

## ***Culture, Scripture's Meaning, and Biblical Authority: Critical Hermeneutics for the 90's***

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Western civilization is undergoing a fundamental worldview paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism. The modern era of science and philosophy, with us since Descartes and Newton, is yielding to the postmodern age born of Einstein, quantum physics, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, and Saussure.<sup>1</sup> The old mechanistic model

1. For more comprehensive descriptions of the transition see D. Allen, "Christian Values in a Post-Christian Context," *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World* (ed. F. B. Burnham; San Francisco: Harper, 1989) 20-25; H. Küng, "A New Basic Model for Theology: Divergences and Convergences," *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future* (ed. H. Küng and D. Tracy; New York: Crossroad, 1989) 445-47; T. C. Oden, *After Modernity . . . What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 48-49. For the transition as it impacts Biblical Studies see E. V. McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988); S. D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale, 1989) 130; S. M. Schneiders, "Does the Bible have a Postmodern Message?" *Postmodern Theology*, ed. F. B. Burnham, 56-73.

Paul Hiebert presents the shift as different reactions of westerners, particularly missionaries, to encounters with other cultures: colonialism (= modernism); anti-colonialism, after World War II (= postmodernism); and globalism, since 1975 (= post postmodernism, critical realism), "Beyond Anti-Colonialism to Globalism," *Missiology* 19 (1991) 263-81. Douglas Jacobsen traces a change in evangelical hermeneutics which parallels the modern/postmodern shift as follows: fundamentalism 1915-34 (= early modernism, a hermeneutics of truth); classic evangelicalism 1945-75 (= later modernism, a hermeneutics of authority); post classic evangelicalism (= postmodernism, a hermeneutics of responsibility), "From Truth to Authority to Responsibility: The Shifting Focus of Evangelical Hermeneutics, 1915-1986 (Parts I & II)," *TSF Bulletin* 10 no. 4 (1987) 8-15; no. 5 (1987) 10-14.

It must be noted that paradigm shifts occur slowly and at any point in time persons operating within the old worldview exist side by side with those participating in the new. In the particular case of the transition from modern to postmodern there are complicating factors. There was a mini-shift within the modern system from a thoroughgoing objectivism to a moderate relativism when the issue of the structure of

of the universe with its "naive realist" epistemology is no longer viewed as tenable. That an independent, neutral "knowing subject" could have objective, verifiable knowledge of the world leading to affirmations of universal truth is now summarily dismissed. Instead, postmodernism posits a holistic model in which the fundamental stuff of the universe is "a dynamic nexus of internal relatings, actual and potential."<sup>2</sup> This universe cannot be fully known and, therefore, known with certainty, because at the most fundamental level the phenomena will not yield to a means of measurement that will, at any one time, comprehend all their properties. Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle has taught us that.<sup>3</sup> Unlike a bullet or billiard ball, a subatomic particle, such as a photon or electron, has either a precise velocity or a precise position, but not both at the same time.

Further, the practice of postmodern science has supposedly given the lie to the independent status of the "knowing subject." "*All knowers are participants in that which is known.*"<sup>4</sup> A quasar emits a photon which is deflected by a galaxy 100 million light years from earth. An observer on earth must choose whether to see the photon as a particle or a wave. Because of these characteristics of postmodern science, the epistemology of the postmodern worldview must see all knowledge as no longer certain or objective. Postmodern science no longer views the articulation of its findings as the presentation of the truth via a set of universal objective facts, "but rather as a set of research traditions born out of a particular community of inquirers and unintelligible outside the lived practice of such communities."<sup>5</sup> Its truthfulness does not extend beyond the community of scholars who operate with the same interpretive scheme.

thought in the human mind came to be seen as historically conditioned (J. B. Cobb, "Two Types of Postmodernism: Deconstruction and Process," *Theology Today* 47 [1990] 149-58). This moderate relativism impacted the interpretation of Scripture in the form of a historical consciousness which saw the nature of the text and its content as historically and culturally conditioned (D. M. Scholer, "Issues in Biblical Interpretation," *EvQ* 60 [1988] 10; B. S. Childs, "Critical Reflection on James Barr's Understanding of the Literal and Allegorical," *JSOT* 46 [1990] 7). The historical criticism, which embodies this moderate relativism, though its limits have been uncovered, is still affirmed as essential for interpretation in the postmodern era (McKnight, *Postmodern Use*, 254; Oden, *After Modernity*, 106). Some of the projects of postmodernism, reader oriented criticism and deconstruction, have been viewed as the pursuit to its logical conclusion of the modernist concerns with the role of the "knowing subject" in acquiring knowledge, and the critical use of reason. (Moore, "The 'Post'-Age Stamp: Does it Stick? Biblical Studies and the Postmodernism Debate," *JAAR* 57 [1989] 546; Cobb, "Two Types of Postmodernism," 151).

