The Tower of Babel:
Adventures in Biblical Interpretation

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This is not a paper on Genesis 11:1-9. I'm using the Tower of Babel as an image to portray the situation we are facing today. The image is meant to be evocative rather than exact. It is not possible for a simple image to serve as an exact representation of complex realities. The image used here is meant to portray some broad pictures or simple generalizations. Exceptions are to be expected.

I'm using the Tower of Babel in two different ways. On the one hand, the Tower of Babel is a symbol of human collaboration and achievement. In Genesis 11, the Tower of Babel is meant to be the rallying point, the visible and unifying center of humanity. In a sense, it symbolizes human aspirations and the pinnacle of human achievements.

On the other hand, the Tower of Babel is also a place of confusion. There was a confusion of tongues. This confusion led the builders of the tower to part ways. There were fragmentation, chaos and disaster.

In this paper, the image of the Tower of Babel serves a dual function: stability as well as chaos. It is an unstable image, yet it serves to highlight the situation we are in today.

1. The Tower of Babel as a symbol of human achievement

The ancient Tower of Babel has its counterparts today. Human beings seem to be fascinated with towers. Towers symbolize human aspirations and achievements. Some modern day towers include the once existed (pre 9/11) World Trade Center Twin Towers, Eiffel Tower, Tokyo Tower, Sears Tower, the Toronto CN Tower, the Pearl of Orient Tower in Shanghai, the Petronas Twin Towers and Kuala Lumpur

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Tower. All these towers are visible symbols of extensive human coloration, progress and achievement.

This image of the tower can also serve as a symbol of the modern period. The modern period has seen great innovations and technological breakthroughs. The following excerpt is a clear indication of how far we have come:

> Einstein said in 1932 that 'There is not the slightest indication that nuclear energy will ever be obtainable'. ⋯ Franklin Delano Roosevelt predicted, when he was Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Navy, that airplanes would never be useful in battle against a fleet of ships. ⋯ In 1883, Lord Kelvin, president of the Royal Society and no mean scientist himself, predicated that 'X-ray will prove to be a hoax'. ⋯ 'Everything that can be invented, has been invented,' Charles H. Duell, commissioner of the U.S. Patents Office, was said to have announced – in 1899.[1]

Things thought impossible before are now common commodities and taken for granted. Modernity has constructed its own Tower of Babel, and it is an impressive structure.

2. The Tower of Babel as a symbol of chaos

The tower constructed by modernity stood tall and majestic. But with the passage of time, cracks began to appear, and we noticed that the foundation is made of clay instead of steel.

Science and technology has developed by leaps and bounds. Today, we are living in a global village: with travel made easy by cheap airfares, information readily available via cable television networks, and instantaneous communications made possible by broadband Internet connections. Yet this global village is also one filled with cultural fragmentation and tribalism. In the field of biblical interpretation, we are seeing an increasing fragmentation in the interpretations of a particular text. Localism, fragmentation and globalization seem to go hand in hand together.

Human beings who are supposed to have come of age failed to live up to expectation.

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1) *Times* 2004. 10. 25, 41.

After two world wars to put an end to all wars, wars are still being fought in different parts of the world today.

The Asia-wide economic crash of 1997 resulted in plunging stock markets, depreciation of currencies, wiping out wealth, jobs and even lives. There is a sense of anxiety, despair, or even the lost of hope.

The once imposing and majestic World Trade Center Twin Towers are no more. When I first saw the images of the planes crushing into the towers on the Television screen, without knowing what had actually happened, I thought I was seeing a prelude of the latest Hollywood movie!

All of a sudden, we work up and found ourselves living in a strange new world. The world is not as stable or secure as we had thought.

We begin to realize that human history is not necessarily a continual progress towards greater heights. The Hegelian synthesis is not always an upward movement. It can spiral down to the depths of destruction as well.

We found out that the Tower of Babel constructed by modernity is built on shaky foundation. It is not as solid or stable as we once thought. The imposing tower began to show cracks and signs of crumbling.

The notion of progress, the reign of reason, science and technology, so cherished in the modern period, are now placed under scrutiny. This questioning and assessment of modernity, together with a complex of other factors, have led to shifts in mind sets and new approaches towards arts and culture, or what is called postmodernism by some scholars.

3. Uses of the term "Postmodernism"

It is difficult to locate the starting point of postmodernism. Postmodernism is a set of ideas that appear in different disciplines: arts, architecture, fashion, film, music, sociology, technology and philosophy.[2] Postmodernism is a broad and ambiguous term. It can point to different things in different contexts and may mean different things to different ones. Nevertheless, postmodernism emerged as an area of

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2) For a helpful discussion of the origins of postmodernism in the various disciplines, see Michael Drolet, *The Postmodern Reader: Foundational Texts* (London: Routledge, 2004), 1-35.

academic studies only in the mid-1980s.[3]

Some of the meanings of the term "postmodernism" are listed below:[4]

1) After modernism (subsumes, assumes, extends the modern or tendencies already present in modernism, though not necessarily in strict chronological succession).

