

READING THE BIBLE THROUGH THE CORRESPONDENCE OF THE ESCHATOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS: THE BIBLE AND OURS

Ma'afu Palu

Ma'afu Palu is the Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies at the Sia'atoutai Theological College of the Methodist church in Tonga. He holds a D.Min. from Faith Lutheran Evangelical Seminary, Tacoma, Washington (2004), and a Ph.D. from University of Western Sydney, Australia (2009). His Ph.D. research was on Jesus' concept of time.

INTRODUCTION

One aspect of hermeneutical discussions constitutes an attempt to apply the scriptures to the contemporary situation.¹ This is a notion, which appears to have already been utilised in the Bible. The books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, for instance, can be taken as a reappropriation of the story told from 1 Samuel to 2 Kings, to the post-exilic community. Even Josephus' retelling of the story of Israel appears to be an attempt to set forth the idea that the

¹ I have in view here the insight of Graeme Goldsworthy that the hermeneutical task properly includes: (1) exegesis, the attempt to understand what was said by the author to his intended audience; (2) hermeneutics, the attempt to understand the relevance of the ancient text to the contemporary situation; and (3) homiletics, the application of the ancient text to the contemporary audience. See G. Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1981), p. 43. I am not convinced by the contention of Brian A. Shealy that there is, in the contemporary hermeneutical discussion, a need to reassert the distinction between hermeneutics and application. The semantic import of the term "hermeneutics" is admittedly slippery, to be contained by a strait-jacket definition, but there appears to be an expansion of its semantic scope from the set of rules for biblical interpretation to also embrace the application of those rules to the text, in order to recover its meaning for the contemporary situation. See B. A. Shealy, "Redrawing the Line Between Hermeneutics and Application", in R. L. Thomas, ed., *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids MI: Kregel Publications, 2002), pp. 165-194.

history of Israel has now arrived at its fulfilment in his contemporary situation, with the elevation of Vespasian as Roman emperor. Perhaps the way in which Ps 18 is included in the narrative of David in 2 Sam 22 represents an attempt to provide it with a new literary setting, and thus, making it relevant in another historical setting. The same trend can be detected in the New Testament, with Paul's retelling of the story of Israel, claiming that it has reached fulfilment in the resurrection of Jesus (e.g., Acts 13). In hermeneutical discussions, a number of proposals have been put forward as possible ways in which the Bible can be made contemporaneous with us.

R. BULTMANN

In one sense, Rudolf Bultmann's demythologisation program was an attempt at contemporising the biblical message from a negative direction.² He seems to have struggled with the question of how the New Testament message can be appropriated by a modern person. Bultmann identified the major hindrance in such an attempt with what he observed as the mythological framework of New Testament eschatology. Included in this mythological framework is the three-tiered universe, in which there is heaven above, and hell below. Thus, in order to make the biblical proclamation relevant to the contemporary situation, one must retrieve the non-mythological elements from the predominantly mythological framework of the New Testament, thus demythologising the biblical document.

The problem with Bultmann's demythologising program, however, is that, once it is accomplished, we are left, not with the central message of Jesus and the Apostles, but, rather, with their moral examples, as existential paradigms for modern human beings. The "gospel" that was foundational to that moral concern has been fundamentally overlooked, since it is supposedly mythological. Consequently, we are left with a gospel-less morality – precisely the thing, from which Jesus and the Apostles sought to rescue their contemporaries.

² See R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London UK: SCM Press, 1958).

JAMES D. SMART

James D. Smart believes that the success of contemporising the Bible depends on students of the Bible fully immersing themselves, not only in the biblical world, but also in the contemporary world. In other words, the Bible interpreter must live in two worlds.³ Only by living in these two worlds at once would the Bible interpreter recognise that he/she is living, not in two worlds at one time, but in one world. The two worlds become one, in the sense that the Bible analogously becomes a “magic glass”, through which we look to see ourselves, our neighbours, and our world, as they really are.

