

**SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS
FOR MISSION IN ISLAMIC CONTEXTS:
FIVE FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES**

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, Seventh-day Adventist missionaries have begun engaging in thorough contextualization and innovative mission practices. However, sometimes the resulting liturgies or cultural adaptations have caused reservations for onlookers. Thus, the following question emerges: is it necessary to articulate a missional hermeneutic to guide mission practitioners in their quest for a biblical, yet relevant, transmission of the gospel to majority world religions? This article will briefly survey some of the questions, issues, and purposes that surround the topic of an Adventist missional hermeneutic and will make several suggestions for a missional hermeneutic specifically for Islamic contexts. Whereas the immediate context of this study is Seventh-day Adventist missions, the principles and experiences involved are applicable to a broad range of Christian missions.

Keywords: biblical hermeneutics, missional hermeneutics, Islam

Introduction

The mission enterprise of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has had its share of failures and challenges as it has tried to advance the gospel in the world. The church has gained significant growth in regions where Christianity is widespread, but has faced major challenges in preaching the gospel and making disciples in the least-evangelized areas of the world, like the 10/40 window. It has been particularly difficult to break through to major world religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, and even harder to retain converts from these religions.¹ For Islamic contexts, much of what has been written on the challenges of making and retaining new converts centers around three main themes: (1) logical or doctrinal objections,² (2) objections to Western

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¹According to Don Little, a researcher on discipling believers from Muslim backgrounds, more than seventy-five percent of Muslim converts fade out of Christian fellowship or return to Islam. See *Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities: Scripture, History, and Seasoned Practices* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 18.

²For an example of an ex-Muslim theologian who takes a heavily apologist stance, see Nabeel Qureshi, *No God but One: Allah or Jesus? A Former Muslim Investigates the Evidence for Islam and Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).

or Christian lifestyle,³ and (3) social barriers, such as fear of persecution or family rejection.⁴

The missiological issues presented by Islam are by no means reducible to one single problem that can be solved simply. It is clear that mission practitioners are in need of contextually relevant, appropriate, biblical methodologies to transmit the gospel message into these difficult contexts of the world, and sometimes it is helpful to take a step back and analyze the foundational assumptions and interpretive strategies that we carry with us to the task.

Over the last few decades, Adventist missionaries have begun engaging in thorough contextualization and innovative mission practices. However, sometimes the resulting liturgies or cultural adaptations have caused reservations for onlookers.⁵ Thus, the following question emerges: is it necessary to articulate a missional hermeneutic to guide mission practitioners in their quest for a biblical, yet relevant, transmission of the gospel to majority world religions? This article will briefly survey some of the questions, issues, and purposes that surround the topic of a missional hermeneutic and will make several suggestions for a missional hermeneutic specifically for Islamic contexts.

The Rationale for a Missional Hermeneutic

The first question that will naturally be asked when pondering the term “missional hermeneutic” is, why would missiologists need a different hermeneutic than the one used by systematic theology or any other field of biblical research? Do not missiologists use the same biblical text? Why, then, would they need a different set of interpretive rules? To create a Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic of mission would imply either something more or less than what is commonly used by theologians. This may stir up questions as to whether missiologists intend to create a hermeneutic that shortcuts interpretive processes to more easily reach the desired end.

Let us begin by summing up what we mean when we talk about hermeneutics or interpretive principles. If we broadly sum up these interpretive principles that guide biblical scholarship, we could say that the

³Much of Phil Parshall’s classic work, *Muslim Evangelism: Contemporary Approaches to Contextualization* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), is centered around the theme of decreasing unnecessary lifestyle objections.

⁴Much of Little’s book (cited above in n.1) revolves around this theme. In a survey of sixty believers from a Muslim background, he was able to isolate a list of challenges faced by those who convert to Christianity. The top three, each of which were listed by more than half of the respondents, were “pressures from family, pressures from the local Muslim community, and pressures from being a socially and economically vulnerable member of one’s family and community” (*Effective Discipling*, 171–173).

⁵G. T. Ng writes, “Issues relating to contextualization are complex. Discussions on such matters are likened to the opening of a ‘Pandora’s box’ of vexed hermeneutical issues much debated today.” (“Connected to Culture, Conformed to Christ: Exploring Alternate Forms of Worship,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 1.2 [2005]: 57, 58).

field of hermeneutics is comprised of two key elements: presuppositions and processes. The former is what you bring with you *to* the text, and the latter is what you actively do *with* the text to extract meaning. Interpretive principles such as *sola Scriptura*, *tota Scriptura*, and *prima Scriptura*⁶ have guided most conservative Christian scholars since the Reformation. Furthermore, the methodological toolbox is well stocked with interpretive process tools such as contextual analysis, textual study, literary analysis, and historical comparisons.⁷

Additionally, Seventh-day Adventist systematic theologians have articulated clear and well-rounded presuppositions that they bring to the text (what Fernando L. Canale calls “macro-hermeneutics”). Canale lists two macro-hermeneutics that have irrevocably separated Seventh-day Adventism from mainstream Protestant Christianity. The first, what he calls the Principle of Reality, rejects the Platonic view of God as a being outside of time, space, and history. The second, what he titles the Principle of Articulation, places all biblical history within a connected metanarrative, which both corrects and illuminates our interpretation of Scripture as we see the connection of each part to the grand whole.⁸

These hermeneutical principles have guided theologians over the many decades of Seventh-day Adventist theological research. Has the Seventh-day Adventist body developed in its hermeneutical positions and practices over the years? Yes. Do the different voices from different geographical directions emphasize biblical themes with differing strengths? Yes, again. The question at hand is, does missiology need a hermeneutic distinct and separate from that which is used in traditional theological circles? Or do they perhaps need more emphasis on one or more presuppositions or processes? Does Seventh-day Adventism view hermeneutics as a fixed, unchanging set of guidelines valid for the next hundreds of years, regardless of time and context?

Let it be affirmed that missiologists are not interested in subtracting from the body of hermeneutics that has been used for so many years. Sincere missionaries do not attempt to apply Scripture in partial or selective ways. Most missiologists would readily affirm their dedication to interpreting passages in their historical and textual context and viewing them in light of an immanent God who interacts in time and space. If any separate hermeneutic is to be made, it must *add* qualifiers rather than subtract.

⁶See Richard M. Davidson, “Interpreting Scripture According to the Scriptures: Toward an Understanding of Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics,” *Biblical Research Institute*, 20–21 May 2003, <https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/pdf/interp%20scripture%20davidson.pdf>.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Fernando L. Canale, “The Message and the Mission of the Remnant: A Methodological Approach,” in *Message, Mission, and Unity of the Church*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2013), 269–270. For a comprehensive treatment of reading Scripture canonically, see John Peckham, *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, Sola Scriptura, and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

Since frontline mission—particularly in the 10/40 window—causes an intense and often bewildering interaction between Scripture and local mission context, it may be necessary to create a missional hermeneutic in which qualifiers and interpretive tools are actually *added* to safeguard Seventh-day Adventism’s historical hermeneutical approach to the Bible. In no case, however, should a missional hermeneutic be viewed as a pseudo-theological or unacademic approach to the biblical text. Although missionaries have sometimes been accused of shortcutting or ignoring correct hermeneutics, a missional hermeneutic should exist, not to perpetuate such practices but to hedge in and correct them.