2) Contra modernism (subverting, resisting, opposing, or countering features of modernism). A couple of representatives of this view are A.K.M. Adam[5] and Max Charlesworth.[6]

3) Equivalent to "late capitalism(post-industrial, consumerist, and multi- and trans-national capitalism)".[7]

4) Artistic and stylistic eclecticism (hybridization of forms and genres, mixing styles of different cultures or time periods, de- and re- contextualizing styles in architecture, visual arts, literature).

5) Global-village phenomena: globalization of cultures, races, images, capital, and products.

Besides the above, Jean-Francois Lyotard simplifies his definition of the postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives."[8] Some scholars (e.g., Richard Rorty, Habermas and Anthony Giddens), on the other hand, viewed the term "postmodernism" as a misnomer. What we are facing today, they argued, is best described as hyper-modernism or the last gasps of modernity.[9]

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3) Mary Klages, "Postmodernism" (www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html: April 21, 2003).

4) Cf. Martin Irvine, "The Postmodern" (www.georgetown.edu/faculty/jrvinem/technoculture/ pomo.html: 1998); George Aichele et al., eds., *The Postmodern Bible: The Bible and Culture Collective* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1995), 8-9.

5) A. K. M. Adam, *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1.

6) Max Charlesworth, *Philosophy and Religion: From Plato to Postmodernism* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2002), 156.

7) Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

8) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

9) Mark R. Schwehn, "Christianity and Postmodernism: Uneasy Allies," David A. Hoekema and Bobby Fong, eds., *Christianity and Culture in the Cross Fire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 157.

For the sake of this paper, I will follow the majority and use the term "postmodernism" instead of debating the merits or demerits of using such a term. Neither will I discuss whether we should be talking about postmodernism or postmodernisms. In addition, I will simply narrow down the focus by looking at postmodernism in the field of humanities only.

Before that, we need to make a distinction between postmodernism and postmodernity. Postmodernism can be broadly described as an open set of approaches, styles or attitudes towards arts and culture. Postmodernity, on the other hand, refers to a historical period. The terms are not synonymous.

I do not see postmodernism as succeeding or replacing modernism in a linear fashion. We are living in the period of overlap between modernism and postmodernism. Both are present at the same time. In addition, a person can live in the postmodern world without subscribing to the mindsets of postmodernism.

As noted above, postmodernism is a broad and ambiguous term. Different scholars use the term in different ways to refer to various phenomena. Despite the various usages of the term, there are some general features associated with this term.

4. Some Salient features of Postmodernism

1) Anti-foundationalism.[10] Postmodernism rejects any premise as the unassailable starting point for establishing truth-claims. It insists that there is no context-free, perspective-free approach to interpretation. Meaning is relative and indeterminate. Knowledge is uncertain at best.

2) Anti-totalizing.[11] Postmodernism rejects all metanarratives.[12] Postmodern thinkers suspect that metanarratives suppress counterexamples and are oppressive in nature. There is a deep-seated skepticism towards absolute or

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10) Foundationalism refers to the external and immutable bedrock of first principles from which knowledge can be pitched. There are two forms of this: the rationalism of Descartes and the empiricism of Locke and Hume. The outcome is that meaning is clear and objective, based on some external reality. See Millard Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 128.

11) A. K. M. Adam, *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 7-10.

12) A metanarrative is an overarching narrative by which all other stories make sense. It unifies and accounts for everything.

universal truth-claims.

3) Demystification. Postmodern discourse suggests that appeals to abstract universal categories or cosmic laws are but mystifications of more concrete and worldly (economic, political) reasons. Mystifications are nothing but ideological projections.[13]

4) The inherent goodness of knowledge is questioned. Discovery of truth may not eradicate evils or social ills. Knowledge can be used for destructive ends (e.g., wars). Hence the notion of progress is rejected.[14]

5) The supremacy of the scientific method of inquiry is questioned. "Truth is not known simply through reason, but through other channels, such as intuition."[15]

There is a spectrum of postmodern thoughts, ranging from strong or radical postmodernism to moderate postmodernism. The moderate form of postmodernism is less vulnerable to criticism, but it is also less unique. On the other hand, the radical strand of postmodernism preserves its uniqueness, but it is also more vulnerable to criticism.[16] In the following, I will make some general comments without trying to sift through the various strands of postmodernism.