Smart’s insight is to be applauded for his recognition of the distinction between the textual world and the contemporary world of the biblical interpreter, as well as the necessity for students to immerse themselves in both, and, thus, to become, not only an astute student of the biblical writers, but also to be people of their own time, being sensitive to current issues that might confront their audience. Nonetheless, the dynamic, in which the biblical world becomes a “magic glass”, through which reality can be observed, needs to be nuanced more carefully and clearly. The question as to what proper sense, in which one might assume the biblical world as a “magic glass”, is not satisfactorily answered by Smart. The present study intends to indicate precisely one possibility, in which this may be made possible.

N. T. WRIGHT

N. T. Wright argues that the Bible is structurally analogous to a four-act Shakespearian play, whose “fifth act” has been lost.⁴ In other words, the Bible consists of four distinctive “acts” of God’s drama for Israel, climaxing in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. The missing “fifth act” is God’s activities in the contemporary situation. Since there is no direct word of revelation from God to us today, Wright suggests that we need

³ See J. D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics* (London UK: SCM Press, 1970), p. 163.

⁴ See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol 1 (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 140-143.

“actors”, who have completely immersed themselves in the first four “acts” of God’s drama, so much so, that they could perform what is the contents of the fifth “act”, as if Shakespeare himself would have written it. Given that the current postmodern situation is characterised by a widespread ignorance of the biblical plot line, Wright’s suggestion, even though sound, is, nonetheless, rendered impossible as an undertaking. Ultimately, it would induce a situation quite similar to that in Judges, where “everyone did as he saw fit” (Jdg 21:25).

JOSHUA NG

Joshua Ng observes three paradigms, in which the Old Testament scriptures are being made contemporaneous in the New Testament.⁵

- (1) Ng observes that the cultural differences between God’s people in the Old Testament, and those in Paul’s contemporaries, did not prevent the direct application of the Old Testament to those in the New Testament, as God’s word. Hence, the temptations Israel faced in the wilderness become the foundation of Paul’s warning to the Corinthian believers not to succumb to temptations in their social setting (1 Cor 10:1-22).
- (2) Ng also observes the opposite scenario, where the culture remains constant, and yet, there are different applications of God’s word. For instance, while 1st-century Jews maintained the same culture as those, to whom Leviticus was written, yet animal sacrifices were no longer applicable to believers, as indicated by the author of Hebrews (Heb 10:1-7).
- (3) Finally, Ng detects that, even if historical situations differ between the Old Testament audience and those in the New, the same application of God’s word can be made to them. Thus, for the Sadducees’ misunderstanding of the resurrection (Mark 10:18-27), Jesus shows that their dullness is the direct result

⁵ See J. Ng, “Jumping the Gap”, in *Briefings* 217 (1998), pp. 5-11, see pp. 7-9.

of not understanding the word God spoke to “them”, and then He went on to cite Ex 3:6 – a passage that was spoken to Moses in the wilderness.

CORRESPONDENCE OF ESCHATOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS: THE PROPHETS AND OURS

I wish to propose, in addition, to the categories observed by Ng, that the fundamental similarities between the general features of the prophetic eschatological framework and ours, in the contemporary situation, enables the prophetic message to be appropriated by us, in our contemporary situation.

THE PROPHETIC ESCHATOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Undoubtedly, it is impossible to offer an exhaustive portrait of all the fine details relating to the prophetic eschatological framework. Nevertheless, I observe that a homogeneous view of prophetic eschatology was commonplace in Israel in the time immediately leading up to the Exile, as attested in the pre-exilic prophets. By prophetic eschatology, what is envisaged is the cardinal content of the prophetic message about the End that was impending to them and their audience.

A few broad strokes of the conceptual brush are required to provide an adequate approximation of prophetic eschatology. Several features appear prominent in prophetic predictions about the End. Almost all the pre-exilic prophets were charged with the responsibility of announcing God’s impending judgment to their audience, and summoning them towards repentance. In fact, it was the distinctive mark of the false prophet to predict imminent good fortune and prosperity for Israel during the pre-exilic time (e.g., Jer 23:16-18). In general terms, several prominent features tend to stand out in the administration of the prophetic ministry in pre-exilic times.

