

# The Exegetical Method Employed in 1 Peter 2:4-10

by

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## Abstract

*The New Testament writers employed conventional Jewish exegetical techniques of the New Testament era to interpret the Old Testament, but contemporary New Testament interpreters often fail to identify correctly the exegetical methods being employed. Using 1 Peter 2:4-10 as a test case, this article demonstrates the process of identifying the exegetical method New Testament authors used to interpret the Old Testament. One key is for interpreters to rely less on formulaic introductions and phrases as keys to identifying exegetical methods and to take all facets of the methodologies into account.*

## 1. Introduction

One of the greatest aids in studying and interpreting the New Testament's use of the Old has been the examination of the Jewish exegetical practices of that era.

Biblical interpretation in the New Testament church shows in a remarkable way the Jewishness of earliest Christianity. It followed exegetical methods common to Judaism and drew its perspective and presuppositions from Jewish backgrounds (Ellis1992:121).

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Since the authors of the New Testament have left behind only the results of their hermeneutics, and not a detailed explanation of their processes, modern readers must often compare the Scriptures with contemporary Jewish writings in the attempt to gain a better understanding of their methods. Consequently, the discoveries at Qumran have been particularly valuable, as the exegetical methods employed there were both explained and demonstrated.

Unfortunately, the existence of such supplementary material does not always guaranty a clear picture of the exegetical method employed by the New Testament authors. In 1 Peter 2:4-10, for example, modern scholars have variously argued that the method employed by Peter is *midrash*, typology or *peshet*.<sup>2</sup> These differing opinions may partially result from the uncertainty of the terms themselves.

Much confusion exists with regard to the use of the terms “peshet” and “midrash.” The definitions of these terms are not fixed even in the technical literature. Often when these terms are used, they are not clearly defined (Bock 1985:311).

Additionally, the occasional lack of textual keys, such as formulaic introductions or phrasing, serves to increase the difficulty of distinguishing between the similarities of certain methods.

This paper, in seeking to explain the exegetical method behind 1 Peter 2:4-10, will:

- briefly describe the various Jewish exegetical practices of Peter’s day.
- provide a clear description of peshet and typology, along with a description of their development and employment at Qumran.

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<sup>2</sup> Michaels (1988:95) argues that “The heart of vv 4-10 is a midrash based primarily on Isa 28:16 and secondarily on several other biblical texts.” Oss (1989:195) counters that in this passage “we find the most distinct Petrine use of the midrash-peshet genre available to us.” Marshall (1991:71), on the other hand, views the passage as “a case of typology: What God was doing in the time of Isaiah is seen as the pattern for what he is now doing....”

- demonstrate Peter's employment of both typology and peshet in his sermons as recorded in Acts.
- analyze 1 Peter in general, and 2:4-10 in particular, for further clues as to Peter's hermeneutical attitude and methods.

## 2. Jewish Exegesis

According to Longenecker (1975:28), "Jewish exegesis of the first century can generally be classified under four headings: literalist, midrashic, peshet, and allegorical." Literalists took the Word of God at face value: what they read was what it meant, "with the result that the natural meaning of the text is applied to the lives of the people" (Longenecker 1987:6). In this manner, literal interpretation most closely resembles modern exegesis in that the text is examined for what it says, and then the results of those studies are applied to a current situation.

Midrashic exegetes however, believed in the *sensus plenior*, or "hidden meaning," inherent to all Scripture, whether that meaning lay in a passage, phrase, or individual word.

Midrashic exegesis ostensibly takes its point of departure from the biblical text itself...and seeks to explicate the hidden meanings contained therein by means of agreed upon hermeneutical rules...The purpose of midrashic exegesis is to contemporize the revelation of God given earlier for the people of God living later in a different situation (Longenecker 1987:6).

The purpose of this activity was to modernize and adapt Scripture so as to make the text more relevant and applicable to current situations (Ellis 1993:151).

Allegorical approaches also looked to a secondary level of understanding in an attempt to liberate the "spiritual" meaning of the text from its primary understanding.

Allegory is an interpretive method which assumes that the writer is attempting to communicate something other than that which he is actually saying. Seeking to go

behind the obvious to the real meaning, it treats the elements of the text as symbols (Scott 2001:132).

Accordingly, the “natural” sense of the text was to be disregarded in favour of the deeper meanings that the text was thought to contain. This was accomplished by treating “the Old Testament as a body of symbols given by God for man’s spiritual and moral benefit, which must be understood other than in a literal and historical fashion” (Longenecker 1975:46).

