

BIBLICAL STUDIES IN A POSTMODERN AGE¹

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Some Comments About Postmodernism

What is Postmodernism?

Postmodernism is a rather hard thing to define: it is perhaps easier to feel it than to articulate intellectually. It would not be useful in this essay, at any rate, to formally *define* postmodernism.² Instead, I offer a few preliminary comments about postmodernism as I understand it (or perhaps as I feel it). First, the name: the term 'postmodern' itself is significant: it implies no definitive characteristic other than being 'after modernism'. But this is important, for postmodernism is either an extension of, or a reaction to, the 'modernist project' which is now seen to be either over or being displaced. The 'modernist project' began in the age of the Enlightenment, and its impelling thesis was that by means of reason, the human condition could be improved. Truth and Progress were the great slogans. Confidence in the essential goodness

¹ This paper was delivered as a public lecture at the Universities of Copenhagen, Denmark, and Dunedin, New Zealand. I have not attempted to furnish the published text with more than a minimum of footnotes.

² Among the classic texts of postmodernism are J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984); F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1981; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); I. Hassan, "The Culture of Postmodernism," *Theory, Culture and Society* 2 (1985), 119-32. D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) gives an excellent account of the demise of modernism and the rise of postmodernism across the cultural spectrum.

of humanity, hope for the future and trust in scientific methods were among its characteristics. Human values were in principle universal and in the course of time, all humans would recognise that fact. We might say that all these things are 'fixed points' in a stable evolving universe embracing metaphysics and ethics. The most typical *philosophical* expressions of modernism include the theories of Hegel, and perhaps last of all positivism, especially logical positivism. In all these cases the ability of reason to dominate reality through understanding is asserted. The typical *political* formation is socialism, the creation of a rational and thus secular state in which universal values are protected and which improves the conditions of every citizen (at least in theory!).

One aspect of modernist culture which postmodernism challenges is its adherence to grand narratives, master-narratives, myths, stories or whatever that were supposed to command universal assent and to represent 'the truth' (the truth of Western culture, in effect). Scientifically-driven progress is one of these myths, European-centred history another, the distribution of gender roles yet another. Postmodernism deprives all these of their authority and their privilege, recognizing them merely as ideological constructs, and encourages the emergence alongside them of competing narratives and myths: feminism challenges a patriarchal culture with its history of great men; histories of the United States (for example) are being told by so-called 'native Americans' in which the coming of Christopher Columbus is a bad moment, marking the destruction of a civilization. Perhaps among the scientists fewer postmodernists are to be found; but the limits placed on scientific progress by the constraints of economic means, and the recognition that many scientific solutions actually create new problems (such as the resistance of bacteria to antibiotics) suggests that progress is at the very least not a simple linear path, if it is anything at all. The idea that improved technology equals progress is, after all, merely what some scientists (and politicians) happen to believe. It is not a self-evident truth. Postmodernism, then replaces the notion of an objective 'history' with different stories. We shall see in a moment how important this perspective is for biblical history.

Postmodernity emerges from a distrust, then, of Truth, History, Progress, Reality; it constitutes a denial of these fixed points of modernity. Several forewarnings of this denial can of course be seen even during the modernist era: in philosophy, by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, even Wittgenstein, while Freud threw doubt on the fixed point of human

self, Einstein on the fixed points of time and space, Planck and Heisenberg on the fixed point of the predictability of the behaviour of matter, and Sartre on the fixed point of essence or identity. These discoveries have mostly encouraged an outright rejection of the modernist faith in a stable universe, but even where they have not, they have induced at least a failure of nerve. We do not have the cultural confidence that our modernist predecessors had in the 'march of history'. As a consequence, hard-line postmodernists can argue that science is a form of religion, an epistemological system, which is no less subjective or more reliable than any other, and which *constructs* truth rather than *discovers* it. Less extreme postmodernists concede that the universe we inhabit is not governed by the kinds of rigid laws that make it predictable. As for the essential goodness of humanity, weernism on its own terms. Rather, they were to a large extent the application of modernism principles, and as such they now cast a shadow over the great modernist project itself.