Postmodernism has aroused a wide spectrum of reactions. Some accepted it wholehearted, treating it as some form of salvation or the latest intellectual fashion. Others rejected it vehemently with or without really knowing what it is all about. I do not find these extremes forms of reactions helpful. It is perhaps better to deal with it critically and assess its contents and premises. Postmodernism may carry with it both promises and threats, opportunities as well as dangers.

In dealing with postmodernism, I will use the image of looking for gems in a quarry. In the quarry, I might find some precious gems, but there is also a lot of rubbish. There may also be artifacts that I'm not sure of their values. I will try to gather the gems, throw away the rubbish, and keep the artifacts aside for further examination. This pragmatic choose and pick approach is based on trial and error.

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13) Ibid., 11.
14) Millard Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith*, 18-19.
15) Ibid., 19.
16) Millard J. Erickson, *The Postmodern World: Discerning the Times and the Spirit of Our Age* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), 87; Thomas Guarino, "Between Foundationalism and Nihilism: Is Phronesis the via Media for Theology?" *Theological Studies* 54 (1993), 40.

Mistakes of judgment are bound to occur. Sometimes I might throw away gems that I failed to recognize and pick up rubbish instead!

In relation to the realm of biblical interpretation, I find certain aspects of postmodernism helpful and challenging. At the same time, I question some of its presuppositions and find other aspects unpalatable. The following are a few personal reflections. They are never meant to be exhaustive or conclusive. It is a work in progress.

5. Postmodernism and biblical interpretation

5.1. Partial understanding of truth

Postmodernism highlights the fact that a person's understanding of a particular text is at best partial. I look at a text from a particular perspective or presupposition. My understanding of a text is historically and culturally conditioned. My upbringing and experiences affect the way I look at things. I filter what I read through my colored lenses and I do not have access to the entire truth in all its perspectives. Postmodernism has been helpful by foregrounding these hidden factors.

This idea of partial understanding of truth need not imply that there is no such thing as absolute truth. That is a matter of faith claim or presupposition. What it does mean is that I do not understand truth absolutely. There are different perspectives of looking at things. Therefore there is some degree of tentativeness in my understanding. Paul echoes a similar view when he describes the incompleteness of human understanding in the realm of spiritual matters, seeing dimly, like cloudy reflections in a mirror (1 Cor 13.12).

The multiplicity of voices in various parts of the Bible also cautions us against absolutizing our readings of any one text. The emphasis on corporate punishment in various parts of the Pentateuch is countered by the emphasis on individual accountability, especially in the book of Ezekiel (e.g., Ezk 18). The change in historical context during the Babylonian Exile may have contributed towards this change in emphasis. There are emphases on divine sovereignty as well as human free will in the Bible. Jesus talks about loving one's enemies (Mat 5:44), but he also pronounces a series of woes on the scribes and Pharisees (Mat 23:13-36). These opposite strands caution us against universalizing a particular voice in the Bible. We

are presented with partial pictures at best, and our readings of these partial pictures are less than complete.

Some might take this perspectival nature of knowing to its extreme and argue that all views are equally valid and legitimate. This may well lead to chaos and cause us to drift aimlessly in total subjectivity. I do not find this extreme form helpful. If we are aware of our presuppositions or the perspectives from which we look at things, there is a possibility that we can strive to minimize our own biases and move toward a more "objective" understanding. Here I do not mean total objectivity, but at least a more commonly agreed and accepted view.

In addition, human beings do have critical self-consciousness, and this allows us to look at things from others' perspectives and to learn from them. We may only be able to enter the other person's perspective partially, but at least this will help us to gain some insight from the viewpoints of others. This self- consciousness may help us to modify or change our views. In so doing, it may help us to strive towards some measure of objectivity.

This idea of perspectival understanding does not necessarily mean that truth is fluid or relative. It is just that our appreciation of it is relative.

Another helpful aspect raised by postmodern scholars is the relationship between power and truth. Sometimes what is presented as truth may be nothing more than the viewpoint of the power elite. Truth can be manipulated by the rich and powerful to suit their own ends, and often their view is the one that is preserved. We see this very clearly, for instance, among the politicians, especially during election campaigns. The opposing camps construe the same event in totally different light in order to take credit for themselves and put the blame on the other party.

Power can be used to manipulate truth or to punish recalcitrant dissidents. It is certainly helpful to be reminded that all too often, power is used as a means of control or punishment rather than for the benefit of all. In some cases, the rich and powerful can even manipulate court verdicts, resulting in injustice and the distortion of truth.

In this regard, a healthy doze of skepticism on the part of the interpreter may be needful. Feminist criticism and ideological criticism, for instance, have helped us to see the power dynamics in the texts. In looking at a book or a text, we can ask, "Whose view is being presented here?" "Who benefits from this presentation of events?" Here, the hermeneutics of suspicion may be helpful.