There’s one last difference between systematic theology and missiology that further highlights the necessity for an Adventist missional hermeneutic. The former focuses heavily on orthodoxy, while the latter struggles to communicate both orthodoxy and correct orthopraxy across cultural divides. Since the rise of Seventh-day Adventism, as with many other Christian denominations, the Seventh-day Adventist message has been received primarily by people groups with very similar worldviews and behaviors—Protestant Americans, Catholic and Orthodox Europeans, Catholic Latin Americans, and so on. Thus, the emphasis has tended to be on doctrinal particularities rather than on worldview or behaviors.⁹

For example, the Southern Baptist liturgy is arguably closer to the Seventh-day Adventist liturgy than to a typical Islamic service. The greatest sources of spiritual virtue *ex opere operato* in Roman Catholicism and Islam—the Eucharist and Qur’anic recitation¹⁰—find no conceptual comparison within Seventh-day Adventism, but the Catholic Eucharist still finds echoes of familiarity in the communion service. A wide gulf exists between the thousands of Christian denominations and the rest of the majority world religions. Missiology’s task is to deal equally with worldview, beliefs, and behaviors in these foreign contexts. Some of the most perplexing issues have arisen out of mission in action—polygamy, gruesome initiation rites, *Sati* (widow burning), infanticide, leper burning, foot-binding, response to pagan festivals, appropriate worship forms, and the list could go on.

⁹Some behavioral exceptions would be the health, temperance, and dress reform movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—these were behaviors that arose out of the Seventh-day Adventist pioneers’ research and that of others as well. Recent studies in ecclesiology have led to decisions on religious/cultural behavior-based matters such as women’s ordination. Sabbath-keeping has been a behavioral matter throughout the entire history of the church and in every culture. But with these exceptions noted, it still seems that, overall, doctrinal issues have taken center stage.

¹⁰Frederick Mathewson Denny writes, “There is an almost sacramental quality to the recitation of the Qur’an, in that God’s presence is made apparent and all else is hushed before it . . . the reciting of the sacred words is itself a participation in God’s speech. This is why it must be performed as perfectly as possible” (*An Introduction to Islam*, 4th ed. [Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011], 134–135). He goes on to make the comparison, “In the Christian Eucharist the Lord is symbolically eaten in bread and wine. In Qur’an recitation, there is ‘real presence’ also, as God’s words and their power penetrate the consciousness of the listeners” (ibid., 141).

Is it necessary to develop a missional hermeneutic? We would argue that yes, it is necessary, in part because of the dramatic impact of hermeneutical trajectories on the worldview, beliefs, and behavior of new converts. Medical students that stand and watch an operation have very few rules to go by: wear sanitary scrubs; don't talk; don't touch anything. Interns that plan on participating in the surgery will have a host of other rules they must obey in preparation for doing hands-on work.

Missiology is hands-on, frontline work. It is with great indebtedness to biblical scholars and theologians who have laid solid foundations in hermeneutics that missiologists pick up their toolbox and keep every single tried-and-true tool for their own use.¹¹ It is with great humility that they proceed to present some additional suggestions that may assist them in forming a Seventh-day Adventist missional hermeneutic, particularly for use in Islamic contexts.

Presuppositions for a Missional Hermeneutic in Islamic Fields

As mentioned before, hermeneutics can be broadly divided into two categories: presuppositions and processes. This section begins by asking what presuppositions would be imperative to both the missionary and the Muslim Background Believer (MBB) when approaching the biblical text.

Missio Dei (God's Mission)

The first key presupposition undergirding a missional hermeneutic is to view the entire canon of Scripture as a missional undertaking of God. God is the missionary; the world is his mission field. Humans often fall into the habit of thinking that the mission experience is about *us*; we are sent by God and he is the one watching and helping while humans take center stage. A missional hermeneutic is instead theocentric, viewing God as the originator and primary agent of mission.¹²

God is the one who seeks wayward humans. *He* is the one who draws all humankind. *He* is the one who is emblazoned on every page of the Bible, calling to fallen mankind through the tear-filled voice of Jeremiah, the fiery denunciations of John the Baptist, and the thoughtful explanations of Paul. It is God, the great missionary, who became a man, who dwelt with us, adopting human life, culture, and language in history's greatest mission endeavor. The existence of the Bible itself testifies of God's missionary purposes towards mankind. In the words of Charles Taber,

The very existence of the Bible is incontrovertible evidence of the God who refused to forsake his rebellious creation, who refused to give up, who was

¹¹See Andrew Tompkins, "Seventh-day Adventist Approaches to Other Religions: Preliminary Findings from 1930–1950, Part I," *AUSS* 54.2 (2016): 333–348; idem, "Seventh-day Adventist Approaches to Other Religions: Preliminary Findings from 1930–1950, Part II," *AUSS* 55.1 (2017): 107–126.

¹²Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 64.

and is determined to redeem and restore fallen creation to his original design for it. . . . The very existence of such a collection of writings testifies to a God who breaks through to human beings, who disclosed himself to them, who will not leave them unilluminated in their darkness, . . . who takes the initiative in re-establishing broken relationships with us.¹³

A missional hermeneutic sees the God of mission traced throughout each book of the Bible. While every single passage cannot be interpreted as having an overtly missionary theme or message—and exegetes must not attempt to fabricate “missiological implications” in every verse of scripture—it is still true that the general movement of God towards humanity can be seen everywhere. Additionally, many texts have their origin in missionary tasks, such as how Israel related to the surrounding nations, or how the early church dealt with issues in their mission context.¹⁴

If theology is seeking to know the will and nature of God, then theology of mission is seeking to know the will and nature of the mission of God. Biblical theology of mission and its associated hermeneutics seek to interpret the mission activity found throughout scripture in order to further question, shape, define, direct, guide, and evaluate our understanding of and commitment to our ongoing participation in God’s mission. Missiological hermeneutics is an essential skill in biblical theology of mission, founded on a mindset of perceiving the mission activity within a given text.¹⁵

As an example of this presupposition in action, we turn to the book of Daniel. A typical Western Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic approach compartmentalizes the entire book: some sections as narratives (mostly used for children’s stories or sermon illustrations) and other sections as prophecies, used to convince non-Adventists of doctrines like the second coming and the investigative judgment. Still other sections are more opaque prophecies reserved for biblical scholars. This slicing and dicing of the book of Daniel destroys the overarching missional activity that is within the text. Sung Ik Kim notes that only a few scholars have probed the book of Daniel for missiological insights and perspectives.¹⁶

¹³Charles R. Taber, “Missiology and the Bible,” *Missiology* 11.2 (1983): 232.

¹⁴Wright, *The Mission of God*, 49.

¹⁵Shawn B. Redford, “Innovations in Missiological Hermeneutics,” in *The State of Missiology Today: Global Innovations in Christian Witness*, ed. Charles E. Van Engen, Missiological Engagements (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 43.

¹⁶Sung Ik Kim, “Contextualization in Daniel’s Use of God’s Names for Cross-Cultural Witness to Nebuchadnezzar,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 4.1 (2008): 18. Some authors have dealt with complex mission issues in the Old Testament in relation to how God has related with people who do not know him. See Andrew Tompkins, “God’s Mission to the ‘Nations’ and Hindus: Three Old Testament Narrative Models” (MA thesis, Andrews University, 2012); Cristian Dumitrescu, “Cosmic Conflict as a Hermeneutical Framework for Mission Theology in the Old Testament” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2010); Wright, *The Mission of God*; Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

The book of Daniel, though valuable for its prophetic content, must also be seen as involving the missional movement of God towards the nations of Babylon and Medo-Persia in general and King Nebuchadnezzar in particular. The fact that Babylon acted as a biblical antagonist against Israel makes us forget the yearning in God's heart to find spiritual and relational connection with the lost people of Babylon. Imprecatory psalms, such as Ps 137, which speak of the happiness to be found in dashing Babylonian babies against stones, make us hesitant to admit that probation might have still been open for the captors of God's people. However, the mission activity in the book of Daniel confirms that God still strives to save individuals from even the most sinful nations.