And what of the future? The future we are creating does not look like the modernist paradise towards which the human race is slowly moving. Too many humans, resurgence of nationalism and sectarian religion, terrorism, drugs, crime, democracy under threat, poisoning of the earth, increasing difference between rich and poor, divorce of politics and ethics are all symptoms of the modern world. The modernist signposts to the future have been taken down or turned round. Postmodernism not only doubts that humanity is good: it is not even sure that humanity has an essential nature at all, and it ponders the meaning of 'good' itself. Who can say what is 'good'? Good for whom, and for what? 'Progress' and 'nature' are, says a postmodernist, constructs of our mental activities. Objectively they do not exist, and there is no universally agreed agenda for progress or universally agreed diagnosis of human nature. Without the signposts of modernism, without the fixed points of reference, not just a sense of direction is lost, but the very notion of direction itself disappears. Truth, too, is not what objectively is the case, but what people agree to believe it is. In the world of business (according to an airline advertisement I have often seen), you do not get what you deserve, but what you negotiate (in the world of postmodernism, indeed, the notion of 'deserving' has little place). And what people believe is what they are invited, forced or simply choose to believe rather than something external to themselves that they can rationally apprehend. Because of its belief that basically, a truth is simply an ideology that is accepted as true, and because of its suspicion that there may be no

universal values, postmodernism applauds plurality and diversity of beliefs rather than unity.

The Economic Factor

Whether or not there is an economic substructure of postmodernism, as has been argued by Marxists such as Jameson, there are interesting sidelights to be thrown on postmodern culture by an analysis of capitalism. The socialist experiment (modernism, seen as having failed) seems over, and market capitalism is currently orthodox. The logic of this capitalism is universal and eternal competition. It constitutes a perverse form of rationality, one based on impersonal economic forces and not on personal human reason. It can thus be seen as Marxist heresy, in which Marx's call for the emancipation of the worker becomes the slogan of the emancipation of the consumer, but also one in which the sum total of rational human behaviour ('the market') replaces some transcendental force such as 'history'; thus it is a secularised Marxism, in which individuals are constructed by the economic activity in which they participate. It does not have, as Marx did, Hegel's metaphysics of the evolution of history. Competition can only lead to cheaper and better goods and more efficiency in production. But that is not much of a goal: it is rather only a means to some kind of end that lies outside the discourse of capitalism. It may, indeed, aim to promote economic success, but in fact its own logic requires that for every success there must be failures. Also unlike classic Marxism, since there is no real objective human nature, there is nothing for humans to be alienated from, and indeed our nature is fragmented as we are dismantled into taxpayers, consumers, employers and employees, each role fighting against the others in a capitalist system. The system has no place for the notion of human beings (nor indeed for those who are unemployed or without money, since they cannot be consumers of anything but welfare, which is economically inefficient). The capitalist philosophy of a stable economic system sustained and guaranteed by the conflict of economic forces is a powerful metaphor for (if it is not one of the causes of) the postmodern idea of values as determined by the negotiation of different interests. We *bargain* for the truth against competitors or business partners; we do not *discover* it. And, as noted earlier, the lack of an objective reality and the disappearance of the concept of a whole human being (to which, as we can see, many individuals are reacting) means that there is little room for ethics. The ethics that big business wants to accept is usually one that it can sell, that will improve its image and

thus is market share. If being ethical is bad for profits, it is not ethical, since business ethics demands producing the best for one's shareholders.

And so, postmodernism represents a reassessment of the concept of value itself. What defines a human being? What is truth, what is progress? What is culture? The values based on these concepts, basic to modernist discourse, are denied, but, more importantly, the terms themselves are deconstructed. How is the music of Beethoven superior to that of the Rolling Stones? Rembrandt better than Andy Warhol? Why is heterosexual behaviour more normal than homosexual behaviour, except in the purely statistical sense? Ideas of cultural hierarchy and of normality appeal to some transcendental scale of values that postmodernism just cannot, or will not, see. Language, once thought of as a mirror of reality at the height of modernity, has become either a game, with Wittgenstein, or, with Saussure, an enclosed self-referential system of signs incapable of referring outside itself; or is shown, with Derrida, to be inevitably unstable, deferred, slippery and constantly undermining itself.

The problem of value leads us back to economics, where I find so many metaphors for postmodern culture: there is a striking resemblance between the status of language and currency. Both rely on exchange for their value, having no stable value of their own. For the meaning of a word, for example, you go to a dictionary and are given another word, or set of words, in the same language or in another one. If you keep this going long enough, you end up with an equivalent that does not mean the same as the original word. Something has been added or lost in the transaction (this is a game you can play with your thesaurus). Likewise with money: you can buy Deutschemarks with your Hong Kong dollar, use your Deutschemarks to buy pounds sterling, your pounds to buy US dollars, and then your US dollars to purchase yen. Finally, you can use your yen to purchase Hong Kong dollars. If you are like me, you end up with much less than you started. If you work in a financial centre and deal in big sums, you can end up with more. Elementary arithmetic is undermined: a dollar is not worth a dollar, but only thereabouts-more, or less!