While postmodern scholars have helpfully highlighted the relationship between power and truth, the presupposition that the quest for truth is "everywhere and always a disguised quest for power and dominion"[17) and will therefore lead to repression is too sweeping. The quest for truth need not always be a disguised quest for power and dominion. The quest for truth could be a quest for freedom or justice. In addition, power is not inherently bad in itself. The real issue is how power is put to use. Power need not necessarily be exercised top down, it can be exercised along side or from bottom up. Power can be used to empower the powerless or help the needy.

5.2. Author, Reader, Text

When I first started studying the Bible, I was told that biblical interpretation means seeking to uncover the authorial intention. The maxim is that I should try to understand the text as it was intended or understood by the original author. I happily went along with this approach.

Gradually, I begin to realize that often, I do not really know who wrote or edited a particular book in the Bible. This is especially true in the OT. Even in cases where I'm quite sure who the authors might be, how could I find out about their intention? How could I look behind the text to authorial intention? All I have are copies or translations of the texts. In practice, the appeal to authorial intention seems problematic.

While traditional methods of interpretation emphasize the author, there is a postmodern shift to the readers. Postmodern scholars have highlighted the role of the readers in creating meaning. Readers construct meaning as they read. Texts are interpreted according to the readers' aims, values and contexts. This has resulted in the multiplicity of interpretations that confront us today, all claiming to be valid and legitimate.

What are we to do with this postmodern flux?

In the light of this emphasis on the readers, David Clines has proposed an End-User theory of interpretation. In this postmodern world, there are no 'right' interpretations, no universally acceptable interpretations. It is therefore useless for

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17) Schwehn, "Christianity and Postmodernism: Uneasy Allies," 161.

interpreters to try to come up with interpretations that can command universal acceptance. In fact, interpreters do not even know whether their interpretations are right or wrong. They only know whether their views have been accepted.[18] Audience acceptance is the key issue in interpretation.

In view of this, the best that interpreters can do is to produce interpretations they can sell. They should aim at producing customized interpretation for the clients, cutting the garments according to the clients' requests and shapes.[19] Since it is the customers who decide whether an interpretation is accepted or not, they are the ones who call the shots. "Those who pay the piper get to call the tune".[20] Those who pay for our services decide what we should do!

How do we feel about this postmodern hijack by the readers or clients?

I find some aspects of this focus on the readers helpful. Readers do interact with the text in the creation of meanings. The construction of meanings takes place some where in the interaction between the readers and the text. In addition, we are all interested readers. We approach the text with our own aims and interests. The multiplicity of interpretations of a particular text may be in part be due to the differences in the readers' aims, interests and contexts.

Having said that, I find it difficult to accept the thesis that the meaning of a text is entirely what the reader makes it to be. I also find it difficult to accept that all interpretations are equally valid, and that the goal of interpretation is to produce readings that we can sell.

Acceptance by the readers is certainly an important factor that deserves to be highlighted, but I do not think it is a sufficient criterion by itself. Some readers may not have the necessary skills to make proper evaluations of the various interpretations that are being offered. The competence of the readers needs to be taken into consideration as well.

In this regard, I find it helpful to analyze, and help the readers to analyze, the process by which they arrive at their interpretations. An awareness of how our socio-cultural contexts, the presuppositions and the aims we bring to the text affect us in the process of meaning-construction is helpful. This may help to induce some

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18) David J. A. Clines, *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays, 1967-1998,* 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 59.
19) Ibid., 60.
20) Ibid., 61.

critical reflection and evaluation on the part of the interpreters. While different interpretations may be plausible, there are limits as well. It is certainly not a case of anything goes.

In practice, I do not know if we can actually live with the idea that meanings are entirely created by the readers and therefore all views are equally legitimate. I wonder how communication is possible if we hold on to such a view.

Imagine someone read a postmodern writing and then told the author, "There is a lack of clarity and coherence in your writing. This reflects a lack of clarity and coherence in your mind. Your mind is confused and disturbed. You have a mental problem. I suggest that you should stop writing, go and consult a psychiatrist instead".

I wonder how the postmodern author would respond. Would he still insist that meaning is entirely constructed by the reader and therefore all interpretations are equally legitimate? Would he instead reply, "Thank you for that very interesting comment. I guess the mental problem is yours, not mine!"

Even deconstructionists who revel in textual ambiguities and indeterminacies do write and expect their writings to be read and understood!

I'm more incline to think that texts do carry intended meanings, and these set boundaries on what constructed meanings are plausible. How clearly the intended meanings of the text are being communicated is another issue. Some texts may be ambiguous and therefore capable of interpreted in multiple ways. The ambiguity may be due to the aims of the writers, the technique of composition or the lack there of, or some other factors.

