

Inspiration And Incarnation: *Evangelicals and the problem of the Old Testament*

By Peter Enns (Baker Academic, 2005)

Preface

The author's aim is to make available to ordinary readers data about the Bible previously known mostly only to scholars. And to look at that data re its implications for an evangelical view of Scripture.

Chapter 1. Getting our bearings

The main area of focus: scholarly conclusions on the Old Testament during the last 150 years. Target readers: those who think such conclusions make evangelical faith unviable.

The Bible is indeed from God, his gift to the church. But what that means needs regular evaluating in the light of new knowledge and insights. In the 15th century Copernicus was attacked by the church for his heliocentric view of the universe, on the grounds that Scripture teaches a geocentric view. Now his view is (rightly) accepted. Today there will be other externally verified truths that require us to look again at our definition of what the Bible teaches.

'The problems many of us feel regarding the Bible may have less to do with the Bible itself and more to do with our own preconceptions.'

We will examine three issues that evangelicalism has not handled very well:

1. The OT and other literature from the ancient world. Why are there similar creation and flood stories, for example? This raises questions re the Bible's *uniqueness*.
2. Theological diversity in the OT. Why are there so many apparent contradictions in its laws and teaching? This raises questions re the Bible's *integrity*.
3. How the NT writers handled the OT. They seem to take passages right out of context. This deals with the question of the Bible's *interpretation*.

One chapter will be devoted to each of these subjects.

The incarnational analogy

As Christ is both God and human, so is the Bible. As a man, Jesus assumed the cultural trappings of his day: he was 'God *with us*'. The Bible, too, was connected to, and spoke to, the ancient cultures in which it was produced. Its very human aspects need to be accepted for what they are, not explained away, as if the Bible only 'seemed' to have a human side (as in the Docetic heresy re Christ).

Among the human marks of Scripture are:

- It was written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. These were 'everyday' languages of their time, not specialised 'religious' ones.
- The OT world was one of temples, priests and sacrifices. Israel was only one nation in that world.
- Like the nations around them, Israel had prophets who mediated the divine will to them.
- Like the nations around, Israel was for most of its history ruled by kings.
- Israel's legal system had some striking similarities to those of the surrounding nations.

That the Bible is so easily situated in its ancient context is a worry to some, who expect it to be 'unique' and 'special' if it is indeed God's Word. But it speaks to where people are at, and that's what God did in inspiring Scripture. Is Jesus any less divine because he was a real first-century Jew?

Chapter 2. The Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Literature

The impact of Akkadian literature

19th century archaeologists unearthed some ancient Assyrian clay writing-tablets written in Akkadian—the language of Assyria and Babylon. They contained, among a variety of documents, creation and flood accounts similar in many ways to those in Genesis.

Creation: *Enumah Elish*

This doc is sometimes called the ‘Babylonian Genesis’ because it has much in common with the Genesis creation account—and some clear differences. It dates from the 7th c BC, but the orally-transmitted stories behind it are certainly much older in origin, probably the 2nd millennium BC.

We don’t know whether there was any dependence between the two, but the authors were certainly working within the same conceptual world. Probably Genesis was written to argue that the God of Israel is superior to the gods of the Assyrians and Babylonians.

Flood: *Atrahasis and Gilgamesh*

These two epics, both very ancient, tell flood stories very similar to that concerning Noah in Genesis. There are some differences, too, but the similarities are very striking indeed.

Whether there was any ‘borrowing’ between the three we cannot say, but they do reflect similar worldviews and traditions.

Israel’s ancestors: *Nuzi*

Nuzi was a city in modern Iraq that flourished in the 2nd millennium BC. The tablets from there give a good picture of the world in which the biblical patriarchs lived, and that helps us understand better some of the customs described in Genesis: the Abraham/Sarah/Hagar situation; family involvement in marriage arrangements like that of Isaac and Rebekah; levirate marriage, etc.

If the Bible reflects customs and practices from a wider ancient culture, how can it be viewed as a higher revelation?

Law: *The Code of Hammurabi*

Hammurabi was a Babylonian king of the 18th c BC. The code of law he enacted was discovered in 1901-2. It contains many laws very similar to some OT laws, some with almost identical wording. How do we square this with the notion that the law given to Moses by God at Sinai centuries later was unique and special?