Another form of Jewish exegesis is typology. It “differs from allegory in that allegory finds a secondary meaning in a text without regard to the original meaning or context” (Brewer 1992:221), whereas “typological exegesis regards the words of Scripture not as metaphors hiding a deeper meaning but as the record of historical events out of whose literal sense the meaning of the text arises” (Ellis 1993:169). “Typological exegesis is thus not a disclosure of the *sensus plenior* of the text” but “it is rather a disclosure of ... divine activity in history” (Fishbane 1985:352).

To reiterate the distinction between the two: In allegory the historical, cultural situation is inconsequential in determining the spiritual meaning; it merely provides clues through which the spiritual import may be found. In typology the historical situation and content of the passage are significant in themselves; true, they may be played down and considered of only secondary importance at best, but they are viewed as both real and valuable (Scott 2001:133)

The purpose of such an approach was to reveal a pattern of Divine activity so that “history becomes an insight into the present and the future” (Brewer 1992:221).

*Pesher* interpretation, though similar to the midrashic and allegorical acceptance of additional meanings, does differ in its point of departure. “With *pesher*, the starting point for understanding is not the Old Testament text, but a historical event or person” (Snodgrass 1991:420). Midrashic and allegorical interpretations on the other hand look first to

the text before seeking an application. For instance, *midrash* will approach a passage by saying “that (the Word) has relevance to this,” while *peshet* looks first to the situation, saying, “this (situation) is that” (Longenecker 1975:43). Accordingly, *peshet* is often recognized through its formulaic “this is that” phrasing.

This emphasis on the current situation is what helps to differentiate *peshet* from typology as well. While “*peshet* exegesis moves...from current event to text” (Sloan and Newman 1996:31), typology looks to the historical past as “both the basis and confirmation of the secondary application” (Brewer 1992:221). In other words, while typology sees the history of the Old Testament as the key to understanding current events, a *peshet* approach sees the revelation of current events as the springboard for interpreting the Old Testament.

This interpretation however, was not restricted to the original sense of the text, but rather, was by design, an attempt to uncover a hidden meaning in the text that would apply to the present day situation. As a result, *peshet* can be further distinguished from typology in that the exegete employing this technique often modifies the text he is examining to make it more applicable to the events of his day.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The Use of *Peshet* at Qumran

The community at Qumran was heavily influenced by the *peshet* exegetical method. It saw the Old Testament prophecies as “a ‘mystery’ (*raz*) in need of interpretation (*peshet*)” (Ellis 1993:160). This understanding of *peshet* is drawn primarily by the actual use of the word “*peshet*” in the Old Testament. “It is an Aramaic term used thirty times in the Book of Daniel to designate exclusively the interpretation of dreams or visions” (Patte 1975:301). The purpose of Daniel’s predictions was that “the Jewish people as a whole ... might understand their own day as a part of the divine plan for history which

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<sup>3</sup> See Ellis E E 1993. *Prophecy and hermeneutic in early Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Baker. Ellis first briefly reviews Stendahl’s analysis comparing textual variants at Qumran with those in Matthew, then goes on to do the same with Pauline examples (pp. 175-181).

was fast approaching its consummation" (Brownlee 1979:35). Therefore, his words are seen as an explanation of his community's current situation that is based upon supernatural revelation.

Likewise, the *peshet* employed at Qumran is eschatological in nature, identifying its own place in time as the last days of the present age (Ellis 1993:160). "This eschatological exegesis views the Old Testament as promises and prophecies that have their fulfilment within the writer's own time and community" (Ellis 1993:160). It is therefore a small step for the Qumran community to transpose "the use of the term '*peshet*' ... from the revealed interpretation of a dream to the revealed interpretation of ... the prophetic texts" (Patte 1975:301). The Qumran exegete's revealed interpretation is then, like Daniel's, "for the benefit of all who would hear and believe and identify themselves with his Community" (Brownlee 1979:35).

In addition, it was believed that this *sensus plenior* "could be ascertained only from a revelational standpoint" and that "the true message of Scripture was heard only when prophecy and interpretation were brought together" (Longenecker 1975:44). "The presupposition is that the text contains a mystery communicated by God that is not understood until the solution is made known by an inspired interpreter" (Snodgrass 1991:420). Thus at Qumran, the task of interpretation was considered a charismatic exercise that was left to the inspired teachers of the community (Ellis 1993:161). "Like prophets, they are mediators of the divine word and delivers of divine messages of contemporary significance" (Kugel and Greer 1986:62). Their role was not simply to interpret the Scriptures, but was instead to seek out the hidden meanings inherent to Scripture that could provide insight and guidance to the community.