Firstly, the beginning of their prophetic ministry is marked by the “coming” of the word of the Lord to the individual prophet in the form of a call to prophetic ministry. Perhaps the most famous, in this respect, is the call of

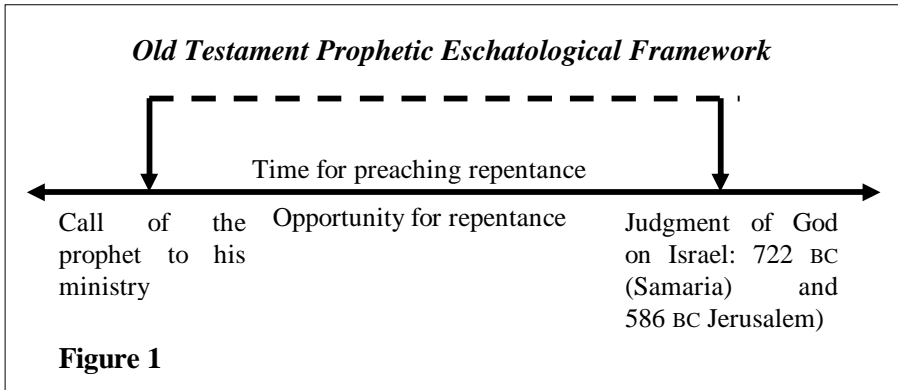
Jeremiah to the prophetic office (Jer 1:5-10). The foundation of the prophet's call was God's covenantal commitment to Israel.

Secondly, the main role of the prophets is to proclaim the word of God to their contemporary situation. Among the latter prophets, the word of the Lord was dominated by the announcement that the End was approaching (e.g., Amos 8:3; Ezek 7:6). This End is described as an impending catastrophic event, political in nature, but also possessing theological and spiritual overtones. Thus, to the northern kingdom, the End that Amos proclaimed, even though it was fulfilled in the Assyrian captivity, is connected with the approaching "day of the Lord" (Amos 5:18-20). The message of the false prophets was distinctively against this message of doom. In the time of impending wrath upon God's people, false prophets proclaimed a message of peace and prosperity, thus securing the people in their stubbornness, and failing to appropriate the message of the true prophets.

A third component of the prophetic eschatological message was the exhortation of God's people, in their contemporary situation, towards repentance. God promised to withhold the catastrophe that He intended to bring upon Israel, if they repented and turned to Him, through obeying the covenant (Ezek 18:31-32). This was supposed to be their principal message. Again, it was the false prophets that propagated the counter-message that there was no need for repentance, since the Lord's goodness would continue to abound for Israel in days to come.

Fourthly, the prophets were not only declaring doomsday to Israel, but also the hope of transformation. Even though, the "day of the Lord" was a "day of darkness", there was a better day awaiting Israel in the future, with God promising a "new heaven and a new earth" (Is 65:17-18; cf. Amos 9:11-15). Especially with the pre-exilic prophets, even though their message was dominated by warnings of a coming national disaster upon Israel, God also wished to tell Israel that His faithfulness to the covenant would not ultimately be thwarted by their unfaithfulness. Through His prophets, the Lord declares, not only a message of impending destruction, but also of future restoration, on a cosmic scale.

These features of the prophetic eschatological framework can be represented in diagrammatic form as follows:



THE CONTEMPORARY ESCHATOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

We can hardly obtain the prominent features of the contemporary eschatological framework with relative ease, as has been the case in deriving the prophetic eschatological framework. In order to adequately estimate the conceptual depiction of this phenomenon, a number of preliminary considerations are in place.

Firstly, despite the apparent diversity of the biblical document, there is an amazing unity presupposed throughout by the coherence of its basic story line. Secondly, it is also instructive to bear in mind that the biblical narrative framework includes in its scope the beginning in creation, and the consummation in the new creation. This important observation prevents us from concurring with Wright's proposal, outlined above.

Thirdly, then, if the coherence of the scope of the biblical grand narrative involves the beginning, in creation, and the end, in the new creation, then, it follows, that our contemporary situation, insofar as we are living after the coming of Jesus, and His expected return, and eagerly anticipating the new creation, belongs within the biblical narrative framework. It is this sense of belonging within the narrative framework that we shall utilise as foundational to the suggestion for making the Bible contemporaneous in

this paper. We shall try to identify where we rightly belong in the flow of biblical narrative, in the hope that this would clarify, for us, how we may appropriate the word of God, spoken in the past.