All the above examples show how the true faith of Israel and the false faith of its neighbours had much in common.

Some other Ancient Near Eastern texts

Deuteronomy and Hittite Suzerainty Treaties

The 20th century has brought many discoveries re the Hittite civilisation (modern Turkey). These include treaty documents dealing with the relationship between kings and their vassals. Such documents follow a regular five-part pattern.

The book of Deuteronomy, and the Ten Commandments in particular, are clearly structured on exactly the same pattern.

David and the Tel Dan Inscription

Written in Aramaic, this dates from about the 9th c BC. It includes the phrase ‘house of David’—this came to light only in 1993. If, as seems likely, this is a reference to King David of Israel, it is one of the oldest extrabiblical references to a biblical figure.

Hezekiah and the Siloam Tunnel Inscription

As described in 2 Kings 18, the Assyrian King Sennacherib was set to attack Jerusalem around 701 BC. To avoid the effects of a siege, Jerusalem's King Hezekiah had built a tunnel to bring fresh water into the city.

In 1880 a tunnel was found in Jerusalem containing an inscription made by the men who dug it. This without question is the tunnel in question, and the inscription is a testimony to the historicity of the biblical account.

Omri and the Mesha Inscription

Mesha was king of ancient Moab around 830 BC. He erected a monument outlining his achievements—the Mesha Inscription, or Moabite Stone. Mesha is mentioned in the OT (2 Kings 3). The inscription also mentions King Omri of Israel.

Again, this is an external source confirming the historicity of the biblical accounts.

Proverbs and the Instruction of Amenemope

A portion of Proverbs, beginning at 22:17, is very similar to a body of Egyptian wisdom literature called the *Instruction of Amenemope*, including the division into 30 parts.

The Egyptian text is older than the Proverbs text, suggesting that the compiler of Proverbs likely knew of and was in some direct sense dependent on this Egyptian material.

What exactly is the problem?

The reality of the above facts raises some questions for thoughtful Christians. For example:

- Does Genesis report historical fact, or is it just stories culled from ancient cultures?
- If other cultures had an influence on the Bible, how can we still maintain that the Bible was uniquely revealed by God?
- Were previous generations, who were unaware of most of the above data, wrong in how they viewed the Bible?

Is the Bible still the Word of God?

We will group the above data into sections and relate each section to a particular biblical problem.

Group 1: *Enuma Elish; Atrahasis; Gilgamesh.*

Creation and the flood: Is Genesis myth or history?

We reject the view that the more like the Akkadian text Genesis is, the less inspired it is. But how can we say that the biblical stories are true and the Akkadian ones false when they both look so very much alike?

Re the word 'myth'. In scholarly circles it has a specialised meaning: 'an ancient, premodern, prescientific way of addressing questions of ultimate origins and meaning in the form of stories: Who are we? Where do we come from?'

Ancient people were not 'scientific' in their approach, but they asked serious questions, and came up with stories (myths) to explain what they thought the answers might be. Is 'myth', therefore, the proper way to understand Genesis? Yes.

Group 2: *Nuzi documents; Code of Hammurabi; Hittite suzerain treaties; Instruction of Amenemope.*

Customs, laws and proverbs: Is Revelation Unique?

These confirm that the stories of Israel's first ancestors likely reach back to at least the middle of the 2nd millennium BC. They also raise questions re the 'moral situatedness' of the OT. Israel's moral standards seem to come as much from the culture of the surrounding nations as directly from God.

Also, the law given at Sinai seems not to have been as unique as we would expect, since similar laws appear in considerably older documents like the Code of Hammurabi. Even the wisdom of Israel, as seen in Proverbs, has older parallels outside.

But there is no reason why the situated/enculturated nature of the Bible should pose a problem to the definition of divine revelation.

Group 3: Tel Dan Inscription; Siloam Tunnel inscription; Mesha Inscription. Israel and its kings: Is good historiography Objective or Biased?

These factual discoveries from external sources serve to confirm the historicity of certain parts of the Bible's historical material. But clearly we cannot apply the same principle to, say, the meaning of the creation accounts in Genesis, because of the pre-historical nature of the situation.

The Mesha Inscription clearly gives a biased account of Mesha's reign. It was in effect propaganda. Could the Bible accounts of Israel and Judah's kings be, at least partly, in the same category? What were the ancient conventions for history-writing?