The first missional move that God makes is tragic for Israel but perhaps lifesaving for some Babylonians: he sends Babylon to take Israel captive, thus placing Israel—the light to the nations—literally within Babylon's borders. The Hebrews are told to live peaceably, to pray for the prosperity of their captors, and continue normal lives (e.g., Jer 29:4–7).¹⁷ Surmising that Israel's basic moral system and religious practices would remain relatively intact during their seventy-year stay in Babylon, God effectively placed several thousand missionaries in an unevangelized region. This is not to say that the primary purpose of the captivity was missional since the Israelites were sent into captivity because of their idolatry and their failure to remain true to their covenant with Jehovah—not primarily to demonstrate their faith, which was presumably very weak. Countless lives were ended in the judgment, and it would certainly create theological complications were we to suggest that the Babylonian captivity was God's ideal for His people. Nevertheless, we have to admit that the text seems to support the idea that at least some of the captives (such as Daniel and his three friends) were used by God for missional purposes.

God's missionary activity did not stop with placing Israelites in close proximity to the Babylonians. He began communicating with King Nebuchadnezzar through mysterious dreams. In a manner that was expertly contextualized to the king's worldview and existential needs, God answered the very heart questions he was asking. The dream contained an image, probably styled after the manner of pagan Babylonian idols that he would have recognized. Intriguingly, the dream could only be interpreted by one of God's agents living in captivity, the prophet Daniel, who carefully utilized cross-cultural religious terminology to introduce his God.¹⁸ By the end of Dan 2, Nebuchadnezzar has met God and recognizes something of his power, but has failed to submit to him.

In chapter three, King Nebuchadnezzar saw the Son of God walking in the midst of the fiery furnace, and trembled at the miracle of the unscathed

¹⁷While it is true that God was “punishing” Israel through exile, there was more taking place, as this passage suggests. Part of the reason for the punishment was probably rooted in Israel's reluctance to share God with the surrounding nations, therefore God pushed them into a situation where sharing God was more readily doable.

¹⁸Kim, “Contextualization,” 19–20.

Hebrews. At this point, King Nebuchadnezzar had met God, had actually *seen* the Son of God, and now made a decree that no man could blaspheme the God of the Israelites. However, he still failed to make a personal submission to God. As a God on a mission, the Lord did not give up yet. In chapter four, the king was finally struck with madness because of his incredible hubris against God in order to prepare Nebuchadnezzar's character so that he would be willing to pay complete obeisance to the King of Kings.

Early Christian history is replete with stories of conversions among pagan people groups after the conversion of the king. The Bible records no such mass conversion in Babylon, but the fact that chapter four is written by the king himself seems to suggest that he felt it was important to tell his personal testimony. It seems that God wants these narratives to serve as guides for how God and people must work together in mission, with a focus more on how we partner with him.

Similar miracles and spiritual overtures were made to King Darius after Medo-Persia captured the land. God's mission knew no ethnic or national boundaries. The rest of the book of Daniel then transitions into prophetic records of how God literally shared with Daniel some of his strategic plans for mission to Planet Earth. These plans are intricately bound up in the Great Controversy theme, wherein God allows evil to become fully mature as a demonstration (perhaps, a missional demonstration) before rising to execute judgment upon the earth. These prophecies are, in and of themselves, missional tools that have been used for many years to demonstrate the power and foreknowledge of God. The book ends with a shadowy glimpse into future glory, the culmination of all mission, wherein "many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake . . . to everlasting life" (Dan 12:2).¹⁹

The Bible can come alive in fascinating ways for missional practitioners when biblical events are viewed as missional movements towards humanity. Not every passage has an explicit mandate or methodology for mission, but the general movement of an active, passionate God towards a lost world can be traced in many passages.²⁰ A missional hermeneutic seeks to uncover these traces as it interprets the text—viewing more than just the immediate context and subject and seeing how the passage relates to the overall mission of God.²¹

In addition to viewing Scripture within a theocentric missional framework—the *missio Dei*—there are a number of other hermeneutical presuppositions that significantly affect the conclusions reached via exegesis. The next one has its roots in the Reformation.

¹⁹For more on Daniel and mission, see chapter four of Andrew Tompkins, *God's Mission to the Nations: An Old Testament Study Applied in the Hindu Context* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2015), 35–39.

²⁰Wright, *The Mission of God*, 31.

²¹Ibid. See also Michael W. Goheen, ed., *Reading the Bible Missionally*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

Sola Scriptura

Richard M. Davidson has written cogently on the hermeneutical presuppositions and process of extracting meaning from scripture.²² The prime directives of *sola Scriptura*, *tota Scriptura*, and *prima Scriptura* center us on the Bible as our sole and sufficient source of truth. Having these principles in place continually draws us back to the biblical text, compelling us to test everything against its precepts. Since the Bible does not rigorously prescribe every detail of human life, holding these principles produces a helpful tension between ancient text and modern context. Although the word “critical” has certain connotations in the hermeneutic realm, even adherents to the historical-grammatical approach use critical thinking skills to interpret the text. The Bible is supreme (*prima Scriptura*), it stands alone (*sola Scriptura*), and it stands in its royal entirety (*tota Scriptura*). Humans come humbly, yet with a certain amount of critical thinking skills, to learn how to apply the text to their current context and life. It is important to note that with these classic Protestant presuppositions, we have already made a crucial break with Islamic epistemology.

Although Islam produced some philosophical giants during the golden era of Islam—such as Avicenna (Ibn Sina), Al-Ghazali, and Averroes (Ibn Rushd)—in today’s world, the Islamic religion would greatly benefit in practice if more critical thinking or textual analysis of the Qur’an was generally encouraged. Epistemologically speaking, the primary mode of ascertaining truth in the Islamic world is via authority figures and traditions. The Qur’an itself is a religious text that is meant to be orally and aurally experienced as a form of worship understood to have inherent virtue in the listening and reciting process—actual understanding of the text is not necessary, particularly for those Muslims who do not speak Arabic.²³ These factors combined lead to decreased emphasis on critical thinking skills and more dependence on authority-based decrees to settle religious beliefs.

The authority figures in the Muslim world carry enormous influence and should not be underestimated as a source of truth for Muslims around the world. To make the shift from authority-based learning to Bible-directed, Holy Spirit-inspired, critical-thinking type learning takes time for an MBB. Every year, thousands of *fatwas* are issued from leading imams and scholars around

²²See, for example, Richard M. Davidson, “Interpreting Scripture.” There have been a good number of articles written in regards to methods in biblical interpretation. They can be accessed at the website of the Biblical Research Institute (<https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org>). Also, an important article is the official statement of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists on “Methods of Bible Study—Bible Study: Presuppositions, Principles, and Methods,” *Official Statements: Documents*, 12 October 1986, <http://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/documents/article/go/0/methods-of-bible-study/>. This document was approved and voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee at the Annual Council in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on 12 October 1986.