Fourthly, an important presupposition, which underlies the proposal set forth in this paper, is that the narrative framework of the Bible corresponds to a historical continuum, in which the described events occurred in reality. The way in which this correspondence is made is entirely beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, a growing community of scholars have appealed to the fact that the biblical documents were written to be believed. In fact, this implies, among other things, that biblical scholarship must drop its default hermeneutics of suspicion and seek, rather, a hermeneutics of reconciliation, in which it should try to befriend the text. With these suppositions in mind, let us try to recover the eschatological framework of the contemporary situation.

According to the New Testament, we are living in the period between the first coming of Jesus and His return, to bring judgment on the living and the dead. Some have referred to this duration as the “in-between-time”, or the “interim period”. The New Testament nowhere refers to the period in view in these terms. It would be instructive, here, to find out how New Testament writers understood the period of time, in which they were living.

A convenient point of departure, in this consideration, is Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-36). In that sermon, Peter tries to help the Jerusalemites to understand the phenomenon of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which they have just witnessed. Drawing on a citation from Joel 2, Peter claims that the descent of the Spirit confirms that Jesus is both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:33-36). The Holy Spirit’s outpouring signifies the fulfilment of what the Lord promised would happen “in the last days” (Acts 2:17). In context, the “last days” constitute the duration before the coming of the dreadful day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment (Acts 2:20).

In that light, the duration between the first coming of Jesus, and the anticipated day of the Lord, constitute the last days. The dreadful day of the Lord is described by Paul to his Athenian audience in the Areopagus to

be the day God has fixed for the judgment of the world (Acts 17:3-31). Elsewhere, Paul affirms that we must all appear before the judgment throne of Christ to give an account of the things we did in the body, whether good or evil (2 Cor 5:10).

Even though there is certainty about the impending judgment, the New Testament professed ignorance, when it came to specifying when it will happen (Acts 1:7). In fact, Jesus, and even Paul, spoke of the Day of Judgment as, unsuspectingly, coming upon the world, like a thief in the night (1 Thess 5:1; Luke 12:39-40). Even though judgment dominates the New Testament message about the future, it is not the sole emphasis. There is, moreover, the message about the resurrection of the body, and the expected revelation of the sons and daughters of God, in the glorious transformation of the New Jerusalem, the new earth, and the new heavens (1 Cor 15; Rev 21-22).

This anticipation of God's impending judgment of the living and the dead becomes the proper context for understanding the apostolic message of Christ crucified. Even Jesus' proclamation that the "time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is coming near" (Mark 1:15) is another way of expressing the impending Day of Judgment. Jesus announced that the fulfilment of time constitutes the dynamic of the coming of God's long-awaited "favourable time". It is the time for repentance, and for the forgiveness of sins, in the name of Jesus. In this connection, Paul described the present as the "fulfilment of the ages" (1 Cor 10:11). It is the time for the forgiveness of sins, based on repentance, to be proclaimed, beginning in Jerusalem, and stretching out to the ends of the earth (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). This explains the preoccupation of the Apostles and the early church with the proclamation of Christ crucified. If the future of the present creation is the dreadful day of the Lord, is it not the most logical undertaking to appeal to all people to be reconciled to God through Christ?

We have seen that the principal role of the ancient prophets was the proclamation of God's word to their contemporary situation, and that God's word was an exhortation towards repentance, in view of the impending judgment. In the "last days", or the "fulfilment of the ages", the

prophetic role of proclaiming repentance has been entrusted by Jesus, not only to His Apostles (Luke 24:44-47; Acts 1:8), but also to those who proclaim the gospel (1 Peter 1:10-12). Peter strengthens the assimilation by the gospel preachers of the message of the ancient prophets, by indicating that the gospel preacher is called, by the death of Jesus, to the task of proclaiming the message. While the word of God came to the ancient prophets, it is the word of the cross that calls the gospel preacher to the role of preaching the gospel.