Money is a commodity, but the same according to postmodernism, is true of ideas and values. In place of culturally agreed values, we have a society of conflicting interests: feminism, religion, ecology, consumerism, big business. Because of the collapse of a consensus

over value, the disappearance of the transcendental system, we can only allow negotiation and competition to take its place. Or, where there is no market, toleration and indifference take over, because without a market there is no value to anything, and with no value there is no interest. Or at least, they should. In fact, where modernism (absolute belief in absolute values) and postmodernism (the market in goods or values rules) we get conflict, especially of the religious or nationalistic kind. Or perhaps terrorism (whether by or against states) is simply an extension of bargaining, and thus a truly postmodern activity; you get what you kill for?

Remember that I am not defining everybody's attitude or behaviour. I am only identifying what I think are the major features of the characteristic culture of our era. In effect, modernism and postmodernism overlap within our culture and within our own selves. The fact that I am writing this article implies some kind of belief in objective reality (about postmodernism). For postmodernism, as I hinted earlier, is somewhat parasitic on modernist notions (just as one cannot write about deconstruction without expecting the reader NOT to deconstruct one's writing!). I have also, I suspect, painted a rather gloomy picture of postmodernism. I could present the same picture in a much more positive way, celebrating the final emancipation of humanity from false notions such as 'reality', from the last vestiges of superstition, and marking the final triumph of individualism, choice, equality. And indeed, I think that postmodernism should be regarded neutrally. It is of itself neither good nor bad. I can say that, of course, as a postmodernist who cannot dictate what good or bad would mean in this case. Or, by looking at postmodernism 'from outside' as a stage in human, I can incorporate it into a revised modernist view, which believes in narratives about human culture.

Postmodernism in Biblical Studies

And so to the question: how is biblical studies affected by the age of postmodernism? In some areas it is not yet consciously affected: many biblical scholars, mostly of the older generation, will remain modernists until they die. But the discipline will not remain in a time-capsule insulated from developments in other humanities. It will become, and indeed is becoming, postmodern. As a preliminary comment, let me just mention the central value of truth. Truth is a currency that most

of us think we carry in our pockets. But postmodernism does not accept that truth is any more a common currency than gold is. Like modern currencies, truth enjoys a more or less stable value within a certain area of discourse, but it cannot be used universally. Truth has a cultural function rather than a metaphysical one. It is what people are prepared to accept as being reality. Now, biblical studies encounters the notion of truth in two main ways: first as a claim that biblical writings make about God (I should say about the god of the biblical writings) and indeed as a claim that is made on their behalf as well by believing readers; and secondly as a discipline that, at least traditionally conceived, is trying to find out the truth about the Bible: how and why it was produced, its relation to history, and so on.

I am going to consider five topics which become problematic in a postmodern setting: language, text, history, god, and, finally, bible itself. Note, though, that I say *problematic*, not impossible or irrelevant.

Language

Let me offer you two biblical images. The first is the tower of Babel. Once upon a time, in the modernist age, humans lived in one place and wanted to stay that way; they built a city and wanted to reach the sky. Yahweh did not want that, and scattered the human race all over the face of the earth, dividing our identities and especially our languages, so that we ceased to be a single human race and became instead nations and cultures. Yahweh, who in our Western culture has become God (I'll come to that later) is thus a postmodernist. He wants us to be different from each other, to compete, never to talk to one another. He wants humanity not to reach upwards towards the sky, but to spread horizontally into diversity. It is the human search for a unified culture, and thus a unified truth that modernism represented. But however widely spoken English may become, and however large the European Union may spread, we shall never return to the city and the tower. But let me go further. The Babel story, ideologically or theologically is a prelude to divine election and partiality. In a scattered condition, humanity is unable to reach universal truth, which can only be revealed to it, or rather to part of it. What is Israelite, and Jewish is true: true god, true law. The Christian story, generated by the story of Pentecost in Acts where the disciples momentarily speak all the post-Babel languages, is a reversal of that story: the spread of the gospel, which is truth, to all humans, via the Roman Empire, which is all culture (and by extension,

Western civilisation). But this great modernist vision (as we might see it) is not the vision of the Hebrew Bible, nor of Judaism. Postmodernism in fact challenges both Christian and Jewish perspectives: the truth of the gospel will never become universal, because there are no universal truths apart from our understanding and accepting of them; and no particular culture or race can be privileged, for what Yahweh promises Abraham is no more or less than what Nyame promised the Asante of West Africa, or Allah to those who submit to him, or any god to any adherent. For who has the right to grant privilege, to grant truth, to one story, one culture, over another? From the postmodernist perspective we cannot escape our relativity. We can impose our truth if we will. And some theorists will equate knowledge and power. But I am not going to discuss that any further.