Though *peshet* and typology differ as methods of interpretation, they share a similar hermeneutical flavour, as in both cases revelation occurs between the tension of Scripture and history (Patte 1975:312). At Qumran, both of these methods were used in complementary fashion so that "the community could discover its identity as the eschatological community of the New Covenant" (Patte 1975:312).

“For the covenanters’ interpretation of Scripture there was only one *Sitz im Leben*: the community” (Patte 1975:213). “They had an eschatological focus in their reading of the Hebrew Scriptures” because they “believed they were an end-time community” (Snodgrass 1991:417). Thus, “the prophetic text” is interpreted “as referring to the community and its history (Patte 1975:304) while “biblical sacred history was seen as the *type* of contemporary and future sacred history” (Patte 1975:312).

Patte (1975:309) goes on to argue that though the process of “uncovering the community’s revealed identity” was continual, “a further use of Scripture was needed in order that it might discover how to carry out its vocation.” He notes that this second application of Scripture is more dynamic as “Scripture was used in tension with cultural changes” as “how to carry out the community’s revealed identity (i.e., how to be God’s Chosen People) was to be discovered in each new cultural situation” (1975:310-311).

#### **4. Peter’s Attitude toward the Old Testament**

Understanding the prevailing methods of exegesis in first century Judaism provides a framework within which we can analyse the evidence we have of Peter’s attitude towards the Old Testament. In the second chapter of Acts, Peter stands up to address the crowds on the day of Pentecost. In explaining the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, he introduces a quote from Joel by saying “*this is that* which was spoken by the prophet” (Acts 2:16, NKJV, italics added). The introductory statement itself is undeniably *peshet* in flavour with its “this is that” formulation. The message too is of a *peshet* nature, for when Peter declares that “a prophecy which in Joel was addressed to the nation Israel now had its fulfilment in the Christian church” (Harrison 1969:1127), he, like the exegetes at Qumran, has applied by inspiration a past prophetic word to his community’s current situation.

Under the Spirit’s guidance, Peter, like the *peshet* commentaries of Qumran, was moving from current event (the outpouring of God’s Spirit) to text (Joel 2). What was hidden from previous generations—the true

significance of Joel 2—was now revealed” (Sloan and Newman 1991:34).

The fact that Peter’s is indeed applying a *peshet* technique here is given further evidence by his alteration of “afterward” in the original of Joel to “in the last day.”<sup>4</sup> This change served to heighten the aspect of fulfilment (Longenecker 1975:100), thereby making it more applicable to his current audience.

Another “surprising piece of Biblical *peshet*-exegesis” (Bruce 1973:232) comes in Acts 4:11. In citing Psalm 118:22, Peter again presents a new fulfilment to an Old Testament prophecy by claiming: “*this is the ‘stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone’*” (Acts 4:11, NKJV, emphasis mine). Once more Peter uses the “this is that” formula (“that” being “the stone”), to introduce the Old Testament text. And, as we noted in Acts 2:16, Peter again alters the text he is quoting to make it more applicable to his audience. In this instance, his alteration of “the builders” from Psalm 118:22 to “you builders” clearly reveals his *peshet* understanding and application of the passage.

However, Peter did not limit himself to only a *peshet* approach to the Old Testament. An example of typology and fulfilment is seen in Peter’s words in the first chapter of Acts, as he discusses both the fate of Judas and the necessity of replacing him. Peter, in the midst of a particular situation, looks back to general statements made in the Old Testament and finds a suitable application for them. Psalm 69:25 addresses the enemies of the godly man, and is therefore a natural “type of the betrayer of Jesus” (Marshall 1994:65), the God-Man. Psalm 109:8 is likewise a curse directed towards the enemy of a man of God (David), and therefore the curse can easily be redirected to the enemy of the Son of David.

It is clear from these passages that Peter, from a Jewish perspective, saw the solidarity of his people’s history, and its typological

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<sup>4</sup> While both Marshall (1994:73) and Longenecker (1975:100) note this alteration, only Longenecker discusses the *peshet* connection.

correspondence with the present age. It is also obvious that as a Christian he saw the entirety of the Old Testament as pointing to Jesus and the new age that he would usher in. These attitudes allowed him to use both the history and prophecies of the Old Testament to address the situations of his day with both typology and *peshet* exegesis.

## 5. Analysing 1 Peter 2:4-10

Having examined the exegetical methods of the day, as well as Peter's own personal exegetical tendencies, this paper now focuses on an attempt to discern which method Peter employed for the passage in question. To begin with, Michaels (1988:95) conclusion that this passage is a *midrash* is unconvincing. As Best (1969) has detailed, Peter's use of the Old Testament in this passage served to build and strengthen an argument. No commentary is given for the texts used, as "the material is of interest to him only as it supports and illuminates his own rhetorical purposes" (Moyise and van Rensburg 2002:27). As the purpose of *midrash* is to offer practical commentary for the text, the absence of such commentary indicates that another method was employed.