²³C. T. R. Hewer, *Understanding Islam: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 58.

the Muslim world. These *fatwas* dictate even the smallest details of life for the believers—such as whether playing Pokémon is permitted, whether polio vaccines are allowed, and whether or not the earth actually revolves around the sun.²⁴ Although technically, Muslims are encouraged to understand the Qur'an, in everyday practice it is rare to find Arab Muslims with more than a surface understanding of the Qur'an.²⁵

With this in mind, it must be stated that, although there are times that the Qur'anic text may be used as a bridge during early engagement, Islamic texts should never be given a permanent place in the MBB community. With the principles of *sola Scriptura*, the Bible alone, and *tota Scriptura*, the entire Bible, nothing else but the Bible should be used as the foundation for a missional hermeneutic. Ganoune Diop and Gottfried Oosterwal have produced excellent articles arguing for and against the use of Qur'anic verses in Muslim evangelism, and we do see some diversity of application among Adventists working in Islamic contexts.²⁶

²⁴Pokémon is forbidden on the grounds of encouraging worldly behavior, such as gambling. See KSA fatwa number 21,758. A fatwa was issued saying that the sun actually revolves around the earth, and any teachings or textbooks that state the contrary must be rejected as false science. See KSA fatwa number 15,255, <http://www.alifta.net/Search/FatwaNumSrchDisplay.aspx?language=en>.

²⁵Ganoune Diop, "The Use of the Qur'an in Sharing the Gospel: Promise or Compromise?" in *Faith Development in Context: Presenting Christ in Creative Ways*, ed. Bruce L. Bauer (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, Andrews University, 2005), 151–179. Gottfried Oosterwal, "Response to Ganoune Diop's Paper," in *Faith Development in Context*, 180–188. See also the complete work, Bauer, *Faith Development in Context*.

²⁶To borrow Oosterwal's terminology, the majority of workers in the Middle East or North Africa that are dedicated to working with Muslims utilize the phenomenological method of relating to the Qur'an in early stages of conversations. That is, they make comparisons between lifestyle issues or doctrinal beliefs in the Qur'an and the Bible that are similar or congruent. Discussing how Adventists believe in the judgment and the second coming of the Messiah, or that Adventists do not drink alcoholic beverages or eat pork are phenomenological ways of utilizing the Qur'an, even if a verse is not being directly quoted. This method starts spiritual conversations quickly and can be extremely useful in building bridges. However, if used alone, it can be insufficient because it often overlooks the deeper core differences that also need to be considered. The Functional-Comparative Approach uses the Qur'an as a springboard to introduce the topic (prayer, forgiveness, heaven, etc.) and discusses how these concepts *function* in both Christianity and Islam. Allowing for functional difference prevents the practitioner from distorting the text into a forced agreement with the Bible. The Core-Comparative Method of utilizing the Qur'an compares the core ideals and inner logic of the Qur'an and Islam as a whole. Some have come to the conclusion that there are no real bridges between the Qur'an and the Bible, while others see no core connections but still have no qualms about using the Qur'an as a missional tool. With these methods in mind, "using the Qur'an" or "not using the Qur'an" is not so black-and-white as we may think. There are layers of considerations that must answer the "how" and "when" questions.

In an official guideline on Adventist Mission in 2003, the Global Mission Issues Committee stated,

In building bridges with non-Christians, the use of their “sacred writings” could be very useful in the initial contact in order to show sensitivity and to lead persons along paths which are somewhat familiar. They may contain elements of truth that find their fullest and richest significance in the way of life found in the Bible. These writings should be used in a deliberate attempt to introduce people to the Bible as the inspired Word of God and to help them transfer their allegiance to the biblical writings as their source of faith and practice.²⁷

It is important to notice that this guideline refers to non-Christian “sacred writings,” such as the Qur’an, as useful during the period of *initial contact*. To secure a permanent position for the Qur’an in MBB worship services would be an affront to the principle of *sola Scriptura*. The committee went on to delineate recommendations for how such non-Christian “sacred writings” can be utilized during early stages of contact without endangering the primacy of the Bible.

- a. The Bible should be recognized as the teaching instrument and source of authority to be used in leading a person to Christ and to a life of faith in a society where another religion is dominant.
- b. The Church should not use language that may give the impression that it recognizes or accepts the nature and authority assigned to the “sacred writings” by the followers of specific non-Christian religions.
- c. Those using “sacred writings” as outlined above should develop or create a plan indicating how the transfer of allegiance to the Bible will take place.
- d. The nurture and spiritual growth of new believers in non-Christian societies shall be accomplished on the basis of the Bible and its exclusive authority.²⁸

The phrase, “the Bible and its exclusive authority,” echoes the hermeneutical principles of the Reformers and Adventist pioneers. Therefore, if Muslim ministry practitioners have a plan in place as to how they will move their Muslim contacts along a trajectory that culminates in a transfer of allegiance from the Qur’an to the Bible, it would surely seem that the principles of *sola Scriptura* and *prima Scriptura* retain their integrity.

A Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic for mission in Islamic contexts is a hermeneutic that first and foremost recognizes its limitations and challenges. It is a hermeneutic that involves constant dialogue with God through his self-revelation, most clearly seen in Scripture, but also in other forms of revelation

²⁷General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, “Engaging in Global Mission,” *Official Statements: Guidelines*, 1 June 2003, <https://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/guidelines/article/go/-/engaging-in-global-mission/>. See also “Roadmap for Mission,” *Official Statements: Documents*, 13 October 2009, <https://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/documents/article/go/-/roadmap-for-mission/>.

²⁸General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, “Engaging in Global Mission.”

(i.e., nature, dreams and visions,²⁹ personal testimony, the church as a body, the works of the Spirit, etc.). However, Scripture is the norm that norms all other revealed truths. By Scripture alone the other sources of God's revelation to humans are to be tested. But it must also be pointed out that because of the dynamic nature of Seventh-day Adventist mission in Islamic contexts, for hermeneutics to bear healthy fruits it must always be engaged in frontline application.³⁰ The Bible itself demonstrates that "correct interpretations of Scripture are most often surrounded by correct understandings and practices of God's mission."³¹ Furthermore, correct praxis also leads to correct interpretation. Hence the concept of a "hermeneutical spiral."³²

Believers from Muslim backgrounds bring with them a whole parcel of presuppositions that can easily distort their understanding of the biblical message. Their view of Allah is highly Hellenic—he is transcendent beyond any human knowledge and unknowable except for the direct transmissions he has sent down to his prophets.³³ All anthropomorphisms in the Qur'an are generally held to be metaphorical,³⁴ but arguments still rage within Islamic circles about whether or not we will actually see the face of Allah in Paradise.³⁵ The agonizingly strict views of the oneness of Allah—the doctrine of *Tawhid*—also bases itself upon a Platonic rendering of a God that can have no parts, no partners, and no division.³⁶ Allah is so pure and unified that nothing can be added or subtracted from his being—the core reason Muslims find it impossible to conceptualize God with an inner Trinitarian plurality.

Another presupposition that could easily distort the biblical text includes the Islamic view of human nature or *fitra* as inherently good,³⁷ which is intimately tied to views of sin and salvation. A human that is inherently good

²⁹See Bruce L. Bauer, "Towards an Adventist Theology of Dreams and Visions with Missiological Implications," (paper presented at the meeting of the AU/MEU Research Group on Adventist Theology of Islam, Beirut, Lebanon, 13–16 March 2017).