The other biblical image is from Isaiah 40:6-7:

A voice says, 'Cry out'. And I said, 'What shall I cry?' 'All humans are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of Yahweh blows on them. People are indeed grass. Grass withers and flowers fall, but the word of our god stands forever'.

Here is a more interesting concept. Being a human is pathetic; we all die. The word of Yahweh, though, stands for ever. This must have been the text of many a fine sermon. But let me exegete it as a modernist text. It may seem to make nothing of human life: individual humans can achieve little. But there is nevertheless something eternal, some transcendent value that goes on regardless of our existence. While we are all mortal, we can be both comforted to know that, and can give meaning to our own lives by relating to that eternal value represented by the word Yahweh. A modernist, being essentially secular, would exegete as follows: let truth stand for Yahweh. Each human falls, each human generation withers. But there is always grass. The next generation will live better than ours; our research will reveal to us a little more of the truth; our morality will become gradually more and more refined. Because of this human life is worthwhile. The Isaiah text has no notion of progress, only of eternal truth. It is not strictly a modernist text. But modernism is a secular equivalent of its ideology. The word of our god is replaced by the inexorability of human progress in knowledge and morality, which gives each individual transient human existence meaning, socially and culturally. Even without a god to make it so, there can be an objective reality.

Alas, postmodernism accommodates the biblical text differently. We know that language changes, that it is unstable, that it cannot accurately reflect an external reality, and even the word of a god cannot by definition stand forever. You cannot have a word without language, and language changes. Change classical Hebrew into English or Danish and you change the word of God. For while some gods are held to be unchangeable, they can only speak in human language, and that changes all the time. Indeed, since Babel, they all change all the time. Language does not unite, it divides. It is no vehicle for eternal truth. If the Bible were in any sense true, we would not need hundreds of theological commentaries on it. Truth, if it exists at all, can only lie in interpretations. But in which ones? And who will decide? Maybe in a world consisting only of Yahwists speaking a Hebrew that never develops, Isaiah makes sense. But that is not any real world. There can be no more eternal word, not even in English. To their credit, the rabbis at least understood that, but increasingly, American politics is being taken over by people who do not.

Text

For modernism, meaning is something definite and stable, in principle at least. The classical view, into which I was educated, was that a text meant what its author intended it to mean. In the discipline of biblical studies, this view authorised an historical-critical approach to the text. Then, in the 1970s the last gasp of modernism moved the locus of meaning away from authors to texts. Thanks to Russian formalism and to the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, myths and stories were seen as expressing a limited number of basic structures in which the basic meaning of each text resided. That meaning was still a determined meaning, but it lay in the structures of language and thus ultimately of human thought. The height of modernist scientific rationalism as applied to literature: reducing the apparent variety of text to a taxonomy governed by relatively few laws. Structuralism killed the power of the author and the reader, leaving only the text and of course, the structuralist critic. In that way it prepared the way for postmodernism, in which the critic plays a paramount role.

In what I see as the postmodernist move, meaning itself has been redefined. It is not a thing but a process, one that a reader performs on a text -- that any reader performs on any text. There are thus in theory as many meanings as readers. Appropriately in a capitalist context, the

poor producer of the text is not centre stage, nor even the commodity itself, the text, but the consumer, the reader. But let's go further: the product is not merely what the consumer sees, wants, desires: it is not an object existing independently of the consumer. As a commodity, it is created by the desire of the consumer. Bread is food and thus has value only because humans want to eat it. Perhaps I should have used beef as an example. Capitalism, after all, is not about making real goods, but marketing objects of desire. It's the customer, not the product that is really sold. And the customer buys what the customer thinks the customer sees. The package, both material and ideological, is very often the object of more investment by the manufacturer than the product.

So it is, says the postmodernist, with readers. Readers are not, of course, free to produce whatever meaning they want; even the supermarket customer can only buy what is on the shelf. The rules of language in any case restrict one's choice. So too do cultural constraints. No reader is isolated; we all read in communities, in cultures, as members of one or other ideological club. We are born into a world of prearranged meaning-possibilities. Religious believers of different kinds agree about what sort of things a biblical text can mean; scholars too, though they have different rules. Europeans and Asians and Africans differ; working class and aristocrats, women and men, politicians of left and right. But our own personal individuality, shaped as it is by the classes, groups, societies, we belong to, allows us to choose what a text is to mean. Who is there to tell us which reading is right? Is the meaning agreed in a lecture room at a University better than a meaning preached from a pulpit? Some of us might like to say yes. But, says the postmodernist, that is because we use academic criteria to judge by. Actually, a lot of my colleagues seem to believe that truth lies both in biblical scholarship and in Christian proclamation. Perhaps they are more postmodern than they get credit for.

