Only recently have Pentecostal scholars begun to reflect critically upon their practices of biblical interpretation, but distinctive hermeneutical approaches were present from the beginning of the movement. The dynamic Pentecostal revival created a unique interpretive matrix from which emerged fresh interpretive strategies. The old hermeneutical wine skins were incapable of containing the new wine of the Holy Spirit that God was pouring out on all people.

Early Pentecostals found themselves in a position similar to that of the early Church in the book of Acts. Before the Day of Pentecost, the disciples had operated under the assumption that Jesus the Messiah would restore Israel to its proper position in the world (Acts 1.6). The outpouring of the Spirit, however, gave them an alternative vision of God’s plan, which was supported by a new understanding of Scripture. In the early church, we find ‘a perplexing tension between a breaking into this world of the kingdom of God, in which Christian believers act as servants in God's redemption of the world, and the need to wait for God to fulfill the promises of the Old Testament according to God's own timing’.1

Pentecost produced a radical transformation of the epistemology, worldview, and hermeneutics of the early believers. Before Pentecost, the disciples would have subscribed to the common worldview and interpretive assumptions of first-century Judaism (though Judaism itself was not monolithic). They also would have been influenced by the spread of Greek philosophy, which was not only ubiquitous in secular contexts but also was subtly interjected into Judaism through the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures.

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The hermeneutics of the apostles changed on the Day of Pentecost. Although they continued to utilize many standard Jewish exegetical practices, their approach to biblical interpretation was altered by at least four new contextual factors: 1. the life, teachings, and resurrection of Jesus; 2. the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out on the Day of Pentecost; 3. the mission of the spreading the gospel, which demanded that the disciples go with haste into the world; 4. the eschatological nature of Jesus’ kingdom, which required the disciples to wait patiently for the return of Jesus.

In its radical re-ordering of reality, Pentecost might be compared to the divine encounters of the Old Testament prophets in their call narratives. The prophetic experience was an apocalyptic event that deconstructed previously held assumptions and created new theological perceptions and new possibilities for God’s people. Just as Moses was reborn at the burning bush, just as Israel was transformed at Mt. Sinai, and just as Isaiah was reshaped by his vision, so also the early disciples were changed at Pentecost. The comparison between Pentecost and the prophetic calling is strengthened further by Peter’s interpretation of Pentecost as the fulfillment of Joel’s promise that servants, sons, daughters, old, and young ‘will prophesy’ (Acts 2.17). Therefore, the gift of the Spirit is the gift of prophecy; and, consequently, Pentecost creates a community of prophets. As John McKay has argued, the prophetic gift of the Spirit naturally leads to the prophetic interpretation of Scripture. The sermons in the book of Acts as well as the New Testament documents demonstrate the outworking of that prophetic hermeneutic.

Like the early church, the first Pentecostals inherited a set of interpretive presuppositions; but while the apostles had been shaped by the hermeneutical assumptions of Judaism, the early Pentecostal movement was indebted to the conservative hermeneutical approaches of the late

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3 Sheppard sees the tension between ‘hurrying and waiting’, along with the ‘passionate personal experiences of the Holy Spirit, as the two features that form the ‘heart of the Pentecostal tradition’ (Sheppard, ‘Biblical Interpretation after Gadamer’, p. 140).