleological or “pur-
poseful plan” pre-understanding for un-
derstanding the Scripture. That
purposeful plan is missionary in nature.
(I am not referring to so-called Misso-
Dei thinking in missiology—an ap-
proach that often gives preference to hu-
man reconciliation and justice over con-
version and reconciliation to God.)

2) In anthropology, there is a strong
emphasis on worldview change as a
precursor to change in behaviors, insti-
tutions and even values. That is, world-
view (or ideology) provides the per-
spective from which all else is
understood and managed. When we re-
alize that world mission in inherent to a
truly biblical worldview its importance
to even an anthropological analysis be-
comes apparent.

3) “New rhetoricians” such as Ken-
neth Burke insist that a valid interpreta-
tion of any particular instance of com-
munication must take into account, not
just the immediate context, but also
what we might call the “mega-
context”—all those major ideas and
events of history which bear upon it.
For Bible interpreters, the mission be-
comes an operative part of the mega-
context of many if not most Bible books
and passages.

4) Many theologians now emphasize
the fact that we must master the larger
historical framework of Scripture in or-
der to understand the “bits and pieces”

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF FRONTIER MISSIONS, VOL 10:1 JAN 1993
A Missionary Hermeneutic

implicit in the promised blessing to the nations (Genesis 12). Moreover, at the
time Sarai proposed her “solution” it must have seemed as socially accepta-
ble and sensible as it was sincere.

It is in light that both Sarai’s pro-
posal, Ishmael’s conception and birth, and related ongoing history can more
fully be understood. A missionary her-
me neutic sheds new light on numerous
Old Testament texts that reflect both

Esau both in his person and in his “mis-

tion.” And Muslims, of course, lay

call to Abraham as their “father”

through Ishmael and related both their holy places and ceremonies to the Gene-
sis record. Moreover, a case can be

made for concluding that Islam is the

religion of the “flesh” in its inception, in its

conquests, in its way of “salvation,”

and even in its view of heaven. Finally,

the animosity between Islam and Chris-
tianity which many trace back to

the Crusades can actually be

traced back to Sarai and Hagar,

Ishmael and Isaac, and Esau and

Jacob. It is as longstanding as that!

A pre-understanding of the missionary
hermeneutic is this: It is God’s expressed
purpose to bring glory to himself

through the creative, redemptive and pu-

nitive work in his Son, and especially

in this age by bringing men and women of

all peoples to repentance and faith in

Christ.

2) Matthew 24:25: the Olivet
Discourse. Think for a moment.

What more than anything else

characterizes teaching, preach-

ing, and writing relating to the

Olivet Discourse? Is it not reflec-
tions of the same curiosity about

day-time events that characterized

Christ’s disciples and occasioned the

Discourse in the first place (see

Matthew 24:3)?

But looking at the Discourse in the

light of Christ’s concern as expressed a

few days later in the Great Commis-

sion the Olivet Discourse takes on a new and

fresh meaning. Why? Because it be-

comes obvious that our Lord had little

interest in satisfying his disciples’ curi-

osity. His overriding concern was that

they (and we) be engaged in mission af-

ter his ascension and always be ready

for his Parousia.

So ingrained in the thinking of many

of us is an interpretation that views the

wars, pestilences, earthquakes, famines,

etc., as signs of Christ’s soon coming,

that it will be difficult to adjust to an-
other approach. But look at the text

closely. May it not be that what we

have here is a litany of the sort of events

that will characterize the entire age?

It is against the backdrop of that kind of

history that we need not become dis-
tracted or distraught. After all, two

fantastically positive happenings will oc-

cur: the evangelization of the world

(Matthew 24:14) and the glorious return

of our Lord (Matthew 24:30). Far from
deterring or distracting us, then, the
dire events breaking all around us be-

come “prophetic alerts.” They remind

us that our Lord knows the end from

the beginning and that history is never

out of (his) control! So let us be looking

for him and let us be about our God-
given mission to evangelize the world.

That is Christ’s burden, and that is

the lesson which is reinforced in the

Applying a “Missionary Hermeneu-

tic”: Four Illustrations

Within the scope of the present work

we can only be suggestive, but for illus-

trative purposes let us choose four well

known passages of Scripture that are

not ordinarily interpreted in the light of

world mission. Let us think together of

their usual interpretation, and then see

how an understanding of the mission “mega-context” helps to illumine them.

We will choose one passage each from

the Old Testament, the Gospels, the

Epistles and the Revelation.