³⁰See Wagner Kuhn and Andrew Tompkins, "Theology on the Way: Hermeneutics from and for the Frontline," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 12.1 (2016): 7.

³¹Shawn B. Redford, *Missiological Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation for the Global Church*, American Society of Missiology Monograph Series 11 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 8.

³²See Grant R. Osborn, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

³³James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 257.

³⁴Sh. Nuh Keller, "Literalism and the Attributes of Allah," 2014, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/littlk.htm>.

³⁵David Waines, *An Introduction to Islam*, 2nd ed. Introduction to Religion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 117.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 18.

needs no salvation outside of himself, but merely needs to “remember” their primal condition. Islamic soteriology focuses on “remembrance” through deeds that will cultivate religious awareness rather than “salvation.”

There is also the Islamic view of the human soul as immortal and separate from the body. At death, the Muslim’s soul is drawn out through his nostrils, questioned by two angels, and taken to the gates of Paradise for a sort of pre-judgment.³⁸ Afterward, the soul is then dressed either in a filthy haircloth or in a fine, perfumed robe and sent back to its grave to wait—in full soul consciousness—until the day of resurrection.³⁹

Foreign missionaries working in Islamic regions do have the ethnocentric option of interpreting the Bible *for* MBBs and controlling all missiological decisions. However, in most cases, missiological decisions should not be made in isolation from indigenous believers. As is often the case, foreign missionaries and indigenous MBBs sit at the same table to search God’s word and make decisions together.⁴⁰ Although these Muslim believers have consciously made decisions for Christ, they may be at varying stages of detaching from their old Islamic presuppositions that they have absorbed from a lifetime of exposure to Islam. For this reason, it is important to be patient and consider the macro-hermeneutics that exist, in varying degrees, even within the church in the Middle East and North Africa.

Macro-hermeneutics: The Principle of Reality and the Principle of Articulation

Many of these major presuppositional stumbling blocks—such as the nature of God, the nature of man, and the nature of reality—can be countered by Canale’s two macro-hermeneutics: The Principle of Reality and the Principle

³⁸Shams C. Inati, “Soul in Islamic Philosophy,” n.d., <http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ip/rep/H010.htm>. Islamic theology contains elements that support both the idea of man as a unitary being that is sleeping in the grave, as well as the concept of soul suffering after death.

³⁹H. Lammens writes about the apparent contradiction by saying, “This problem has caused acute embarrassment to the Muslim schoolmen, no doubt because the *Sūras* furnish no clear solution. Certain verses, in conformity with ancient Arab beliefs, suppose the dead to be either sleeping or insensible in the tomb (Qur’an 22:7, 50:18). The tradition of the Sunni and Imamites has seized upon this suggestion and deduced therefrom its theory of the ‘Torment of the Tomb.’ This theory does not succeed in making clear the nature of the sufferings which torment simultaneously body and soul, in spite of their separation and of the bodily insensibility which follows it” (*Islam: Beliefs and Institutions* [London: Frank Cass, 1968], 53–54). As a frontline worker, I have looked into the eyes of Muslim women and asked them what their greatest fear is and heard them respond, “The Torment of the Tomb.” Whatever conclusions are reached by Islamic scholars, the reality is that some Muslims view the time between death and resurrection with great fear.

⁴⁰For an excellently proposed process of integrating foreign missionaries and indigenous believers in the process of developing scriptural understanding together, see Tom A. Steffen, *Reconnecting God’s Story to Ministry: Cross-Cultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2005).

of Articulation. The Principle of Reality is diametrically opposed to the Islamic view of God and the immortal soul. Reading the biblical text with the above Islamic presuppositions will produce radically different readings than if the interpreter understands and applies the Principle of Reality.

As an example, we can see how mainstream Protestant Christianity has largely retained a Neoplatonic and Aristotelian view of God and the human soul. Although they read the exact same Bible and have highly trained theologians, they arrive at different conclusions than Adventists.⁴¹ Without intentionally applying the Principle of Reality in our mission work with MBBs, we should not expect them to reach similar interpretations as we do.

The Principle of Articulation sees the Bible as a connected whole, Christocentrically anchored in the gospel message, and articulated through the Great Controversy metanarrative and the Sanctuary doctrine.⁴² It likewise plays a large part in replacing other major stumbling blocks to an accurate interpretation of the Bible. The narrative of man's perfection, fall, and subsequent experience of salvation communicates a sense of depravity that replaces an innately good and worthy *fitra*. The chronological, overarching narrative of God's interaction with Israel convincingly demonstrates that "remembrance" as a means of securing favor with God has never been enough—Israel's many failures to remember God and their final rejection of Christ demonstrates once more humanity's depravity and need of a savior. A holistic view of human nature as expressed in the Great Controversy metanarrative cannot coexist with the view of the human soul as immortal.

From these few examples, we can begin to see the tip of the iceberg as to how some Islamic presuppositions and biblical presuppositions affect the interpretation process. As religious/cultural outsiders (i.e., Western missionaries approaching the Islamic world), these Christian presuppositions may seem obvious and easy for Muslims to adopt. But what about for the young MBB who has been sent back to his home country to evangelize his people group? Can we be sure that his or her hermeneutic presuppositions are aligned in such a way that we will reach similar interpretations? How long does it take for a believer from a Muslim background to lose his Islamic presuppositions? Can they make the shift without assistance?

On the other hand, however, is the humble realization that exegetes from certain parts of the world do not have a monopoly on theologizing. While some may feel a passion to secure Seventh-day Adventist theology from being adjusted to fit pre-Christian worldviews, the missional practitioner should also be open-minded to the possibility of valuable theological contributions that may not fit his or her expectations. It is important to remember that much of the Western hermeneutic tradition is informed by Greek and Enlightenment ways of reasoning. Therefore, how does one find the delicate balance between promoting correct hermeneutical processes without imposing foreign logic systems?

⁴¹Canale, "Message and the Mission," 270.

⁴²Ibid., 278.

The Principle of Relational Life

From eternity past, the glorious and love-filled members of the godhead have related to each other from within the unspeakable councils of the inner Trinitarian communion. The concept of “Relationship” has existed as long as God has. All three persons of the godhead are seen, imminently participatory and present during Creation Week, as a new planet is spoken into existence.⁴³ Genesis 1 introduces the Creator as אֱלֹהִים, “God.” As soon as man is created in Gen 2, the name switch is apparent: The Creator is now addressed as יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים, “LORD God.” Once humans appear on the scene, the narration immediately switches to using the relational title of God.⁴⁴ This first narrative proliferates with relational language as God lays the foundation for subsequent generations to view Him as God-With-Us—not the clockmaker god that created and walked away, or a disinterestedly transcendent being.

The Bible is pockmarked with the tragic relational consequences of sin. Adam and Even had to leave the presence of God. Cain, the firstborn human child, committed fratricide. Family members were sold into slavery and friends were murdered for the fulfillment of lust. Isaiah lamented the relational impact of sin when he declared, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear” (Isa 59:2).

That Christ came to restore broken relationships is one of Christianity’s favorite themes, one that was stunningly embodied as the Lord of the universe took on flesh to tabernacle with us, to be Immanuel, God-With-Us. This topic of relational wholeness and interconnectedness becomes even more fascinating when we analyze it from the perspective of missiology and hermeneutics.

One of the most emotionally moving passages that portrays missionaries as spiritual relationship-builders is 2 Cor 5:18–21.