The presence of multiple interpretations of the same text does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that texts do not carry intended meanings. I presume when the President of the United States of America gave the order to his troops to "free" Iraq, the text does carry intended meanings and is meant to be understood. It is not simply left to the readers to construct meanings as they like without paying attention to the intention of the text. Similarly, when the High Court of Malaysia gave the verdict in September 2004 to release the former Deputy Prime Minister from prison, the text does carry an intended meaning, understood by the people. In these instances, the intended meanings of the texts are relatively clear.

The postmodern situation has sensitized us to the importance of the reader's context and the role of the readers in the construction of meanings, resulting in a multiplicity of interpretations. But at the same time, we should not loose sight of the context of the text. We should keep these contexts together.

Text and its context do set boundaries on what meanings are plausible. Here I do mean there is only one legitimate meaning to the text. I'm talking about a trajectory of meanings. A text may point to a trajectory of plausible meanings instead of "having" only one meaning.

In the case of biblical texts, we are far removed from the cultural, historical and linguistic situations surrounding these texts, and these gaps complicate matters. It may be difficult, and sometimes impossible to grasp the intended meanings of some texts. I may not get at the intended meanings of the text fully. This is not a problem. I'm not talking about exactness, but approximations. My aim is to get at some adequate readings of the text, not the meaning of the text.

In view of the multiplicity of interpretations available today, I also find myself thinking more and more in terms of an ethics of interpretation. What does this interpretation do to me and to others? When I propose this interpretation, am I doing justice to the text and to the community for whom I serve? Perhaps there need to be a sense of accountability between text, the interpreters and the communities for whom they serve.

5.3. Degrees of determinacy

In biblical interpretation, we are increasingly faced with the situation of multiplicity of readings. The abundance of different translations of the same bible text and the ever-increasing number of commentaries with diverse interpretations are indications of this flux.

Part of this fluidity is due to the fact that words are more like pointers rather than containers. A word may point to a trajectory of meanings. For instance, the Hebrew word "bat" in the OT can point to the following items, to name a few:

- Daughter by birth.
- Daughter-in-law. For instance, in the book of Ruth, Naomi calls her daughter-in-law as "daughter" (Ruth 1:11, 12, 13; 2:2, 22b; 3:1, 16, 18).
- Young woman (Ruth 2:8; 3:10, 11).

- Metaphorical use of daughter. Zion is often described as daughter Zion (Isaiah 1:8; 10:32; 16:1).

While the word "bat" can point to a range of meanings, it does not imply that there are no limits to its meanings. Whatever meanings the word "bat" may point to in the OT, it probably does not point to "heaven", "cat", or "cheese".

In dealing with a text, I prefer to think in terms of the degrees of determinacy. Context and genre will influence the degree of determinacy. For instance, a coded military message in a war situation probably does carry highly determinate meaning. It is important to find out the intended meaning of the codes. Failure to get at the intended message could mean death or defeat. This genre of text may have a high degree of determinacy.

On the other hand, thrillers written to entertain or tease our imaginations may be deliberately ambiguous, filled with gaps, twists and turns of events. This kind of text may have a relatively high degree of indeterminacies.

If the above is true, then we have a continuum ranging from high determinacy to high indeterminacies, and points in between. Genres, contexts, and the intentions of the texts play significant roles in influencing the degrees of determinacy.

In trying to work out the plausible meanings of a text, perhaps we can think in terms of a series of related circles, each influencing the other. Any change in one part influences the whole. The meanings of a word are dependent on the meanings of a sentence. Similarly, the meanings of a sentence are dependent on the meanings of individual words. They are also dependent on the meanings of the larger passage as a whole. Conversely, the meanings of the passage are dependent upon the meanings of individual sentences and words. There are mutual causalities. Any change in one part influences the whole.[21]

Some additional circles that might help us decide which meanings are acceptable include:[22]

- The circle of praxis, in terms of individual piety, church worship and service, and involvement in society. Our understanding of the Bible does not always proceed in a linear fashion from theory to praxis. Sometimes we may begin with praxis and later postulate theory to fit our praxis.

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21) Edgar V. McKnight, "A Defense of a Postmodern Use of the Bible," Michael S. Horton, ed., *A Confessing Theology for Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 77.
22) Ibid., 77-80.

- The circle of doctrine, in terms of how this reading relates to the doctrines of the church.
- The circle of history and historical study
- The circle of language and literature, in terms of whether the language allows for such a reading.