1) Genesis 16: Hagar and Ishmael. The

story is familiar and need not be retold

here. Nor need we do more than men-

tion the traditional interpretation: namely, that Abram’s union with Hagar

to produce Ishmael was a purely hu-
nan affair from start to finish and

therefore could not possibly result in

the blessings to mankind that can only

accrue to faith in God’s person, provi-
sion and plan. Some commentators

may proceed to point out Esau’s

(Edom’s) marriage to Ishmael’s daugh-
ter, the animosity of Ishmaelites and Edomites toward Israelites, and the das-
tardly dealings of the Edomite Herod

and his sons with Jesus and John the

Baptist.

But there is more here: In my opin-

ion, we have not given nearly enough

emphasis to the potential within the

Abram-Hagar union (and subsequent

related events) for aborting the mission

these human inclinations and plans on

the one hand, and God’s rejection of

them in favor of his sovereign purpose on

the other. For example re-read the

often neglected prophecy of Obadiah in

this light as a case in point.

More than that, those early Genesis

events and choices illuminate the way

in which New Testament writers deal

with Hagar, Ishmael and Esau (as well

as Abraham). For example, neither

Ishmael nor Esau can appear in the genea-

logy of Emmanual in Matthew 1 though,

by societal rules, as firstborn sons they

should have been listed. Again, Hagar

was a bondwoman and bears spiritual

slaves according to Galatians 4:22-26.

And it is Esau who comes in for one of

the most unenviable assessments in both Testaments because he deliberate-

ly despised his rights as an heir to the

promise. So both Malachi and Paul

record God’s verdict: “Jacob I loved,

but Esau I hated.” (Malachi 1:2, 3; Ro-

mans 9:13). God looks past the outer ap-

pearances to the inner heart and he sees

spiritual aspirations that will populate

heaven in the one case and “natural”

proclivities that will populate hell in the

other! Little wonder that a “Missionary

God” who does not want any to perish

responds to the plan of Sarai and Ab-

ram, and the character of Ishmael and

especially Esau, in ways that cannot

readily be grasped apart from God’s mis-

sionary passion and plan!

Understanding these texts in this way

will soon propel the inquiring mind far

beyond the biblical text itself. Acquain-
tance with Muhammad reveals his

many resemblances to Ishmael and
analogy and parables of the men in the field, the story of the women grinding at the mill, the household, the two servants, the ten virgins, the stewards of God-given talents, the judgement of the nations (etnē) to whom he will send his ambassadors (Matthew 24:40-25:46). Note the text: The householder should have been on the alert for the thief but was surprised by him. The foolish slave thought he had plenty of time to “get his house in order” but his master returned earlier than expected. The wise virgins had plenty of oil, but the foolish virgins thought the bridegroom would come right away so they did not replenish their supply. The faithful and fruitful stewards invested what their master gave them but the faithless one buried his talent. All of this can and should be related to our Lord’s purpose and plan to evangelize the world.

As for the judgment of the nations in the last part of Matthew 25, how will the sheep and goats among the ethnē be distinguished? Answer: On the basis of how they received Christ’s “brethren” (Matthew 25:40). And who are his brethren? Who if not his ambassadors, his missionaries who have so often been mistreated among the very people they were sent to save (cf. Matt. 10:38-42)?

Understood this way, Christ’s words are consonant both with the doctrine of salvation by grace and his missionary plan. Understood in this way many interpreters (including some evangelicals) view these verses as they conflict with both grace doctrine and the Great Commission. (Ed. note: see John Amstutz’ exegesis of the Matt. 25:40 passage in the last issue, Vol. 9:4 Oct. 1992, pages 131/132.) Viewed in this light, the Olivet Discourse fully serves God’s purpose towards world evangelization and to use committed believers to do this task. Therefore, the Discourse fully serves the Divine purpose, even though it leaves open questions and does not completely satisfy our curiosity about the complexities of end-time events.

3) Romans 12:3-2: “Living Sacrifice.” Many Bible teachers make an outline break between chapters 11 and 12 of Romans, the former concluding a “parenthetical” section and the latter inaugurating a “practical” section. Many sermons on Romans 12:1-2 lift it out of both the immediate and larger contexts of God’s great missionary purpose and solemn) assembly. With Paul you have reviewed God’s revelation concerning sin, justification, sanctification and glorification (Romans 1-8). With Paul you have exulted in the fact that nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39). But suddenly, you notice that Paul’s letter takes a sharp turn. He has anticipated what your reaction to what he has written might well be, that God’s plan of salvation through Christ is indeed great. But at the same time, it entails a problem. What about his prior plan for the Jewish nation? What has happened to it? What will God do with the Jews? If God has abandoned the Jewish nation perhaps he will abandon Gentile believers as well, now or later.