In summary, the eschatological time frame of our current situation consists of the expectation of the dreadful day of the Lord's judgment. This characterises life's anticipation between the first coming of Jesus and His second coming. It implies that the "today" of Jesus, and of the New Testament writers, embrace even our contemporary situation today, in its scope, since we still live with the expectation of the return of Jesus. Today is an opportunity, not only to proclaim the word of the cross, but also for the daily exhortation of believers to remain faithful until Jesus' return (cf. Heb 10:24-25). This can be represented in diagrammatic form as follows:

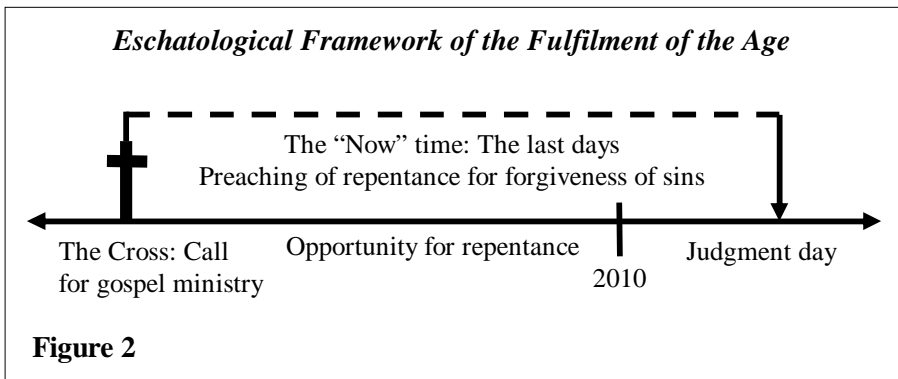


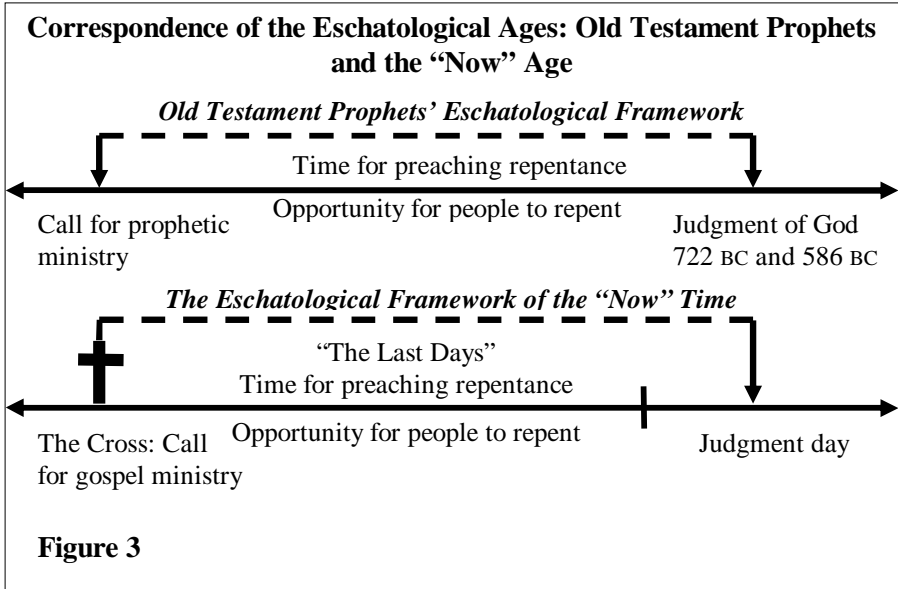
Figure 2

CORRESPONDENCE OF ESCHATOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The important point is the recognition that, similar to the contemporaries of the Old Testament prophets, we are also living under the dreadful near-expectation of the impending judgment day. Because of the structural similarity of the eschatological time frame, in which we now live, to that of

the Old Testament prophets, God's message for them can also become God's word for us here and now. The announcement of judgment to them should become the announcement of the impending judgment of God to us today. Just as the message of coming judgment to them was meant to turn them back to God in repentance, so also, is the message of the gospel to us today. It urges us to turn to God and "wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thess 1:10). In view, therefore, of the judgment to come, Paul urges Timothy, his young associate, to "preach the Word" (2 Tim 4:1-4).

There is, of course, a real sense in which the word of God is clearer to us, here and now, than it was to the prophets, and their contemporaries, there and then. They did not have Jesus Christ, the "word in flesh", then (John 1:14). Jesus' coming heightens the urgency of the prophetic message of repentance for us here and now. We are rendered inexcusable for not believing in God's word, the Bible, with its solemn declaration to us that salvation is found in Christ Jesus alone, and that justification for our sins is graciously attainable through His blood, by faith alone (Acts 4:12; Rom 3:23-24). We must, therefore, make every effort to turn to God now, while we still have the opportunity to do so, before either death or judgment catches up with us. Figure 3, below, shows how the eschatological framework of the prophets corresponds to the time frame, in which we currently live in "these last days".