2. J. B. Miller, "The Emerging Postmodern World," *Postmodern Theology*, ed. J. B. Burnham, 10; cf. J. P. Martin, "Toward a Post-Critical Paradigm," *NTS* 33 (1987) 372, 377.

3. See Allen Emerson, "A Disorienting View of God's Creation: Faith in the Crucible of the New Physics," *Christianity Today* 29, no. 2 (February 1, 1985) 19-24.

4. Miller, "Emerging Postmodern World," 10.

5. J. B. Burnham, "Introduction," *Postmodern Theology*, ed. J. B. Burnham, x.

The impact on hermeneutics of such an epistemic shift to thoroughgoing epistemological relativism is radical.<sup>6</sup> It raises basic questions of definition and of the relation between truth and cultural context, the interpreter and the production of meaning, and Scripture's authority and pluralism.

Within a framework of radical relativism, how can evangelicals intelligibly and effectively express and commend the message of a Bible which claims to speak eternal and universal truth?<sup>7</sup> When the reigning paradigm says the interpreter is decisive for the "weaving" of meaning, how are evangelicals, who have always affirmed authorial intent recoverable from texts as the locus of meaning, going to describe the interpreter's relation to the production of meaning?<sup>8</sup> Within an epistemological framework, which sees interpretation as a participatory "give and take" between text and interpreter, how do evangelicals, known for their commitment to Scripture as the primary authority, practice a hermeneutic which will permit the Bible to exercise its full authority?<sup>9</sup>

6. Stephen Moore (*Literary Criticism*, 130) calls it "an epistemic shift that portends to change the way we think across a span of disciplines, about texts, about methods, even about the human and material world. In biblical studies today the epistemic shift is considerably less obtrusive than the methodological shift [from diachronic—historical to synchronic—literary approaches to texts], but we can expect it to move steadily to the fore in the coming decades."

7. The general intellectual climate today is inhospitable to the concept of truth as a quality of correspondence to reality because realism is in disfavor. Often postmodernists replace the goal of certainty or truth with understanding or insight (D. Tracy, "Some Concluding Reflections on the Conference: Unity amidst Diversity and Conflict," *Paradigm Change*, ed. H. Küng and D. Tracy, 463; Cobb, "Two Types of Postmodernism," 156). But a case can still be made for realism and truth (David Ferguson, "Meaning, Truth, and Realism in Bultmann and Lindbeck," *RelS* 26 [1990] 183-98).

8. Edgar McKnight (*Postmodern Use*, 14-15) defines the postmodern perspective as "a radical reader oriented literary criticism, a criticism which views literature in terms of readers and their values, attitudes, and responses . . . [it] sees the strategies, the criteria for criticism and verification, the 'information' obtained by the process, and the use made of such 'information' in light of the reader . . . the reader and the text are interdependent. The text is actualized by the reader in a fashion that the text may be said to actualize the reader."

Evangelicals have been working recently on the relationship of text and reader but mainly in terms of identifying Scripture's normative content which legitimately applies to the reader (e.g., H. M. Conn, "Normativity, Relevance and Relativism," *TSF Bulletin* 10, no. 3 [1987] 24-33; G. D. Fee, "Issues in Evangelical Hermeneutics Part I: Hermeneutics and the Nature of Scripture; Part II: The Crucial Issue—Authorial Intentionality: A Proposal Regarding New Testament Imperatives; Part III: The Great Watershed—Intentionality and Particularity/Eternality: I Timothy 2:8-15 as a Test case; Part IV: Hermeneutics, Exegesis and the Role of Tradition" *Crux* 26 no. 2 [1990] 21-26; no. 3 [1990] 35-42; no. 4 [1990] 31-37; 27 no. 1 [1991] 12-20); Scholer, "Issues," 19-22; V. S. Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *WTJ* 48 (1986) 241-79.

9. G. Fackre, "Evangelical Hermeneutics: Commonality and Diversity," *Int* 43 (1989) 119; Sandra Schneiders ("Does the Bible have a Postmodern Message?" 62)

These are questions which must be answered if evangelicals are to successfully cope with this new intellectual climate. By success I mean that the resulting hermeneutic will be able to avoid the twin dangers of obscurantism, no communication, and syncretism, the distortion of Scripture's message by a wrong appropriation of the cultural worldview, in this case the postmodern paradigm. Stated positively, a successful interpretation will articulate a message that is intelligible and relevant to postmodern culture and, at the same time, faithful to Scripture's content.