How have these issues been handled in the past?

Until the late 19th c, biblical scholarship focused on clarifying the original *form* of the Bible text. But with the subsequent discoveries of materials like the ones described above, the focus switched to the *setting* in which the text was written.

Some 19th c scholars, it is true, were intent on attacking both the Bible and Christianity, and used the new evidence as ammunition. Protestants, in particular, were perhaps over-strong in their reaction, establishing a questionable standard of what was meant by 'revealed Scripture'—namely, that it should be scientifically and historically accurate in every detail. They put their heads in the sand regarding the questions, raised by the new evidence, over the Bible's uniqueness and its historical accuracy.

How can we think differently through these issues?

How we look at the evidence is governed by the underlying *assumptions* we make about the nature of God, and particularly how he provides revelation and inspiration; what constitutes reality; what is good history writing, etc. Only as we adjust our expectations as to how the Bible should behave can we move beyond the conservative/liberal debates of recent generations. We should begin with two assumptions:

1. That the extrabiblical archaeological and textual material must be allowed a role in shaping our understanding of Scripture.
2. That the Holy Spirit is still leading God's church into the truth, not dropping them down into the midst of it, and that some adjustments to our thinking may be required.

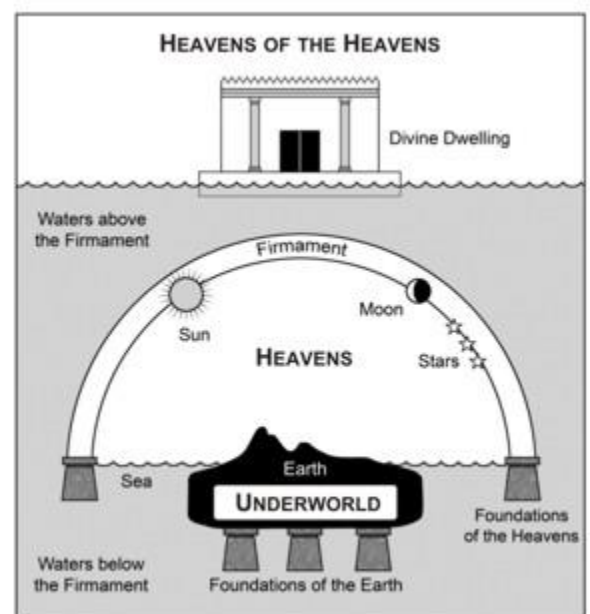
Is Genesis myth or history?

The distinction between the two is a modern one and not helpful here. It assumes, to modern thinking, that 'history' is superior to 'myth', while in fact it is not. Why couldn't God use the category that we call 'myth' to speak to ancient Israelites, since that was a living feature of their culture?

Israel's early ancestors were nomadic people, whose stories were passed down orally and only later, when they became a more settled people, committed to writing. Those stories grew up in the context of the nations and culture of the day and shared many features with them. The Hebrew language in its written form—and in which the Genesis stories were eventually recorded—came on the scene quite late—around 1000 BC.

How is it that Genesis looks like so many other Ancient Near Eastern texts?

Abraham was not an Israelite but a resident of Babylon, from which God called him out. He thus came from a people whose origin-stories—of the mythic category—had been in existence for a very long time. But thanks to his experiences, he came to see that the God he worshipped was different from the gods of the surrounding nations, and this gradually came into the consciousness of the nation that came from him.



Ancient Near Eastern religions were hierarchical and polytheistic. The religion of Israel contrasted with that on both counts. God did not leave Abraham in his mythic world. Rather, he transformed the ancient myths so that Israel's story would come to focus on its God, the real one.

But there remained much in common, including the cosmological viewpoint that the Israelites shared with their Mesopotamian neighbours: the earth as a flat disk with a dome above it (see picture). We do not protect the Bible or make it more believable to modern people by trying to show that it is somehow consistent with modern science, because it isn't.

It is not beneath God to enculturate himself. That is precisely how he reveals himself to the world he made.

Is revelation unique?

The Group 2 texts show that Israel's legal and wisdom texts had much in common with those of other nations. It is not the *content* that marks off Israel's texts, but Israel's connection to the one true God who alone has the right to lay these claims upon them. It is God saying that, of the many laws (for example) common to all, *these* are the ones Israel is to obey if they are to be truly the people of God. People surely knew that murder was wrong long before Sinai and 'You shall not murder'.