IMPLICATIONS FOR THEOLOGICAL CONTEXTUALISATION IN THE PACIFIC TODAY

As a result of the similarities between the eschatological time frame, in which we now live, and those of the Old Testament prophets, I wish to give four reflections on how contextualisation could be done in the Pacific, in a way more in line with the biblical storyline.

- (1) If contextualisation is trying to replant Christianity in the Pacific context, in terms of our culture, history, stories, and personal experiences,⁶ then, we must realise that the essential nature of the “tree” (i.e., Christianity) that we wish to replant in our Pacific context is eschatological – that is, the gospel speaks of the “last things”, namely, of repentance, because of the coming day of judgment, in which Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead, and to establish the kingdom of

⁶ See M. Palu, “Pacific Theology: A Reconsideration of Its Methodology”, in *Pacific Journal of Theology* 29 (2003), pp. 30-58, esp. pp. 32-34.

God in the new creation. Thus far, most attempts at theological contextualisation in the Pacific tend to overlook the eschatological element of the good news about Jesus. Actually, Christianity does not just teach us ways to live, here in the Pacific, in the present time. It teaches us to live the life of the coming kingdom of God, here in the Pacific, until it is fully realised when Jesus returns.

- (2) Another view of contextualisation in the Pacific involves the retelling of our personal stories from the viewpoint of a Pacific Islander, in order to explain the values that we hold dear.⁷ However, we must see our personal stories within the context of the big story of God's dealing with humanity, in Jesus. That is, we must not retell our stories merely as Pacific Islanders, but as Pacific Islanders who are living under the Lordship of the risen Jesus, and expecting His return. In that light, the fact that I eat green bananas, and wear a special hat to church on Sunday, as a Tongan, are unique ways in which God has made me a Pacific Islander member of His family. In other words, my personal story, as a Pacific Islander, is consumed and reshaped by the big story of God's dealing with humanity in Jesus Christ in such a way that even the cultural and personal values I adopt are in line with the kingdom of God's values. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor 5:10 NIV).
- (3) We must learn to see Pacific contextual theology as a reflection on how to live in the Pacific context during the "last days" – the short time, during which we are living, before the dreadful judgment of God arrives. That is, we need to understand that we have been living in the last days ever since

⁷ See K. A. Kanongata'a, "Why Contextual", in *Pacific Journal of Theology* 27 (2002), pp. 21-40.

the first coming of Jesus. This means that we should not listen to those who make their Christianity out of interpreting the daily news, to find out when the last days will arrive. The New Testament believers lived in the last days, and so do we, since we live in the same time frame as they did, between the first coming and the return of Jesus. Hence, we should seek to think, theologically, about how best to preach repentance to our people here in the Pacific. If doing so means we must use our culture, and our personal stories, to make the gospel better understood by our people, then we should do so. But there is a need to avoid the kind of contextual reflections that seek to understand aspects of the biblical storyline, in terms of our culture, but have no application to our lives as Pacific Islanders, living with the expectation of the impending judgment of God, when Jesus returns.

- (4) Given that the similarities between the time frame of the Old Testament prophets and the time, during which we live, allows for their message of repentance, in view of the coming judgment, to also become our message. In view of the return of Jesus, to judge the living and the dead, there is a pressing need to understand that the Bible has its own way of making its message applicable to us. That is, it is a mistaken view to think that the Bible is irrelevant for us today, and, therefore, there is a need to contextualise. Contextualisation, indeed, is necessary, but it should be seen in terms of illustrating and applying biblical truths, and not an attempt to make it relevant to us here in the Pacific. If the Bible is, as it claims to be, namely, the living word of God (Heb 4:12; cf. 2 Tim 3:16), then we always need to begin our contextual theological reflection with the view that scripture is relevant to us today. Our task, as Pacific theologians, is one of applying that living word to our people, in ways that directly address the many problems they currently face.