5.4. Multiplicity of methods

When I first studied theology, I learned the "grammatico-historical" method of exegesis. I was warned against reading my views and presuppositions into the text. Instead, I need to go through the time tunnel, transport myself back into the author's mind and times, and to listen to his words as if I'm among the original audience. Later, when I went to the U.S. for further studies, I was exposed to the historical-critical method. That was the method of biblical interpretation at that time. I learned to pursue highly technical matters or engaged in complex historical reconstructions. The text is placed under the tight scrutiny of reason.

In the last few decades, scholars began to talk about the limitations and one-sidedness associated with each methodology. A particular methodology is conditioned by the cultural context from which it develops. The use of "a given critical methodology, besides providing exegetes with the critical methods necessary for identifying several textual dimensions, predetermines the value judgment of these dimensions, posits their hierarchization, and thus engenders a one-dimensional exegesis".[23]

Outside the academy, the results of historical-critical studies are generally felt to be irrelevant, or even dangerous to Christian praxis. As a result, the pursuit of the critical scholarship is often viewed with suspicions by the churches and the lay Christians.

In the last few decades, we have seen the decline of the hegemony of the historical-critical approach of studying the Bible. This is partly due to the decline of the reign of science and reason. In the modern period, science has often set the agenda for biblical interpretation. Scholars have tried to harmonize the scripture text with scientific discoveries. For instance, various interpretations of Genesis 1 (the

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23) Daniel M. Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 46.

gap theory, the day-age theory) are basically attempts to harmonize the text with scientific findings. Other examples of imaginative harmonization of biblical text with the so-called scientific discoveries are too numerous to cite. As a result, the text has been submerged under the cold waters of scientism.

With the advent of postmodernism, there is now the realization that science is basically built on presuppositions. Science is not a neutral or objective pursuit. When probe rigorously, scientists have to admit that the foundation of science "looks much like the foundations of what was traditionally called religion: they cannot be established with hard proofs; they can only be discussed in the kind of language, or rhetoric, always employed by theologians".[24] Scientific experiments are geared towards a certain set of pre-determined goals. Its scope is rather limited and there is a degree of tentativeness in its conclusions. In addition, funding, self-interest and the imperfections of the scientists affect the pursuit of science.

There is also the recognition that human reasoning is not neutral, neither is it a natural universal category. There are different traditions of reasoning. Human reasoning is conditioned by socio-historical circumstances. It is bound by specific paradigms.[25] For instance, one paradigm of reasoning may reject miracles or supernatural occurrences, while another may allow for those occurrences.

The limitation of logic has also been noted. This is not something new. The ancient sages realized this long ago. "Heraclitus said, 'You cannot step into the same river twice' and his student added, 'not even once, since there is no **same** river.' The ancient Eristics showed the unreliability of logic alone".[26]

This loosening of the biblical text and the methods of study from the tight control of reason and scientism is a good thing. Biblical interpretation is emancipated from the tyranny of modernity and scientism. At least, there is an opening for the ancient, pre-scientific biblical texts to speak with their own voices, no matter how strange those may be, instead of being domesticated under scientism.

At the same time, there is an explosion of methods or approaches in biblical interpretation: Social-Scientific approaches, Canonical approaches, Rhetorical

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24) Wayne C. Booth, "Deconstruction as a Religious Revival," David A. Hoekema and Bobby Fong, eds., *Christianity and Culture in the Cross Fire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 138.

25) Guarino, "Between Foundationalism and Nihilism," 45-48.

26) Eugene T. Gendlin and Richard A. Shweder, "Conference on After Postmodernism" (http://www.focusing.org/apm.htm, 1998).

approaches, Narrative approaches, Reader-Response criticism, Feminist criticism and Ideological criticism, to name a few. This mushrooming of methods is a healthy development. There is an increasing realization that no one method is the gatekeeper to all truth. In that sense, there is no one right method. We are talking about a multiplicity of legitimate methods. This is an exciting development. Different methods can be used to shed light on different aspects of the texts. Different methods allow us to look at the text from different angles or perspectives, and this can enrich our understanding of the text.

5.5. The purpose of interpretation

The postmodern situation has sensitized us to the different aims of the interpreters when they approach a text. Some may want to find out what the text meant and what it means for us today. Others may be content to use the text for their own purposes. The difference in aims may lead to different treatments of the text.

The postmodern emphasis on humor and play provides an alternative to sterile and antiquarian modes of research. Some biblical texts are indeed rich in humor and irony. I'm often amused whenever I read the account of the creation of woman in Genesis 2. After the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (2:18), God proceeded to make birds and animals and brought them to Adam (2:19-20). It is a bit like parents bringing their son to the zoo to see if he will find a suitable life partner! I also have a great deal of fun reading the hilarious reaction of the Assyrians in response to Jonah's message. They even made the animals fast and put on sackcloth (Jonah 3:7-8)! It is also exciting to read deconstructive interpretations of certain passages in the Bible. Some texts are indeed rich in ambiguities and deconstruction has exploited these texts in helpful ways. The postmodern authors have sensitized us to the playful aspects of some texts. It is good to be reminded of this.