It is the first two commandments that set Israel on a collision course with its neighbours, all of whom had multiple gods whom they worshipped via idolatry. Otherwise, the laws had much in common, as did the rituals of priesthood and sacrifice.

Proverbs, too, echoes much of the content of wisdom literature in the surrounding nations. But God is saying that by living according to *these* particular truths Israel would be in line with his will.

Is good historiography objective or biased?

The Group 3 texts raise this issue. But historiography that would be questionable by modern standards also exists within the OT itself. The books of Samuel and Kings cover much the same ground as the books of Chronicles (the rise and fall of the monarchy). But they tell the story in very different ways. Historiography is not the statement of bare facts but the shaping of those facts for a particular purpose. It is an interpretive exercise.

The Mesha Inscription was propaganda, aimed at boosting Mesha's reputation in spite of the facts—he did *not*, for instance, get rid of Israel for ever, as the inscription claims he did. Much OT history is similarly shaped by circumstances and the author's purpose. Samuel-Kings is aimed at showing the reasons why God's people ended up in exile: the refrain is that their kings practised idolatry.

Chronicles, by contrast, tells the same basic story from quite a different perspective. It was written for the Israelites who returned from exile in Babylon and who felt deserted by God and lost without their temple and its worship. How could they reconnect to God's promises? Chronicles shows them that they had a long and noble pedigree as God's people, and so the emphases are quite different.

God's promise to David through Nathan, for example, is expressed quite differently in the two accounts (2 Sam 7:16; 1 Chron 17:14). We should not try to 'harmonise' the two accounts in the way books of 'Bible difficulties' do, but should see them, in context, as accounts written for totally different purposes. It is the same with the four Gospels, which have varied accounts of the same event, written with a different aim in mind.

How does this affect us?

We reach three conclusions:

1. We must take account of the fact that the OT is an Ancient Near Eastern document and bring this incarnational element into our thinking when interpreting it.
2. Because Scripture was given in a specific context, we must ask how much of a particular passage remains binding on us today, in our totally different context.
3. The incarnational dimension continues today. The canon is closed, of course. But we remain creatures of our own day and times and we must constantly review how we see God as speaking to us through Scripture.

Chapter 3. The Old Testament and Theological Diversity

The problem of theological diversity in the Old Testament

Jewish biblical interpretation has a long pedigree. It has aimed at resolving the tensions and apparent contradictions in the OT text. Christian interpretation, by contrast, has tended to run away from those elements, on the grounds that, in an inspired text, they shouldn't really be there.

By 'diversity' in Scripture we mean its different perspectives and points of view on the same topic. Evangelicalism has tended to play it down or pretend it doesn't really exist. But it does! We shouldn't be telling the Bible how it *ought* to behave.

Diversity in wisdom literature

Proverbs

This book is more than 'rules to live by'. It contains conflicting advice (e.g. 26:4-5) which needs applying sensibly to the circumstances, as appropriate.

Ecclesiastes

There is diversity within the book itself, with conflicting advice (e.g. 7:3 and 8:15) as in Proverbs, plus diversity in its clashes with other parts of the OT (e.g. 2:10).

But the diversity in these two books is intentional, part of the books' nature, and is not to be confused with chaos or error.

Job

Much of the OT teaches that deeds have consequences, but Job seems to fly in the face of this. His 'comforters' were justified in believing the message of the OT in general, which was no help to Job. They applied that message superficially, without sufficient knowledge of the particulars of the situation.

Diversity in Chronicles

Chronicles is, as we have seen, different from Samuel-Kings in how it treats Israel's kings, addressing, as it was, the returnees from exile. In particular, Chronicles plays down King David's sins; emphasises the unity of God's people; emphasises the temple and Solomon's role in building it; and emphasises a theology of 'immediate retribution'.

Diversity in Law

We would expect the law to be free from diversity, because of its very nature. We are disappointed. Even the Ten Commandments have differences in the two listings (Ex 20 and Deu 5)—in the 4th, 5th and 10th commandments. In particular, the motivation for keeping the Sabbath is different in the two accounts.