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

God has committed to us the ministry of reconciling the broken relationships between heaven and earth. Paul uses strong language to communicate this concept. God is *pleading through us*; we implore people to respond to God’s relational invitation.⁴⁵ At its core, missionary activity

⁴³Woodrow W. Whidden II, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2002), 246.

⁴⁴Michael L. Gowens, *A Study of God’s Hebrew Names* (Shallote, NC: Sovereign Grace, 2016), 53–54.

⁴⁵In the English language, we do not commonly use such terminology in everyday speech. It would be odd to say, “I implore you” or “I plead with you.” However, this

involves an element of relationality that connects people with people and people with God.

The concept of the harmonious interconnectedness that existed at Eden goes beyond interpersonal relationships. Man also had a harmonious way of relating to the various aspects of his own life. His pattern of communicating, eating, sleeping, working, recreating, and worshiping all contributed to the ultimate good in his life. He experienced a healthy relationship with his own inner emotions and related properly to his surrounding environment.

It is only after the fall that we see turbulent emotions like self-justification and shame and we also begin to see the results of chaotic patterns of relating to self, others, and the environment (Gen 3:7–13). In today's society, people eat food that ought to kill them and then take pills to stay alive longer. Energy drink addicts have been reported to have died from lack of sleep.⁴⁶ Promiscuity has proven to lead to sexually transmitted diseases, but rather than relating harmoniously with nature's design, mankind has invented various kinds of barrier devices that allow multiple sexual partners without the danger of disease.

It is on the plane of everyday human existence that theological and philosophical ideas are played out. Language, communication, marriage, family relationships, work patterns, rest and recreation patterns, eating habits, housing customs, environmental awareness, clothing customs, worship styles, music preferences, and exercise habits⁴⁷—these all are the places of human life and experience where the gospel must reach. Jesus promised to bring *abundant life*. This life is not a conceptual idea; it is a real experience that can be found through relating in healthy ways to every category of life. The life created in the Garden of Eden was a relational, interconnected experience where all things related harmoniously to each other;⁴⁸ the abundant life

is not unusual in Islamic contexts. The Arabic language is very vivid and descriptive; one of the highest qualities of social grace is to be an eloquent speaker. The Arabic language commonly uses impassioned verbs such as “beg” or “plead.” We have often had refugees that are desperate for humanitarian assistance using the same words to say tearfully, “I beg you, please do anything you can,” or heard desperately delinquent grade school students cry out, “I *beg* you, Miss!” with great zeal. These kinds of words are laden with powerful emotion. Paul does not say that we are merely “asking” on God's behalf. How might our sense of mission change if we *felt* with God in this process? If we could feel God's impassioned pleas as he literally begs for their hearts through us? What would be the personal, existential implications for mission if we recognize the emotional overtones in this passage?

⁴⁶Ryan Gorman, “Copywriter Dies After Tweeting about Working 30 Hours and Energy Drinks Blamed,” *Daily Mail*, 17 Dec 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2525584/Copywriter-dies-tweeting-working-30-hours-energy-drinks-blamed.html>.

⁴⁷See Andrew Tompkins, “Culture and Religion in Genesis 1–3,” (unpublished research paper, Andrews University, 2016). Especially interesting is the section titled “Cultural Elements of Genesis 2” (8–22), where the following topics are listed: work and rest, food and eating, language, human relationships and marriage, and clothes.

⁴⁸“How beautiful the earth was when it came from the Creator's hand! God

that Jesus promised in John 10:10 brings us back to this experience.⁴⁹

This presupposition has at least two implications for developing a hermeneutic of mission. First of all, it presupposes that the Bible has answers to every dimension and facet of human reality. Rather than dealing in abstracts, it should lead exegetes to search for principles that promote abundant life in which new believers can relate wholesomely to God, to themselves, to others, and in community. It will not stop at rejecting the biblically impermissible behaviors such as polygamy, honor killings, and widow burning—rather, it goes deeper to discover how people in any given place can experience the fullness of Christ’s abundant life. Missional hermeneutics allows itself to be concerned with details of one’s personal life and sees the whole person as a fully unitary being, each part of the whole in need of restoration.

Is the “good news” only meant to transmit doctrinal beliefs, a few new values, and a slightly shifted worldview? Or can the gospel be “good news” and “enhanced quality of life,” too? Can the “abundant life” seep down into every crack of human reality, changing behavior patterns, health, social connectedness, and emotional well being? The Principle of Relational Life sees humans as whole individuals, who are composed of a web of internally connected parts and pieces that deserve to be impacted by the gospel message.

It should be noted that the interconnected web of human experience is *not* the interpretive tool; it is that important body of subject matter that demands answers and guides interpreters to know what questions to ask. To view human experience as the interpretive tool itself (i.e., whatever seems “best” and most “abundant” for my life must be truth) is not a correct application of the Principle of Relational Life. Imagine, for example, the man who decides not to keep Sabbath because it would have negative consequences for his quality of life if he were to lose his job. Rather than serving as an interpretive tool, the Principle of Relational Life is a presupposition that all of life is connected and all of its connected parts can find answers in Scripture. This mindset forces missiologists to go beyond doctrinal discussions and touch people’s lives where they feel the most need.

Internally complex humans are connected in relationship to families, which are connected to communities, which are connected to nations, which are connected to the vast global populace. Ellen G. White speaks of this reality with the phrase “mutual dependence.” She writes, “We are children of God, mutually dependent upon one another for happiness.”⁵⁰

presented before the universe a world in which even His all-seeing eye could find no spot or stain, no defect or crookedness. Each part of His creation occupied the place assigned it and answered the purpose for which it was created. Like the parts of some great machine, part fitted to part, and all was in perfect harmony” (Ellen G. White, *Christ Triumphant* [Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1999], 8).

⁴⁹The creator God had to be born into humanity to restore the wholesomeness of creation. “And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him” (Luke 2:40, NIV).

⁵⁰Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1855–1909), 4:71.

All human beings are mutually dependent upon others, but this sense of community distills itself in a highly condensed form within the church relationship. “The bonds of unity which unite member with member of the church are to be as firm and harmonious in their operation as are the different parts of the natural body. The hands, head, and feet are so closely united, and so mutually dependent, that one member cannot live and act independently of the other members.”⁵¹ It is in this sense of mutual dependence that we arrive at our second hermeneutical application of the Principle of Relational Life. If the world church is living in mutually dependent relationship with each other, is it possible to look to the world church as partners in the task of interpreting scripture?

One of our field administrators worked for more than two decades in Africa. In a recent conversation, he described how, a number of years ago, African pastors in his region were not permitted to preach about how to deal with the spirit world. Church members were being assaulted by demons and having curses cast upon them, but received no biblical basis on how to deal with these attacks. The pastors were routinely told they could not preach about dealing with spirits because this was not part of the (then) twenty-seven fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and not in the *Church Manual*. Rather than presenting biblical answers to their members, the pastors were forced to pretend as if there were no such problems occurring among their members.

The administrator recounted how thrilled the pastors in his region were when the fundamental beliefs were updated to include the eleventh fundamental belief statement titled “Growing in Christ,” which emphasizes the complete victory of Christ over Satan and the forces of evil.⁵² The pastors

⁵¹Idem, *Manuscript Releases*, 21 vols. (Silver Spring, MD: Ellen G. White Estate, 1981–1993), 19:370.