How, then, do we arrive at the correctness of an interpretation? Only when we all agree. And if we do not? Then we negotiate. But whose language shall we negotiate? I don't mean English or Danish. I mean the language of the capitalist or the Marxist, the fundamentalist or the libertarian, the male or the female? Negotiation requires commonly agreed interests. A debate has been going on for some years between Gadamer and Habermas about whether value-free communication is possible. Habermas, who says yes, is the modernist and Gadamer, who says no, represents the postmodernist view. I think Gadamer is ultimately

right, but Habermas wins an impressive point by conducting an apparently meaningful debate with Gadamer.

I don't need to suggest what the implications are for biblical texts. In our University libraries are shelves upon shelves of commentaries on the Bible, each one pretending to explain what biblical texts mean. This belief is buttressed by the view that the ultimate author of their meaning is divine. But they disagree about what this divine author, through his human channels, meant. Moreover, this divine being is never going to pronounce a verdict on what he meant. Whatever biblical texts mean is up to us, and attempt to deny this and assign some transcendental authoritative meaning to them can only be seen as naive or an attempt to impose one's own opinion as that of god. The postmodern version of commentary is metacommentary, in which the critic interprets the real source of meaning, the reader, and not the text. Von Rad's commentary on Genesis tells us little about Genesis but a lot about von Rad. If we read Childs and Speiser alongside von Rad we end up learning nothing about Genesis, but a lot about three of its readers. In place of single biblical truth is a plurality of humanly generated meanings. That is the postmodern world for you.

History

History, by which I mean a universal history, is a notion we owe to modernism, in particular to Hegel. It is something most people still believe in, in the sense of an objective series of events and an objective set of facts. But this belief is inseparable from the notion that these facts and events have an objective meaning, too. Without that meaning, they cease to be a history at all. For a modernist history is the arena in which human progress takes place, either thanks to a god or gods, or to *Geist* or to the gradual control of their own fate by humans using their rationality. Modernist history is, moreover, universal; the one story we all share in. All histories intersect, and Western rational civilization, of course, represents the most advanced stage of historical progress and understanding. Thanks to colonialism, the rest of the world can catch up, if it has the innate ability to do so, and if not, could enjoy the benefits of true human civilization in return for some kind of servitude.

You will perhaps agree that in the 1990s this view of reality is hardly acceptable as a civilised one. The symptoms are everywhere: there is no moral basis for colonialism, or for the superiority of Western

societies. In any case, Western societies are or are becoming multicultural. The inherited symbols of identity like the nation state, monarchy, religious traditions, the class system, and national histories are all eroding or undergoing revision -- though I am not going to predict their demise. Many symbols of authority have also been overthrown. In the Great War of 1914 -- 18 millions of young men were sent to kill each other, to run at each other's guns and be mown down. The war was fought in the cause of nationalism. This would not happen today. Perhaps we could be persuaded to die for other causes. But it is usually extremists only who can do this: Hamas, the IRA. In Bosnia we have seen a dramatic confrontation of modernism and postmodernism. We saw fighting in the name of ethnic and religious identities, of historic wrongs. Perhaps it was even tribal, pre-modern. The postmodern reaction of Europe was paralysis, lack of moral conviction, lack of moral will hardly excused by a lack of political means. In the name of what values do you stop people fighting? The events of twentieth century history have eroded our confidence in progressive values, and in the forward march of history. The history of the world itself has also fragmented. There is no history of Ireland: there is an Irish history and a British (I should say, English) history. In the Middle East an Israeli/Jewish history is in conflict with a Palestinian one. There is no universal objective history, only a certain number of agreed facts. But the process of selection, evaluation and interpretation that turns these into a narrative and thus into history is far from objective. A postmodernist would say that precisely because history is narrative it cannot be 'history'. It will always be *someone's* history. And, as with the meaning of texts, who is there to decide between the varying histories? Even if a critical historian can point out inaccuracies in one or other history, no historian can provide an objective history of his or her own.