God seems willing for his law to be adjusted over time. Even the law has a situational dimension. Keeping it is not a mechanical, legalistic process. The generational consequences spelled out in the 2nd commandment stand in contradiction to the principle enunciated in Ezekiel 18:19-20. The gospel encourages even greater flexibility in the law's application, e.g. Jesus' teaching re the Sabbath.

Slaves

In Exodus the compulsory freeing of slaves after six years' service did not extend to female slaves, but Deut does extend it to them. Different scenarios are probably in view—but all these laws come from God and sit comfortably in the same canon.

Passover

The meat in this annual ceremony had to be eaten roasted, not raw or cooked in water (Ex 12:8-9). But the Hebrew of Deu 16:5-6 says to cook it in water.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice was practised in the OT long before the laws that set out its parameters in a system. That system was clear-cut, but the prophets sometimes raised questions as to its validity in certain circumstances (e.g. Hosea 6:6).

Circumcision is similarly treated. Certainly the NT shows it to be outdated and no longer necessary in a Christian context. Yet Paul circumcises Timothy so as not to offend certain Jews. In other words, particular circumstances dictate one's attitude to the ruling.

Gentiles

The Israelites were to be separate from Gentiles. No Ammonites or Moabites, for instance, were *ever* to enter the assembly of the Lord (Deu 23:3). Yet Ruth was a Moabitess and was admitted. And God shows compassion towards Ninevites and Egyptians.

Is Israel's separation, then, with a view to eventual integration? The NT says yes.

God and diversity

Some of the OT's elements of diversity touch on God himself.

One God or many gods?

Some OT passages speak of Yahweh alone as God. Others speak of him as greater than the gods of the other nations, implying a recognition of their existence.

The plagues on Egypt, for instance, were direct challenges from Yahweh to some of the Egyptian deities. In Egypt, the Israelites has been surrounded by polytheism; God was meeting them where they were in their understanding and treating the Egyptian gods as if they were real.

Does God change his mind?

Though outside of his creation, God sometimes acts as if he were a character in the story. E.g. after Abraham has shown himself willing to sacrifice Isaac, God says, 'Now I know...', implying he couldn't have been sure till then. God also seems to have *reacted* to human wickedness in sending the Flood. After the golden calf incident, God decides to wipe the people out, but Moses intervenes and God 'changes his mind'.

[The current 'openness of God' debate is on whether God controls future events, and whether he is in fact open to change.]

God in the Bible speaks about himself in ways that reflect our ability to understand. So he *wants* us to view him as a God who can change his mind.

What does diversity tell us about Scripture?

Pretending these 'diversity' issues don't exist—as many evangelicals do—is dishonest. Facing up to them is not to give in to liberalism or to admit to the kind of 'errors' in Scripture that cast doubts on its being God's Word.

We begin by confessing that it *is* God's Word, then we are free to look at *how* it is God's Word. And diversity shows us that there is no superficial unity in the Bible. Portions of it are in tension with each other. And that tells us that God participates fully in history, engaging with all its natural tensions. 'The messiness of the OT, which is a source of embarrassment for some, is actually a positive.'

There is unity in the Bible, but not of the superficial kind; its unity is to be found in Christ himself, the living Word.

Chapter 4. The Old Testament and its Interpretation in the New Testament

Do NT authors misuse the OT?

The way the NT writers handle the OT often does not square with our own instincts. They seem to handle it in a cavalier manner sometimes. Three explanations have been offered, none of which stand close examination:

1. They were in fact respecting the original context, but in ways we haven't yet understood. [In fact they were clearly not doing so]
2. They were not interpreting the OT scriptures, just applying them, so no problem. [They were indeed commenting on what those scriptures *meant*]
3. They were apostolic figures, with a unique right to interpret as they pleased. [No; their hermeneutical approach should be followed by the church today]

The NT authors were explaining what the OT means *in the light of Christ's coming*.

Biblical interpretation in the Second Temple period

i.e. from the completion of the Second Temple in 516 BC to its destruction by the Romans in AD 70.

The grammatical-historical approach applies to how we do hermeneutics as well as to texts. We must therefore seek to understand as best we can the interpretive world in which the NT was written.

Innerbiblical interpretation: the OT's use of the OT

E.g. The author of Chronicles was clearly interacting with at least parts of Samuel-Kings.