However, I have difficulty in accepting the attempt to treat all texts indiscriminately in the same light-hearted manner. Biblical texts do convey a multiplicity of themes and notes. If salvation is an important theme in the Bible, then this is a serious matter that we should pay careful attention to, not just simply to play with.

In addition, there is a missionary emphasis in various parts of the Bible (e.g.,

John 20:31; 1 John 5:13). It is also intended for the life and instruction of faith communities. This overall purpose of the Bible will have bearing on what aims of interpretation may be appropriate.

5.6. Imagination and Interpretation

I'm becoming increasingly aware of the role of imagination in interpretation. We are far removed from the worlds of the biblical text. Sure, I need to do my research and careful exegesis, but these can only help me up to a certain point.

In biblical narrative, for instance, how do I envisage the relationship or interactions between the participants in the text? What were their relative ages, the form of language used or their intonation in conversation? These paralinguistic features will affect our understanding of the text. My construal of the ancient world and how I imagine the scenes and the exchanges taking place will affect my interpretation.

On a broader level, other questions related to the text can be raised as well. Why was the text written? What were the social and political matrixes of the text? Who benefited from the preservation of this text? These questions will influence how we approach the text. For instance, in 2 Sam 21:1-14, we read the story of seven sons and grandsons of Saul were impaled on the mountain before Yahweh in order to bring the years of famine to an end. The ritual was effective and brought about the much needed fertility to the land. Now, besides the general populace, who else benefited from the slaughter of Saul's descendants? Was this an attempt for David to eliminate rivals to the throne without casting a bad light upon himself?

This does not mean letting imagination run wild. Imagination has wings that may need to be clipped. Here careful research may help to set boundaries to our imaginative construal of the situation.

Leander Keck observes that for the past two centuries, "there has been a persistent effort to translate biblical language, pre-scientific and mythological, into abstract idiom."[27] In so doing, we may have sacrificed some features of the texts. Perhaps there is a need to let the biblical images and metaphors speak to us in all their richness rather than trying to reduce the richness to only one thing. Keck's

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27) Leander E. Keck, "The Premodern Bible in the Postmodern World," *Interpretation* 50:2 (1996), 138.

thesis is that "It is now time! Time to stop worrying about the Bible and to start worrying about ourselves. Time to stop using the Bible and start living with it. Time to stop telling the Bible what it means and to let its mythological character restore imagination to our thought and praise."[28] That is certainly a helpful reminder.

5.7. Some problematic areas

There are problematic areas in postmodern thoughts, some of which have been noted in the above discussions. Some of the presuppositions of postmodernism are questionable. For instance, the insistence that the quest for truth is a quest for power, which will lead to oppression, is too sweeping. We have noted that while this has often happened in history, it is not the inevitable endpoint. Truth can be liberating, and power can be used to empower the powerless.

There are also inherent contradictions or inconsistencies in the more extreme form of postmodern thoughts. Deconstruction, for instance, is helpful in that it helps us to see the self-interests, personal biases and the presuppositions we bring to the text. But deconstruction has its own problems too. In theory, deconstruction should itself be subjected to deconstruction, but adherents of this approach have refused to allow the method deconstruct.

Derrida revels in the indeterminacy of meanings. But even a deconstructionist like him seems to believe in the intended meaning of the text at times. This can be inferred from the ninety-three-page paper he wrote in response to John Searle's criticism. In it, Derrida objected that Searle has misunderstood and misstated his position at several points. Derrida even asserted that what he had meant should have been clear to Searle.[29] If meaning is entirely constructed by the reader, no such response is needed. Apparently, Derrida is not quite happy with that, especially when he felt that readers have misunderstood him.

While deconstruction vehemently rejected all metanarratives, it has somehow made itself into a metanarrative. It rejects all metanarratives except its own. This is an inherent contradiction.

We also need to bear in mind that postmodernism is only a chapter in our cultural

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28) Ibid., 130.
29) Jacques, Derrida, "Limited, Inc., abc," *Glphy* 2 (1977), 162-254; cited in Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith*, 156.

history, our current chapter. We do not know how long it will stay with us. Civilizations and worldviews come and go. On November 14-16, 1997, the University of Chicago organized a seminar titled, "Conference on After Postmodernism."[30] Ninety-three scholars were already discussing on what might come after postmodernism at that time. There is a certain measure of arbitrariness and tentativeness in postmodernism. There are helpful aspects in postmodernism that we can embrace, but we need to be careful and discriminative, lest we become totally absorbed into all that postmodernism espouses.