Paul’s assured exposition in Romans 9-11 constitutes one of the greatest missionary passages in the New Testament. If these chapters are categorized as a parenthesis, it is one of the most important parentheses ever penned! Paul says that God has not forgotten his promises to Israel. Israel has not fallen, never to rise again (Romans 9). But God has turned Israel’s unbelief into an occasion to take the Good News to all peoples everywhere. Without distinction between Jew and Greek, “whosoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10). Gentiles must never forget, moreover, that when the “fullness of the Gentiles has come in” God will save Israel. The upshot is that “God has shut up all in disobedience that he might show mercy to all.” Today’s youth might simply say, “Awesome!” But Paul is more awe-struck.

Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and mercy of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and unfathomable his ways! (Rom. 11:33)

Whether as Roman believers in the first century, or as American believers in the twentieth century, we are now in a position to understand the challenge and promise of Romans 12:1-2. How do we know that God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our lives? Because we have been made aware of the fact that he has a fantastic plan for the whole world—a plan that is from eternity past, that is inexorable and unchanging, and that even now is in process of being realized as “preachers” are sent to preach the Gospel to the nations, as the unreached peoples hear and call upon the Lord, and as God saves those who call on Him.

How do we know that God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our lives? Because we have been made aware of the fact that he has a fantastic plan for the whole world—a plan that is from eternity past, that is inexorable and unchanging, and that even now is in process of being realized as “preachers” or missionaries are sent to preach the Gospel to the nations, as the unreached peoples hear and call upon the Lord, and as God saves those who call on Him. Yes, God has a wonderful plan for our minuscule lives precisely because our lives can fit into the majestic and all-encompassing plan God has for the whole world. Apart from to that plan, your life and mine loses its real meaning. But when we fit into that plan, the plan of the ages, you and I find that His plan for us is good, acceptable, and perfect (Romans 12:2).

4) Revelation 5: the Scroll with the Seven Seals. Familiar to all mission-minded believers is the ascription of awesome praise by the redeemed in Revelation 5:10-11:

Worthy art Thou to take the book and to break its seals, for Thou wast slain and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

The heart of every believer should resonate with these words! But once again we must ask a question. Do these redeemed rejoice at this point because of their personal salvation only or also for another reason? Both text and the immediate context make it perfectly clear that they also rejoice because one is found who is able to open the seven-sealed scroll. So there is a second reason for their rejoicing and the still “larger context” of Scripture reveals what it is.
Notice that an inquiry into the significance of the scroll and its seven seals takes us back to the Old Testament. Most references have to do with the Scroll of the Law, but others have to do with human transactions. Both kinds were discoverable in the Tabernacle and the Temple. Those related to human transactions—often the redemption of people or property in accordance with the laws of Deuteronomy—were sealed at various places where special requirements before elders acting as witnesses was a part of the redemption process.

A beautiful incident which illumines Revelation 5 is found in Jeremiah 32. Nebuchadnezzar’s forces are at Jerusalem’s gates, and the prophets have prophesied Judah’s defeat and the Babylonian captivity. But all is not lost. A remnant will return and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. To reinforce God’s promise, Jeremiah is instructed to redeem his cousin Hanamel’s field; record the transaction on two scrolls; and have Baruch place the scrolls in a jar which will be available to the returning remnant.

Humanly speaking, the idea of spending good money to redeem a field that will shortly be taken over by occupied armies is nothing short of ridiculous. Similarly, for us to believe—really believe—that God’s promise to his Son, “Ask of me, and I will surely give the nations as Thy inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Thy possession” (Psalm 2:8), and act accordingly seems ridiculous when the “god of this world” is Satan.

With John, we need to look to the future. The day is coming when God will be praised, not alone as Creator (Revelation 4) but also as Redeemer (Revelation 5). A “Worthy One” has paid the ultimate price. He will break the seals one by one (Revelation 6:1ff) and judgments culminating in God’s triumph will ensue. Not only will the ethne become Christ’s inheritance, the whole earth will be his possession!

Talk about vision! Here is a vision for all of us. And in its light we can go to the tribal and language groups, unreached peoples and nations of the world in full assurance that the result will be well worth whatever the cost.

In conclusion, how a “missionary hermeneutic” should be labelled, exactly how this “teological mission principle” is best articulated or the precise ways in which we can best focus on the big picture of God’s salvation plan for the nations, all of this we can leave to the experts. But I would plead with both professors and pulpiteers, with those who occupy important positions of leadership in world missions along with those who sit in supporting places in the pew: Reread the sacred text. Take the long view. See the plan of the ages. Catch the “mission vision.” It will change your life!

Dr. David Hesselgrave is the executive director of EMS and professor emeritus of world mission at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.