Also, Daniel interacted with Jeremiah's statement about the 70 years of Babylonian captivity, but he understood them, under the 'insight and understanding' given by Gabriel, as 'seventy sevens' of years—heavenly help to provide understanding that Jeremiah himself had not enjoyed.

Jesus does something similar at the end of Luke: 'Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures...' (Lk 24:44-48). These are, he tells them, all about himself: he is the climax of Israel's story.

Biblical interpretation in Second Temple literature

Much extrabiblical literature appeared in the period following the exile including: the Apocrypha (18 books), parts of the Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the works of Philo and Josephus. Two examples:

Apocrypha: *Wisdom of Solomon*

The author is anonymous: pseudo-Solomon, heir to a long history of Jewish biblical interpretation. Written in the late 1st c BC and early 2nd c AD.

In ch 10 he tells Israel's story (to encourage readers suffering under the Romans). He mentions people and incidents, and clearly has a set of accepted understandings about them—as we, for example, tend to assume there were *three* wise men, named Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. He mentions, among others:

- *Adam*, and says wisdom 'delivered him from his transgression'.
- *Cain*, and goes on to say that 'the earth was flooded because of him'.
- *Abraham*, and puts him in the same time-frame as the Tower of Babel incident.
- *Joseph*, and mentions multiple accusers of him, not just Potiphar's wife.

Dead Sea Scrolls: *1QpHab*

The Scrolls were discovered in 1947 near Qumran. They are mainly commentaries (Heb *pesher*) on the OT. 1QpHab = 'Cave 1, Qumran, *pesher* on Habakkuk'. We will look at Hab 1:5. There, God is answering Hab's cry to punish the unjust. God's answer amazes him: he will send the hated Babylonians to do the job.

The Qumran interpreters saw a hidden meaning in this, referring to themselves as devout Jews living in the last days. They read subtle hints and double-entendres into the Hebrew words, so that God's promise to bring the Babylonians to punish Israel is turned into a condemnation of the enemies of the Qumran community. They then go on to provide two further, different, interpretations.

So for them, biblical interpretation was not a way of *discovering ancient meaning* but of using the OT to *validate the present self-understanding* of their community.

What can we learn from Second Temple literature?

These early interpreters seemed to anchor their interpretations in what they *knew* to be right, going back and manipulating the text to suit their purposes. This is very different from the approach of modern interpreters.

The NT is, in its own unique way, a Second Temple interpretive text, so we should expect it to interpret the OT in a way that has some sort of resonance with its contemporaries.

Apostolic hermeneutics as a Second Temple phenomenon: interpretive methods

Jesus used Exodus 3:6 to explain that God is the God of the living (in Lk 20:34-38). We can't see how it is relevant, given the original context, but his hearers clearly did, saying, 'Well said, Teacher!' We need to get into the mindset of that period.

A few more examples of NT writers and their interpretive methods:

Matthew 2:15 and Hosea 11:1

'Out of Egypt I called my son.' Matthew said the Holy Family's flight to Egypt was a *fulfilment* of Hos 11:1. But Hosea was talking about the past (Israel as God's son), not the future.

Matthew is writing for a Jewish readership familiar with this type of interpretation. Matthew wrote as a man convinced that Jesus was the fulfilment of all the OT. He may have been looking at the whole section in Hosea (no verse numbers in those days, so he may have meant 'the "out of Egypt" passage'). Matthew is probably comparing the two 'sons' and showing that Jesus was in fact just what Israel should have been, but failed to be.

2 Cor 6:2 and Isaiah 49:8

Paul quotes Isaiah to back up his warning about receiving God's grace in vain, as his ambassadors. In Isaiah the context is Israel's future deliverance from Babylon—nothing about being reconciled to God.

Paul, knowing Jesus as he did, sees that his coming had introduced the *eschaton*, and the 'now is the day of salvation' meant an eschatological 'now', not a personal one as often applied by evangelists. A greater deliverance than Israel's from Babylon was now a reality.

Gal 3:16, 29 and Abraham's 'seed'

Paul makes a big point of 'seed'—meaning Abraham's 'offspring'—being singular and thus referring to Christ. The Heb *zera*, 'seed', is a collective noun, as in English, but a look at the relevant Genesis promises shows that it is clearly meant there in a plural sense. And Paul takes it, not in the context of many people inheriting the land of Israel, but as indicating the means by which one is reconciled to God.