And so it is time to abandon the idea that there is a history of Palestine. There is a history of Israel, which is both a Zionist history and a Christian one. There is also space for a history which the modern Palestinians can have, for they certainly cannot accept the Zionist one. Outside these two alternatives there is scope for other histories. But the biblical historian can certainly not claim to be doing any kind of objective history merely on the basis of modifying or even rejecting the biblical story. Where is the history of the other peoples of Palestine-Phoenicians, Hurrians, Philistines? After all, Allah has determined the history of Palestine for a longer period than Yahweh. Histories do not exist

independently. They are stories, and all stories have tellers. Histories do not converge, they diverge. There is no master-narrative that represent *the* history of ancient Palestine; there are more inclusive narratives and less inclusive ones, but that is all. In the postmodern world we have to live without definitive history and find ways instead of keeping alive the notion of a real past that lies beyond the fragmented stories that people tell, even though that past itself can never become a story itself. Thus, the Old Testament does not and cannot give us any kind of authorized account of history. Its detailed and factual accuracy is less of an issue than its ideological character. And that it shares with all histories. I think that the history told by scholarship is important when it recognizes no privilege, when it refuses to sanction any particular story but balances agreed data and the diverging stories that exploit these data.

But this is hard. For Western culture, the history in the Bible has become part of our own history; we are children of the new Israel, and our God started out by creating the world and then calling Abraham. We can perhaps escape bondage to the literal but the mythical is harder. Note that the biblical story moves without a break from Creation to Flood, to Abraham to Exodus to kings of Israel and Judah. It ignores the modernist distinctions of myth and history. Adam, Enoch, David and Ezra all have the same status as characters in this story. And this story is embedded in our own culture, in our art and our literature. In our mythical patterns, too: the sacrifice of the one for the many, the notion of a god who takes sides in war, who gives land to his chosen ones and authorises the extermination of inferior natives, as in South Africa and North America. The Christian myth which is in our culture's blood views history as the working out of a divine script, as moving towards a final judgment. The nuclear threat was, and perhaps still is, thought of as an apocalypse. These biblically-inspired myths, either manifest or hidden, support their worldview. But the story in the Hebrew Bible is after all the story told by a small elite in probably a single city, Jerusalem made universal thanks to a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia and an emperor who chose Christianity as his imperial religion. Our culture has used this history to justify its own superiority and its persecution of other cultures. But this history conflicts with other stories that we really prefer, those that use archaeological data more competently. It conflicts with the histories of the Arabs, even of the Jews. In a postmodern world both the great Western myths and the biblical narrative they

grow from will be relativized to the status of powerful and important stories, but no more.

God

Modernism was perfectly happy with God. Its universalism allowed it to be monotheistic, or mono-atheistic; its belief in absolute values and in truth allowed it either to accept the need for a universal God or to rename that God as Truth. If there was no God, at least he had an alias.

The aliases have gone or are going. Without them, the notion of a god is under attack. Literary critics insist that in the Bible, Yahweh is just a character like any other, and does not necessarily correspond to any metaphysical reality. Feminists will not accept a single male god, because that authorises male supremacy. Philosophers of language claim that the reality of gods cannot be transmitted by means of language, and so the notion that the bible is the 'word of God' is meaningless. As an exercise I insisted that, as well as the gender-free language the University of Sheffield insists upon, I should also require my students not to use upper case letter for 'god'. Then one student suggested we should not use gendered language for the god. This became interesting. A class of eighteen-year-old students were debating the gender of their god. No clearer example of the reversal of power could be made; this god couldn't even decide his or her own gender. In fact, I settled it by explaining that Yahweh was male, whatever God was, if there was one. Who actually *is* the god of modern biblical studies, the one all my students and most textbooks refer to? Sometimes he is the ancient deity Yahweh, sometimes an unmoved prime cause, eternal and universal, the father of Jesus. Most often he is all three. He is not, however, Allah. Yahweh and Allah are on opposite sides in the Middle East; each is the only god there is, but they must not be confused. What better demonstration of the postmodern view that religion is about lifestyle and identity and not at all about metaphysics?

Postmodernism typically reverses, then, the status of god and believer; the believer as consumer chooses the god, not *vice-versa*. The god is a commodity, shaped according to the desire of the human consumer. Here is a striking illustration: the traditional notion sees

Yahweh as a ventriloquist and his prophets as dummies who speak out his words. The postmodernist sees the prophet as the ventriloquist who can make the deity say anything. Anything, that is, that people are prepared to believe that the deity said. For all gods are impotent unless someone believes in them. For a postmodernist this is no problem, and I can once again bring a biblical text to support the postmodern attitude:

But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death. You may say to yourselves, 'How can we know when a message has not been spoken by Yahweh?' If what a prophet proclaims in the name of Yahweh does not take place or come true, that is a message he has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him (Deut. 18:20ff).