Typology, however, is much more difficult to dismiss as the method with which Peter drew upon these Old Testament sources. In fact, Bruce (1977:67) explains Peter's use of Hosea in verse 10 in a manner that suggests typological influence.

In 1 Peter 2:10 (as in Romans 9:25 f.) this promise, which originally referred to a situation within the national frontiers of Israel, is seen to embody a principle which in apostolic days was being worked out on a world-wide scale.

If Bruce is correct in this assessment, then Peter, while not denying the reality of the original promise, may in fact be interpreting it as a type of God's reaching out again to people who were not originally His people.

Without a *peshet* introduction, the task of differentiating between clear-cut *peshet* and typological correspondence is a difficult one. While

*peshar* deals first with the present and typology focuses on the past, both seek to understand the correlation between the two. Perhaps it is this common ground, formed in the dynamic tension between past and present, which at times makes it difficult to distinguish between them. Though it could be maintained that *peshar* deals with quotations while typology deals with images, even that distinction becomes blurred in 1 Peter. Passages such as 1 Peter 2:9 could either 1) in a *peshar* fashion be saying that Moses' words, as recorded in Deuteronomy, actually refer to Christians, or 2) through typology be saying "you are now what Israel was."

The difficult task of identifying Peter's method of exegesis in 1 Peter 2:4-10 is, however, aided by his own testimony back in the first chapter of his letter, where he claims that the Old Testament prophets did not have the full interpretation of their own revelations, but that their prophecies were intended for Peter and his audience. Thus, the Old Testament prophecies are at once recognised as being both previously hidden and now open for interpretation.

1 Peter 1:10-12 enunciates a clear-cut *peshar* attitude toward the nature of biblical prophecy...though the terms 'mystery' and 'interpretation' are not employed, the thought here is strikingly parallel to the *raz-peshar* motif found in the Qumran commentaries (Longenecker 1975:201).

In his explanation that even the Old Testament prophets failed to find the fullness of the gospel that we now know, Peter was not, as Grudem suggests (1995:67), trying "to increase his reader's appreciation for their great salvation in Christ." Rather, his design was to communicate the foundation for his understanding of Scripture: a *peshar* attitude, which "is similar to the approach of the Qumran covenanters in dealing with prophecy" (Oss 1989:196).

Further evidence of this *peshar* approach is seen in 1 Peter 1:24-25, where Peter quotes from Isaiah and then applies that quotation with the "this is that" formulation. "But the word of the LORD endures forever.' Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you" (1:24-25, NKJV). As Ellis (1993:160-11) points out, the "this is

that” or “this is” formulation often appears at the end of the quote, and must not be understood as only an introductory formula. Thus, in this passage we again find a *peshher* formulation and a *peshher* application, as Isaiah’s prophecy about God’s word is now *understood* to be regarding the gospel message.

Therefore, if Peter’s previous exegetical examples are to be a guide, then one must lean toward viewing 1 Peter 2:4-10 as *peshher* in nature. Though his use of the stone imagery in these verses comes without the “this is that” formula, it must be recognised that “the author is giving us the results of his use of Scripture without emphasizing the process itself” (Patte 1975:303). That process, however, has already been shown in 1 Peter 1:10-12, where the author has clearly stated his understanding of the Old Testament prophecies as former mysteries that are now being opened for understanding. This exegetical foundation provides the basis for any future prophetic applications that Peter may make. It is therefore the assertion of this paper that Peter’s *peshher* attitude toward the Old Testament is the primary exegetical force behind 2:4-10.

Additionally, as shown earlier, Peter has already introduced the same quotation from Psalm 118:22 in Acts 4:11 with “this is the stone” formula. It must therefore be recognised that Peter does not employ the *peshher* introductory formula in every instance in which that has been his exegetical method.<sup>5</sup>

In the same manner, the purpose of the passage should give some indication as to the method used to develop it. The two main points of the passage seem to be to help his readers understand their new identity (Grudem 1995:97), and the obligations of that new life (Moyise and van Rensburg 2002:17-20).

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<sup>5</sup> Sloan and Newman (1991:34) note that the absence of a formulaic *peshher* introduction is not unique to Peter’s writings: “Although the New Testament rarely employs the formula “this it that,” its bold, Spirit-inspired, eschatological treatment of the Old Testament is often *peshher*-like.”