We consider such tinkering with the finer points of Hebrew words unhelpful, but clearly neither Paul nor his readers took any issue with it. It was the kind of interpretive approach they were familiar with.

Rom 11:26-27 and Isaiah 59:20

In his 'all Israel will be saved' passage Paul quotes Isaiah that 'The deliverer will come *from* Zion.' Again, the message is that Israel's deliverance from exile is but a harbinger of the greater deliverance of sinners that Jesus brings.

But Paul adjusts Isaiah's wording to reflect his theological goal. Isaiah has the redeemer coming 'to Zion'. Maybe Paul could have used 'from' to indicate Jesus' human origin as a Jew, or it may refer to the heavenly Jerusalem. But, either way, Paul has no problem with changing the preposition.

Hebrews 3:7-11 and Psalm 95:9-10

Ps 95 has God saying, 'For forty years I was angry with that generation'. Hebrews alters the wording a little, inserting a 'therefore', so that we have 'Your fathers...for forty years saw what I did. *That is why* I was angry with that generation.' Here, it is God's activity, not his wrath, that lasts 40 years. In Hebrews his anger *follows* the 40 years.

The analogy is between Israel after the Exodus and the church. The church's equivalent of the wilderness wanderings is its current, 'normal' situation, prior to its final 'rest' at Christ's coming. But for Israel the 40 years were years of God's wrath, and that's hardly applicable to the church, which is a manifestation of God's blessing. So the writer

tweaks the psalm to make the analogy fit. Compare this with Heb 3:17, where, because he is now referring to Israel, not to the church, the writer reverts to the original '40 years of wrath' rendering.

Apostolic hermeneutics as a Second Temple phenomenon: interpretive traditions

The NT writers casually slip in items regarding OT incidents that betray the interpretive grid that was already in their minds. E.g..

Jannes and Jambres

In 2 Tim 3:8 Paul names these as the magicians of Pharaoh's court who opposed Moses, though there is no mention of their names in the OT itself. It does, however, occur in some extrabiblical material of the day.

Noah, the Preacher of Righteousness

In 2 Pet 3:5 Peter refers to Noah as 'a preacher of righteousness', though there is no OT mention of this. It occurs in several ancient sources, including Josephus.

The dispute over Moses' body

In Jude 9 Jude mentions a dispute between the archangel Michael and the devil over Moses' body, though it is nowhere found in the OT. He presents it as a well-known illustration to support his argument, and it appears in extracanonical sources.

Jude and 1 Enoch

Jude 14-15 cites a prophecy by Enoch that is not in the OT but appears in the noncanonical book of 1 Enoch, and he uses it in an authoritative way.

Moses' Egyptian Education

Acts 7:21-22 mentions this in passing. This is not stated in the OT, though it may be implied. It is not central to the argument of Stephen's speech; he just mentions it as part of Moses' early life. It appears in two non-canonical sources.

The Law Was Put into Effect through Angels

This is mentioned three times in the NT: Gal 3:19; Acts 7:52-53; Heb 2:2-3. It has no direct OT support. It is mentioned, however, in the extrabiblical book of *Jubilees*. The NT authors were simply talking about an OT episode *as they understood it*.

Paul's Moveable Well

1 Cor 10:1-4 talks about a 'spiritual rock' that 'accompanied' the Israelites during their journeying in the wilderness. Paul must be referring to the water from the rock described on two occasions, in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20, at the beginning and end respectively of the desert journey. There is no OT basis for this 'accompanying' idea, but several other Second Temple texts refer to it, probably concluding that it was the same rock in both cases, so it must have stayed with them.

'Paul's OT is one that has already been subject to a rich history of interpretation. It is not just the words on the page but the interpretive tradition as well that made up Paul's OT.'

What makes apostolic hermeneutics unique?

The NT is clearly similar to other Second Temple texts in the interpretive methods it uses and the interpretive traditions it adopts. There is no avoiding that conclusion, and we are foolish to try.

Further, the vital factor about apostolic hermeneutics is their conviction that, in Christ, especially his death and resurrection, the *eschaton* had arrived. In the light of that live conviction, they reread their OT in a fresh way. We, today, resist taking biblical texts out of context, but this is what the NT writers did with the OT. Or, more accurately, they took them out of *one* context (that of the original author) and put them into *another* context (the one representing the final goal towards which Israel's story had been moving).