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, 'Let us follow other gods' (gods you have not known) 'and let us worship them', you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. Yahweh your god is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is Yahweh your god you must follow. Keep his commands and obey him.... That prophet or dreamer must be put to death (Deut. 13:1ff).

Yahweh your god will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him (Deut. 18:15).

First, there are no false prophets. Political correctness reigns: there are just mistaken prophets. All prophets behave the same way. That is the problem. So how does anyone know whether to believe? We have three criteria. Does his prediction come true? If not, he has lied. But that criterion is useless, since by the time it works, it is too late. And he might make a correct prediction anyway; so we need another test. Does he tell you something you know is wrong? Then he must be killed. How do you know when something is wrong? It is contrary to Yahweh's commands. But how did the command come? Through Moses. And he is the greatest prophet of all. So how does one know Moses is speaking the truth?

Because he says so. Or an author makes him say so. Deconstruction is one of the most explicit mechanisms by which the determined and transcendental categories of the modernist world are reduced to the fragmented, relativized and fully humanised postmodern world. The voice of a god is the voice of a human; his nature and his will and his commands are subject to human discernment.

Bible

The concept of 'bible' offers one of the best contrasts between modernist and postmodernist attitudes. Traditionally, we speak of 'the Bible'. But let us look with a cool consumerist gaze. I go into a bookstore and ask for the Bible. I wouldn't. I would ask for '*a bible*'. Which one would I like? Of English translations made this century alone I have over 100 to choose from. I can have apocrypha, either as apocrypha or integrated with the other books: I can have a simplified English version, or a fairly literalistic one. I can have one with maps, with cross-references. I can have a politically correct one, a Jewish translation. I can, of course, have a Hebrew or Greek bible, too. I can have a Hebrew one with an apparatus suggesting other ancient readings, or even better ones that the editor has guessed at.

A bible is not a canon, nor is it all inspired, nor all holy. A bible is the result not of divine speech or human insight but of human technology. Had no-one invented the codex we could not have a bible. We would have sacred scrolls. We might not even have a canon if we did not have a codex. In any case, there are lots of canons. Is Jubilees a biblical book? Is Tobit a biblical book? It depends both where you are and what your bible contains. But it seems to me that if a book is in some bible somewhere then it is biblical. A bible is a printed volume, whose contents are decided upon by Christian communities and by publishers. It belongs, however, to the purchaser.

Does it belong to the church? No. The Church does not own the copyright, and churches do not as a rule publish bibles. Most of it was not written by Christians. So why is it that the only bibles I can buy are Christian ones? If enough atheists want bibles, no doubt some publisher will produce one. And why not? Christian theologians often say that atheistic readings go against the grain of the Bible, are at odds with it, and thus they are misreadings. To a postmodernist all readings are misreadings, of course. But since we all agree that no author of any Old Testament book was a Christian, I might reply that all Christian readings are against the grain. But all kinds of reading of, say, Psalms, are possible. It is possible to read an individual psalm as a single ancient Judean piece of literature, an ancient poem. Or it can be read as part of a collection; it can be read as part of the Jewish Bible, or it can be read as part of the Christian Old Testament. None of these will give you the same reading, and none can claim to be anything more than *a* reading,

or perhaps a misreading. But they are all biblical readings, because psalms are printed in bibles. A non-biblical reading is impossible. But while a modernist perspective can accept an idealist view of 'the Bible' as some abstract entity, with its own determinate meaning, the postmodern perspective sees only a variety of books, all bearing the name bible. Whether I am a Muslim, a Jew, an atheist or a little green man from Mars, a bible is a bible. I can equally believe all of it or none of it; it is, regardless of how I read it, a bible. And so a postmodernist cannot say 'the Bible belongs to the Church' (and in any case neither 'the Bible' nor 'the Church' are real, only ideal) but will say simply that bibles belong to their purchasers who have every right to do what they like with them, so long as it is legal.

Indeed, it is about time that we had a postmodern discipline of biblical studies, which will start dealing with real bibles in all their history and their contemporary variety. Biblical studies should interest itself less in who wrote the contents or why and when and focus instead on the range of products that fall into the category 'bible'; Who invented bibles? How have they been treated over the last 2000 years? What effect have they had, and do they have, on our culture? How are they used? It is quite remarkable, isn't it, that biblical studies mostly bothers itself about two thousand years before there were any bibles, and by the time we have the first bibles, in the fourth or fifth century of our era, biblical studies stops and we are into church history. But here I am going beyond the topic of my lecture.