“He reminds them of their new identity in three ways: (1) indirectly, and independently of the three quotations (v. 5); (2) directly, on the basis of Isa 28:16 (vv. 7-8); (3) directly, in terms drawn loosely from a number of other biblical texts (vv. 9-10)” (Michaels 1988:94).

In citing these passages together, Peter was trying “to assign to the Gentile communities ... an essentially Jewish identity” (Michaels 1988:95).

Like the exegetes at Qumran, Peter wanted his people to see themselves as a religious community with a corporate identity. To this end, he describes his readers as “living stones (1 Pet 2:5),” as at Qumran where “the image of the stone...was applied to the community...and the members of the community are even described as stones” (Oss 1989:195).

Peter’s understanding of this new community, like that at Qumran, also went beyond mere identity. In his eyes “to be the people of God is not only a privilege but a responsibility” (Michaels 1988:96). While the above texts serve to give identity to Peter’s readers, this is not his only goal. “Peter’s ultimate theological use of the ... texts may have been to establish a compelling foundation for his ethical exhortation” (Oss 1989:193). This duty aspect of identity, once established, is illustrated throughout the rest of 1 Peter 2.

This stress upon community identity and responsibility seems to tip the balance further away from a typological understanding of the passage. While typology is primarily used to disclose the historical pattern of divine activity (Fishbane 1985:352), the focus of *peshet* is to explain the current situation via the interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. In this way, the exegetes at Qumran apprehended the Old Testament and gave their community a sense of identity and purpose. It appears that in this passage, Peter was doing the very same.

Finally, while the passages from Isaiah and Psalms were clearly prophecies in need of interpretation, Hosea’s words (quoted in 4:10) might have been viewed as typological by Peter, given the recent

inclusion of the Gentiles as the people of God.<sup>6</sup> However, looking back to Acts 10, one is reminded that the inclusion of the Gentiles was first revealed to Peter in a vision. This supernatural revelation could itself be considered as a likely foundation for a *peshet* interpretation of Hosea. As with his quotation from Joel on the day of Pentecost, Peter again seems to be moving from current event (the inclusion of the Gentiles) to the text (Hosea's prophecy) with a *peshet* orientation.

## 6. Conclusion

After examining the definitions of Jewish exegetical methods, it is easy to understand the daunting nature of the task of deciding which one was employed in writing a specific New Testament passage. The main difficulty seems to arise from the fact that each method overlaps with one or more methods in at least one area of its description (see Appendix A). For instance, (1) several methods look for a "hidden" or "spiritual" meaning, (2) several rely on the original meaning of the text, (3) several seek to provide a contemporary interpretation of the Old Testament and (4) and several look to the text first to begin their exegetical process.

Because of this overlapping, scholars have alternately pointed to *midrash*, typology and *peshet* as the exegetical method employed in 1 Peter 2:1-10. However, the following evidence supports the conclusion that Peter was employing *peshet* exegesis as he wrote the passage in question.

- his use of *peshet* in Acts
- his *peshet* attitude in 1 Peter 1:10-12
- his re-use of the previously *pesheted* Psalm 118 in the passage in question
- the intent of the passage to reveal a community identity and responsibility to his Gentile audience (which is how *peshet* was employed at Qumran)

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<sup>6</sup> Despite arguing against a typological approach by Peter in this passage, the author does view Hosea's words as a typological precedent for God's ongoing and future saving activities.

- his supernatural revelation in Acts 10 that Gentiles were to be included establishes a foundation for a *peshet* interpretation of Hosea
- the lack of textual commentary, which seems to indicate that the current situation was Peter's point of departure

This analysis of Peter's use of the Old Testament in 1 Peter 2:1-10 suggests that relying exclusively on formulaic introductions and phrasings to identify the exegetical method used to interpret the Old Testament is inadequate. Though the presence of such formulas is a great aid in understanding the author's methods, the absence of these formulas can too easily be used to dismiss a particular method. Instead, each identifier, be it method, point of departure or purpose, should be included in the examination process so that all facets of the methodology in question are brought into a sharper focus.

## Appendix A

### Methods of Jewish Exegesis

Method	Description	Point of Departure	Purpose
Literal	Searches for the natural meaning of the text	Text	To provide current application
<i>Midrash</i>	Searches for the “hidden meaning” of the text	Text	To provide current application
Allegorical	Treats Old Testament as a collection of symbols, and ignores the original meaning	Text	To illuminate the “spiritual meaning” of the text
Typological	Treats the history of the Old Testament as a precedent for God’s current and future actions	Text	Demonstrates a continuity that underlies Divine activity
<i>Pesher</i>	Points to the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy in current situation	Current events	Give community a sense of identity and a sense of purpose

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