5.8. Concluding remarks

Modernity has constructed its own Tower of Babel. It is an impressive structure that has stood for centuries, with reason at its apex. However, postmodern scrutiny has revealed cracks in the Tower. Will it collapse? Will it become a leaning Tower, a historical monument for tourist attraction? Will it be rebuilt or modified into something else? It is difficult for us to know what will happen in the future. What we do see is that multiple mini structures are sprawling up, each competing for our attention. Whether this will eventually lead to a more even playing field is not clear, but at least it opens up the opportunity for other voices to be heard. In the case of biblical interpretation, we are indeed living in exciting times.

The Tower of Babel is a place of chaos and fragmentation, but it is also a place of grace. In the story recorded in Genesis 11.1-9, the barrier of communication and the subsequent dispersion in a way prevented human beings from being united in rebellion against God. For us today, postmodernism shatters human arrogance. The reign of reason, science and the notion of progress are being called into question. In this mode of questioning and reflection, there is a possibility for us to read and hear the biblical text afresh in its own voice, and let that voice challenge us.

The Tower of Babel, left uncompleted, may be a good thing after all.

* Keyword
postmodernism, Biblical interpretation, metanarrative, multiplicity of methods, modernity.

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30) For access to some of the conference papers, please go to http://www.focusing.org/ apm.htm.

<Abstract>

바벨탑: 성서해석의 모험

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모더니티는 진보의 개념, 이성의 지배, 과학과 기술의 무한 발전에 대한 끝없는 기대를 통하여 자신의 바벨탑을 건축하였다. 포스트모더니즘은 그 탑에 균열이 생겼고, 기초가 흔들리고 있음을 일깨워 주었다. 이 연구는 성서해석에 있어서 포스트모더니즘이 유용하면서도 도전적인 측면이 있음을 긍정하면서 동시에 몇 가지 동의하기 어려운 점들을 지적한다.

1) 진리가 부분적 이해에 불과하다: 포스트모더니즘은 특정본문의 이해가 부분적임을 강조한다. 지식이 관점에 의존한다면 객관적 진리란 존재하기 어렵다고 여길지 모르지만, 오히려 이것이 자신의 편견을 최소화하는 노력을 통해 상식적으로 동의되고 용납되는 그런 종류의 "객관적인 이해"를 향해 나갈 가능성이 있다. 또 포스트모던 학자들은 권력과 진리의 관계를 제기하면서 진리탐구가 결국에는 억압으로 이끌 것이라고 가정한다. 권력이란 본질적으로 나쁜 것이 아니다. 중요한 것은 권력의 사용법이다. 권력은 힘없는 자에게 힘을 줄 수 있다.

2) 저자, 독자, 본문: 포스트모던 방법들은 해석의 주체를 저자가 아닌 독자에게로 돌린다. 그러나 독자의 역량이 문제가 된다. 모든 독자가 전부 정당하고 합법적인 해석을 산출하는 것은 아니기 때문이다. 본문은 "의미들의 궤도"라고 말할 수 있는 하나의 합법적인 의미가 있다. 우리의 목표는 본문의 적절한 읽기에 도달하려는 것이다.

3) 정확도: 본문의 장르, 상황, 의도들이 본문 이해의 정확도에 기여한다. 개연성 있는 의미를 얻어내기 위하여 전체와 부분의 상호의존관계를 염두에 두어야 한다.

4) 다양한 방법들: 포스트모더니즘은 과학이 중립적이거나 객관적 작업이 아님을 지적했다. 성서 본문과 연구방법들이 이성과 과학주의의 엄격한 통제에 벗어나는 일은 좋은 현상이다. 고대의 저자들이 자기 목소리로 말할 출구가 생겼기 때문이다. 다양한 방법들은 본문의 이해를 증폭시켜 준다.

5) 해석의 목적: 포스트모던 저자들은 어떤 본문의 흥미로운 측면(유머와 아이러니)에 민감하도록 만들어주었지만, 성서는 구원과 같은 심각한 주제를 담고 있으므로 진지할 필요가 있다.

6) 상상력과 해석: 상상력을 갖고 폭넓은 차원의 질문을 던질 필요가 있다.

포스트모더니즘은 한 시대의 풍조일 수 있는 임의성과 잠정성을 갖고 있다. 너무 동조하지 않도록 신중함을 가져야 한다. 모더니티의 혼돈과 분열을 상징하는 바벨탑은 동시에 포스트모더니즘에 의한 새로운 읽기의 가능성 때문에 은혜의 장소라고도 말할 수 있다.

(우택주)