⁵²This fundamental belief statement reads as follows: “By His death on the cross Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil. He who subjugated the demonic spirits during His earthly ministry has broken their power and made certain their ultimate doom. Jesus’ victory gives us victory over the evil forces that still seek to control us, as we walk with Him in peace, joy, and assurance of His love. Now the Holy Spirit dwells within us and empowers us. Continually committed to Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we are set free from the burden of our past deeds. No longer do we live in the darkness, fear of evil powers, ignorance, and meaninglessness of our former way of life. In this new freedom in Jesus, we are called to grow into the likeness of His character, communing with Him daily in prayer, feeding on His Word, meditating on it and on His providence, singing His praises, gathering together for worship, and participating in the mission of the Church. We are also called to follow Christ’s example by compassionately ministering to the physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual needs of humanity. As we give ourselves in loving service to those around us and in witnessing to His salvation, His constant presence with us through the Spirit transforms every moment and every task into a spiritual experience. (1 Chr 29:11; Pss 1:1, 2; 23:4; 77:11, 12; Matt 20:25–28; 25:31–46; Luke 10:17–20; John 20:21; Rom 8:38, 39; 2 Cor 3:17, 18; Gal 5:22–25; Eph 5:19, 20; 6:12–18; Phil 3:7–14; Col 1:13, 14; 2:6, 14, 15; 1 Thess 5:16–18, 23; Heb 10:25; James 1:27; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:18; 1 John 4:4)” (General Conference of

then felt free to address this important topic with their churches, and have since developed books and resources addressing this very thing—an issue that is remote and almost unreal to Western theologians, but that touches the lives of many African Seventh-day Adventists.

Can missiology and theology be done by Africans, Arabs, and Asians, or in the Global South? Most likely we will all answer “yes.” But what happens when their exegesis differs from ours? Or when ethnocentrism blinds our hermeneutics?⁵³ Wright makes a point that a missional hermeneutic must contain multicultural hermeneutics. At the beginning of the twentieth century, ninety percent of Christians lived in Europe and North America; today, at least seventy-five percent of Christians live outside these nations.⁵⁴ The Seventh-day Adventist Church assumes and encourages members in all countries to study the Bible. It is inevitable that different people from different cultures will see different gems of truth in the same book.

A missional hermeneutic must include at least this recognition—the multiplicity of perspectives and contexts from which and within which people read the biblical texts. Even when we affirm (as I certainly do) that the historical and salvation-historical context of biblical texts and their authors is of primary and objective importance in discerning their meaning and their significance, the plurality of perspectives from which readers read them is also a vital factor in the hermeneutical richness of the global church. What persons of one culture bring from that culture to their reading of a text may illuminate dimensions or implications of the text itself that persons of another culture may have not seen so clearly.⁵⁵

The Principle of Relational Life recognizes, first of all, that mission happens in relationship: God in relationship to the world, the missionary in relationship to his or her host culture, individuals in relation to their families, their communities, environments, and their selves. A missional hermeneutic will attempt to touch each of these connecting points that form the web of being for the individual in his/her personal or public life. This emphasis on

Seventh-day Adventists, “Growing in Christ,” *Beliefs: Salvation*, 2018, <https://www.adventist.org/en/beliefs/salvation/growing-in-christ>.

⁵³Some time ago I [Esther Happuch] sat and discussed some popular Bible narratives with an Adventist MBB couple from North Africa. We mentioned stories and tried to agree what the “core concept” of each story was really about. When we came to the story of Joseph, I felt sure that the core concept was forgiveness, or perhaps dependence on God. The North African MBB was sure that the core concept was family honor and obedience to parents. After we finished the conversation, I thought back to the individual’s “incorrect” understanding of the story and could not help feeling a little twinge of pity. *Poor guy, he’s still learning*, I thought. *Everyone knows the story of Joseph is a lesson in forgiveness*. In hindsight, my ethnocentric claim of having the correct interpretation could not have been more shamefully clear.

⁵⁴Wright, *The Mission of God*, 38. See also Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, eds., *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2006).

⁵⁵Wright, *The Mission of God*, 39.

human experience will not act authoritatively over the text, but rather provide the palette of questions that suggest subject matter for biblical study.

The Principle of Relational Life, secondly, recognizes the value of a multiplicity of perspectives in the hermeneutic process. As humans, related together in mutual dependence, we need and value perspectives from biblically sound, committed scholars in every world culture. A missional hermeneutic that operates within the body of Christ allows for diversity of interpretation without subscribing to pluralism as a hermeneutic ideology or allowing for relativism.⁵⁶ This process is validated and enhanced when utilized in everyday life, as we will try to demonstrate next by looking at mission in Islamic contexts.

The Development of Hermeneutical Practices

A recently held church planting retreat offered training to many of its frontline church planters that live and work in Islamic contexts. The main thrust of the meeting was to redefine church planting in terms of house churches rather than traditional structures, and to discuss factors leading to mass movements. One of the themes that surfaced prominently was the recommended use of the Discovery Bible School method. This method features minimal missionary control and high empowerment for new believers—something that has supposedly sparked mass movements in other parts of the world. Biblical narratives are discussed, and three simple questions are asked: what does this story tell us about God, what does this tell us about human beings, and who can we tell this story to?

The Discovery Bible School (DBS) method is highly acclaimed because of its simplicity and reproducibility. However, as we discuss the topic of macro hermeneutics and Islam, there are a few points to consider before adopting the DBS method in exactly the same way as Evangelical missionaries have used it.

First of all, many Evangelical Christians have founded their theology on Hellenistic views of reality, as has Islam.⁵⁷ Therefore, the standard DBS questions—what does this story tell us about God and what does it tell us about human beings—are not designed by Evangelicals to shift Muslim macro-hermeneutics. It is designed to shift beliefs and some aspects of worldview, such as allegiance, values, etc. However, Seventh-day Adventists are attempting to do something more than Evangelicals are doing. We are

⁵⁶Ibid., 40.

⁵⁷The influence of Aristotelian thought is more clearly documented in early Islamic history than Platonic thought. No Arabic manuscripts of Platonic dialogue exist from the tenth century golden period of *falsafa* (classical Islamic philosophy); however, many Aristotelian commentaries and translations exist from the same period. Al-Farabi, a famous Platonist from this period, was measured against the writings of Aristotle, not Plato. Though the extant texts seem to indicate that there seemed to be an obvious preference for Aristotelian work rather than Platonic, Paviz Morewedge notes that “the philosophers under Islam were so transparently Neoplatonists and were, at the same time, so oblivious to the true nature of their Platonism” (*Islamic Philosophical Theology* [Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1979], 15–17).

attempting to shift the macro-hermeneutics part of the MBB's worldview, which is a matter closely tied to epistemology and ontology. If church planters adopt a methodological structure like DBS, which is low missionary control and high MBB empowerment, can we expect this kind of shift to happen organically, as a result of Holy Spirit enlightenment?