(Positive) Conclusions

I hope I have shown that postmodernism is not a transitory fashion, nor an unwelcome development to a biblical scholar. It will almost certainly change the discipline. Biblical studies has inherited a theological agenda, because it always used to be part of theology. In many places it still is essentially a part of theology. I am not too concerned with its fate there. That is safely in the hands of our German friends. But across the Atlantic biblical studies is an independent and increasingly secular discipline, and one especially prone to the influence of postmodernism, because of the fact that the Bible is often taught in the context of literature or philosophy or possibly religion. Since it is also taught in seminaries, there is a tension within the discipline that also assist

postmodern perspectives to become dominant. On the one hand, the Bible is the Christian scripture, but on the other hand, it is literature, it is myth, it is ideology, it is a kind of history.

I see two reactions to postmodernism taking place. One is among traditionally conservative Christians, like Iain Provan, who take refuge in the fact that all 'truths' are to be treated equally. It means that I, for example, cannot attack him for being a conservative evangelical, and if I do, he can attack me not for being wrong but for suggesting that *he* might be wrong. Conservatives are using postmodernism to retreat from the need to justify the way they do things, just as they use literary criticism to escape asking questions about the inerrancy of scripture.

But postmodernism is not about taking refuge from any kind of challenge. Recognising the legitimacy of a plurality of approaches does not forbid commitment to a point of view, nor does it prohibit argument. Indeed, in a postmodern academy, the need to justify your own truth and argue against other truths is more important than ever, since no longer can any particular truth expect to be given a privileged status. Postmodernism does, indeed, place the individual subject at the centre of the universe, but such a position leaves the subject more, and not less, responsible. If postmodernism represents a sort of failure of nerve, a loss of most or all metaphysical and ethical certainties, the need for belief and action still remains. I think this is especially the case in a world where economics and ethics are divorced, where democracy is under threat from minority interests and free speech from political correctness and political repression, and where the capitalist system has to develop techniques of persuasion to make us consume things we don't want and would not like.

The thing to do is become better consumers; just as bacteria develop immunity to antibiotics, we can do the same to ideologies that claim to be self-evidently true, we can resist the presentation of self-interest as morality. We can respect the right of anyone to claim a truth, but not to insist that this truth be accepted by all. Modern consumers suffer a barrage of attacks on their freedom of choice; capitalism is geared to inducing them to desire a product. We live in a world not of fact and object but of persuasion, of marketing, of the blurring of reality and unreality. We need more than ever to know ourselves and to make choices that are as genuinely free as we can. In this task it is good for us to believe that there are no objective truths other than those we wish

to accept. In the case of bibles, we must beware those who deify it, appeal to it in the cause of their own truth, whose political programmes masquerade under the name of the word of God, who tell us what 'the Bible' says and damn us as godless if we disagree.

The history of the Bible shows its power to liberate -- and I do not mean in a theological sense. Luther used it against the monopoly of the church, but even so, translating the Bible remained a capital offence in England until the seventeenth century. But the result of Luther's reform, 'the Bible' (I am deliberately using the term in its ideal sense) has taken on an awful power, the power of truth. It has attracted to itself a huge potential power to anyone who can tap it. My own view is that no texts can or should have that power. Whatever truth there is in this collection of literature is a matter for the individual reader. To this, however, I have to add that no individual is an isolated subject. Who we are is largely determined for us. It is in the small space still left for one to create oneself that the challenge of postmodernism lies.

Abstract

This essay attempts to understand how biblical studies is affected by the age of postmodernism. It considered five topics which become problematic in a postmodern setting: Language, Text, History, God and Bible. Though these five areas become problematic to biblical scholars in the postmodern age, it is not impossible or irrelevant. The discipline will not remain in a time-capsule insulated from developments in other humanities. The author argues that, we live in a world not of fact and object but of persuasion, of marketing, of blurring of reality and unreality. Indeed, in a postmodern academy, the need to justify your own truth and argue against other truths is more important than ever, since no longer can any particular truth expect to be given privileged status.

撮要

本文試圖了解後現代主義對聖經研究的影響，並探討語言、文本、歷史、上帝、聖經等在後現代處境中引發的問題。儘管上述五個範疇為後現代時期的聖經學者製造不少問題，但卻是有可能及息息相關的。這門學科不會與其他人文科學的發展隔絕。筆者認為我們身處的世界並不注重事實和實質，而是充斥著論說、推銷及真假難辨的事。事實上，後現代的學者比以往更需要為自己的理論辯護和駁倒別人的理據，因為沒有任何人的論點可以擁有特權。