This eschatological hermeneutic may be called *christotelic*. ‘To read the OT christotelically is to read it *knowing already* that Christ is somehow the *end* (Greek *telos*) to which the OT story is heading.’ The OT is fulfilled not only in Christ, however, but also in the new people of God. So we could say that apostolic hermeneutics have an *ecclesiotelic* dimension as well.

Should we handle the OT the way the apostles did?

If we do, we may end up handling it in a way that violates some of our interpretive instincts. But if we don’t, we are implying that the NT writers were wrong in showing how Jesus is connected to the OT, or saying that their hermeneutic is theirs alone and cannot be reproduced today.

We should adopt the same basic approach to the OT as the apostles themselves did—with Christ’s death and resurrection as the starting-point. There can be no sound reason for *not* doing so. This should be our *hermeneutical* stance, because we live in the same age as them eschatologically

As for the ‘Second Temple’ aspect, though the apostles were special in many ways, they were also men of their time, with a Second Temple culture and background governing their interpretive approach. As to our *exegesis*, therefore, we would be wise to try and discern carefully what sorts of things can and cannot carry over from that to today, as we no longer live in their Second Temple world.

Apostolic hermeneutics were not driven by adherence to a *method* (grammatical-historical or otherwise). The writers were guided by an intuitive, Spirit-led engagement of Scripture, based on Christ’s centrality.

What we can learn from apostolic hermeneutics

Our own understanding of the OT—and the gospel—has a contextual dimension, just as did that of the apostles. The 1st-century context shaped theirs; our own period, history and doctrinal pedigree shapes ours. With both to take account of, we must approach our task with humility.

Biblical interpretation is as much an art as a science, a path to walk more than a fortress to be defended. No one person, school or tradition can exhaust the depths of God’s Word. That’s why interpretation is as much community oriented as it is individually oriented. And the Christian community stretches way back into history, with the Spirit at work in it all.

Chapter 5. The Big Picture

What is the Bible, and what are we supposed to do with it?

- As to the Bible’s cultural setting...

The incarnation of Christ helps us to build a good model for the inspiration of Scripture. This means that our expectations of the Bible must be in conversation with the relevant data—the culture and circumstances in which it was written. It also means that, like the incarnate Christ, we will never understand it completely.

By faith, the church confesses that the Bible *is* God’s Word. Christians in each generation must then work out what that means.

The Bible is unique, but that does not mean that it somehow holds human cultures at arm’s length. In today’s communications-linked world we need to be open to see how cultures other than our own read Scripture and live it out.

- As to the OT’s theological diversity...

We must accept this as necessary and good, rejecting the notion that diversity spells a lack of integrity. ‘We are to place our trust in God who gave us Scripture, not in our own conceptions of how Scripture ought to be.’

The Bible sets trajectories, not rules, for many issues that confront the church today. E.g. how to raise a family. The broad trajectories it offers may be applied in a variety of ways in different lands and cultures.

- As to the NT’s use of the OT...

Christ is the goal of the OT story, and thus the ultimate focus of Christian interpretation. He is the 'deeper sense' of the OT, in which it finds its *telos*, its goal.

'Our task in biblical interpretation is to communicate the one, unchanging gospel—of what God, the creator and redeemer, has done in Christ—in such a way that respects and even *expects* that message to be articulated differently in different contexts.'

Continuing the conversation: learning to listen

We must do all we can to put an end to the mutual suspicion that too often exists between those ordinary Christians who honour the Bible as God's Word and those scholars whose work has brought to our attention the kind of features of it outlined in this book. 'What drives this suspicion is fear that what is new will necessarily threaten the old, which is often uncritically equated with the gospel itself.'

We need to see greater...

- *Humility* in scholars to be sensitive to how others will hear them, and in those whose preconceptions are being challenged.
- *Love* that assumes the best of Christian brothers and sisters, and does not treat any difference of opinion as an excuse to go on the attack.
- *Patience* to know that no person or tradition is beyond correction, and therefore no-one should jump to conclusions about another's motives.

We are building *God's* kingdom, not our own, and all our Bible study should be to that end.