The answer is yes and no. While we affirm that the Holy Spirit can illuminate minds without any human intervention, history demonstrates that the process takes much longer without assistance. It took more than a thousand years before Christianity experienced its first hermeneutic revolution—what we call the Reformation.⁵⁸ It is only recently that Lutheran theologians in Germany and Japan, staggering from the existential shockwaves of World War II and Hiroshima, began questioning the impassibility of God. These recent movements in the Protestant world have only begun to uncover the subtle but significant influence of Greek philosophy on Christian belief.⁵⁹

It simply takes a long time for worldview and macro hermeneutics to shift organically from within the culture. Yet this would be necessary if we relied solely on the DBS method without any supplemental plan to help facilitate key hermeneutical shifts. Evangelicals have had great success with this method and there is no doubt that it is one of the most effective ways to ignite mass movements and bring Muslims to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. However, if we wish to go beyond what our Evangelical friends have done and shift the macro hermeneutics of new believers to the point of creating Seventh-day Adventist theologians and Bible students within the MBB community, we may need to provide more scaffolding. This may look like resources and materials, it may look like discipleship, or it may look like trainings and seminars. The only other alternatives to scaffolding some form of hermeneutic shift would be either to retain a level of foreign missionary control (in which case correct orthodoxy and orthopraxy would be more likely), or to allow hermeneutic shift to take place naturally from within the culture (which would likely take a long time, during which there would be varying levels of doctrinal correctness produced by the MBB community).

A Seventh-day Adventist biblical hermeneutic for mission in Islamic contexts affirms five core presuppositions: The *sola Scriptura* Principle, the *missio Dei* Principle, the Principle of Reality, the Principle of Articulation, and the Principle of Relational Life. It is also recommended that missiologists conceive of ways to transmit these interpretive principles to new believers as quickly as possible in order to empower the new generation of indigenous theologians.

⁵⁸See Wright, *The Mission of God*, 38.

⁵⁹Stephen Voorwinde, "Does God Have Real Feelings?" *VR* 67 (2002): 35.

*Critical Contextualization, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit*⁶⁰

Moving beyond hermeneutic presuppositions for a missional hermeneutic in Islamic contexts, it is important to review critical contextualization as an important methodology. It is crucial to understand that critical contextualization is born out of the relationship between the *missio Dei* Principle, the Principle of Relational Life, and the *sola Scriptura* Principle. God's mission to the lost people of every nation on Planet Earth is viewed within the paradigm that the Bible contains an answer for all dimensions and facets of human existence. Critical contextualization is the methodological approach to Scripture that seeks to understand how the Bible affirms, judges, and transforms the various elements of human existence.

Typically, as missiologists attempt to form responses to religion, culture, and life as a whole, three common reactions surface: (1) wholesale acceptance (uncritical contextualization) of local customs, often based on a deep respect for culture, with its inherent weaknesses; (2) wholesale rejection (denial of the old): virtually all cultural forms are thought to be linked negatively to traditional religions; and (3) critical or integral contextualization, which attempts to communicate the gospel in a new context in ways that it is understandable to people there, including the development of church life and ministry that are biblically faithful and culturally appropriate in that context.⁶¹

The process of critical and faithful contextualization⁶² is of major importance in the cross-cultural missionary enterprise. In it, old beliefs and customs are first analyzed in terms of meanings, and then evaluated in the light of biblical principles and norms. The need to deal biblically with all areas of life is recognized, and this leads the church to avoid adopting dating, wedding, funeral practices, music, entertainment, economic structures, and political traditions from around itself or other places indiscriminately.

⁶⁰Parts of this section have been adapted from Kuhn, "Adventist Theological-Missiology: Contextualization in Mission and Ministry," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 27.1–2 (2016): 197–199.

⁶¹See A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*, Encountering Mission (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 12.

⁶²Paul G. Hiebert has used the term "critical contextualization" to mean the intentional, selective, disciplined, thoughtful incarnation of the normative gospel into particular cultures. See his landmark 1987 article, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 11.3 (1987): 104–112. Gordon R. Doss has adjusted the term to "faithful contextualization" and builds on Hiebert, but adds the emphasis that being faithful to the Bible is primary and adaptation to culture is secondary, though essential. See "Faithful Contextualization: Crossing Boundaries of Culture with the Eternal Gospel," *Ministry* 87.12 (2015): 6–9. See also *Introduction to Adventist Mission* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2018), 211–221. Charles H. Kraft refers to this concept as "appropriate contextualization," where he emphasizes, and perhaps over-emphasizes, the role of culture. See "Appropriate Contextualization of Spiritual Power," in *Appropriate Christianity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 375–395.

In order for missionaries to avoid a wholesale acceptance or a wholesale rejection of the culture they encounter, four steps in critical contextualization are recommended. First, uncritically gather as much information as possible about the meaning of local traditions, customs, and the practices related to the issues at hand (without criticizing people, otherwise they will not share openly). This focuses on understanding the old ways, and it involves both the expatriates (cross-cultural workers) and members of the local community. The information-gathering stage is a group effort with people on both sides. Second, engage in critical Bible study on the tradition, custom, or practice under scrutiny. Third, evaluate the custom (or tradition) in light of biblical understandings. In this process, the congregation has to be involved in order to grow in their own abilities to discern truth as they get involved in biblical exegesis as well. The missionary helps as a hermeneutical bridge. It needs to be noted that people are in a better position to evaluate critically their own past customs in the biblical light, since they know their culture better than anyone else. They know the deeper, hidden meanings of old customs and their significance in their cultural context. Fourth, apply and practice the new ethic. Acceptance and rejection needs to take place. People will have to make a decision: with freedom (encouragement) to experiment, following evaluation, and adjustments as needed. It is possible that in this process some things will be maintained, others will be modified, and some will have to be rejected. As necessary, functional substitutes may need to be developed or borrowed, and perhaps there will be the need for the creation of new forms as the church members understand and practice the biblical message.⁶³

As seen above, the theological principle guiding the faithful and critical contextualization methodology is that the Bible is the final arbiter or authority for belief and practice of church members everywhere. Thus, the Bible is its own hermeneuter, but it is the Holy Spirit that helps the believer in the interpretation, understanding, and application of its content and truths. Paul stated long ago that spiritual things are “spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14), and this can only happen through the enlightenment and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Davidson notes,

Since the Bible is ultimately not the product of the human writer’s mind but of the mind of God revealed through the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 2:12–13), it is not possible to separate “what it meant” to the human writer—to be studied without the aid of the Holy Spirit, from “what it means”—to be applied by the help of the Spirit. Both the original meaning and its present application involve the thoughts of God, which according to Paul can only be adequately comprehended if we have the aid of the Spirit of God.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Indeed, missiology is concerned with hands-on, frontline mission work. In this context, we have attempted to show that all our mission endeavors must

⁶³See Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1985), 171–192.

⁶⁴Davidson, “Interpreting Scripture,” 28.

flow from *missio Dei*, must be anchored in *sola Scriptura*, and are demonstrated through a Relational Life framework whereby the members of the body of Christ are guided by the Holy Spirit to fulfill God's purposes. Frontline mission work in Islamic contexts must take into account macro hermeneutics such as the Principle of Articulation and the Principle of Reality, and must operate with intention to purposefully transmit these hermeneutics principles to new believers.

This article has attempted to demonstrate the necessity for a missional hermeneutic for the transmission of the biblical message in Islamic contexts. This has been done by surveying some of the questions, purposes, issues of presuppositions, and practices surrounding this challenging topic. We have also attempted to provide guidance to mission practitioners by describing and applying important core presuppositions, interpretive principles, and methodologies through reviewing the literature, the use of case studies, as well as examples from Scripture.

It has been with great indebtedness to biblical scholars and theologians who have done solid work in hermeneutics that we have cautiously proceeded to present some additional suggestions that may be helpful in forming a missional hermeneutic, particularly for use in Islamic contexts.

As for now, "we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. . . . For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:9–10, 12, ESV).