But there is another set of questions which evangelicals must ask and answer if they are to truly serve postmodern persons. These come from the perceived, as well as the real, needs of postmodernism itself. The pluralism of the postmodern hermeneutical enterprise is one of chaotic diversity which generates in its participants a cynical or apathetic lack of commitment.<sup>10</sup> Instead of differences held within a "common universe of canonical theological discourse," W. D. Davies wonders, "Is ours one of those situations in which 'Things fall apart; the center cannot hold' because there is no one center and often no centers . . . the new pluralism can often become banal, trivial and pretentious, like a fish in that ocean [of the transcendent] always keeping its mouth wide open, afraid to shut it, and therefore never taking a bite."<sup>11</sup> Can evangelicals put forward a comprehensive hermeneutical framework of biblical realism which will bring order out of the chaos by presenting a "balcony view," a metacultural grid, through which to view and assess the various competing hermeneutical proposals?<sup>12</sup>

describes the participating dialogue this way: "Interpretation, in other words, is not a matter of dominating the text by method or of submitting to the text in servile fideism, but of entering into genuine dialogue . . . reader and text are mutually transformed. The reader is not transformed by capitulation but by conversion; the text is transformed not by dissection but through multiple interpretations to which it gives rise by its surplus of meaning, but which can only be actualized by successive generations of readers whose interpretations enrich the texts themselves."

10. G. T. Sheppard, "'Blessed are Those Who Take Refuge in Him': Biblical Criticism and Deconstruction," *Religion and Intellectual Life* 5 (1988) 60; Charles Colson, "Comfortably Numb at Harvard," *Christianity Today* 35 no. 10 (September 16, 1991) 88. Brevard Childs ("Critical Reflections") sees the confusion as simply a matter of how the newer literary methods relate to the older critical enterprise. He thinks that most scholars see it as a matter of continuity, an extension of the old.

11. W. D. Davies, "Reflections on Thirty Years of Biblical Studies," *SJT* 39 (1986) 57.

12. Paul Hiebert ("Beyond Anti-colonialism," 271-79) calls for this as the next necessary step to moving beyond the relativism of anti-colonialism (= postmodernism) to the critical realism of globalism (= post postmodernism). He documents those in the physical, social, and language sciences who have begun to do this.

Postmodern scholars, as well as evangelicals, have been working on such projects.<sup>13</sup> But the work of evangelicals must go broader, deeper, and higher. Broader, in reaching out in empathy to those confused, even despairing, as the modern world collapses into chaotic postmodernism. Evangelicals must move beyond their critique of relativism<sup>14</sup> to give hope through a coherent worldview which makes sense of the chaos in terms relevant to postmoderns. Deeper, by questioning and reformulating their basic presuppositions about truth, meaning, revelation, and scriptural authority. Evangelicals owe it to the postmodern and to themselves to divest their assumptions of anything from the modern or postmodern paradigm which does not accord with Scripture.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, they can with integrity commend to others their hermeneutic as not just another system, but as an attempt to express God's desires for interpretation. Higher, in reaching up to God and his wisdom as disclosed in Scripture as the fundamental source of their hermeneutical framework. For, as Hiebert contends, It is divine revelation in Scriptures that ultimately defines the questions, provides the categories, and outlines the methods that help us see reality. It is this world known by God, not the worlds we create, that is the real world. All other systems of knowledge, including the sciences, must emerge out of this biblical realism.<sup>16</sup>

13. William A. Beardslee ("Recent Literary Criticism," *The New Testament and Its Interpreters* [ed. E. J. Epp and G. W. MacRae; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989] 190) calls for "a series of fresh attempts at reconstructing overall theories of interpretation." N. K. Gottwald's ("Literary Criticism of the Hebrew Bible: Retrospect and Prospect," *Mappings of the Biblical Terrain: The Bible as Text* [ed. V. L. Toilers and J. Maier; Lewisberg, NJ: Bucknell U. Pr., 1990] 27-44) "literary theory to encompass literary, social, theological, and historical critical practices" and Mark I. Wallace's (*The Second Naivete: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology* [Macon, GA: Mercer U. Pr., 1990]) proposal about reintroducing the concept of revelation to shore up the "second naivete" are first steps in this direction.

See n. 8 for information on evangelicals Conn, Fee, and Scholer. See also E. E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990); V. S. Poythress, "God's Lordship in Interpretation," *WTJ* 50 (1988) 27-64.

14. Darell Jodock (*The Church's Book: Its Contemporary Authority* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989] 84) faults conservatives for critique without compassion (cf. Oden, *After Modernity*, 68).

15. Have evangelicals' historic declarations of the objective truth of Scripture been too dependent on the modern scientific model, as Oden (*After Modernity*, 68) contends? On the other hand, have their more recent protestations of uncertainty and the impossibility of objective meaning (Jacobsen, "From Truth, Part II," 12; Scholer, "Issues," 9) been shaped too much by the moderate relativism of later modernism and the radical relativism of postmodernism?

16. Hiebert, "Beyond Anti-Colonialism," 275. Reviews of my own attempt to develop such a framework, a biblical theology of hermeneutics and culture, show that many see such a task as impossible. They believe it either violates in an anachronistic

In the area of meaning and the interpreter, the postmodern reader oriented criticism has transformed the interpretive enterprise from one of rational demonstration via arguments based on evidence from the text to an act of political persuasion. The rationalist mandate of modern criticism: serving truth and objective knowledge, has given way to a postmodern political mandate: serving the critic and his or her interpretive community.<sup>17</sup> In two recent SBL presidential addresses calls were issued by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Walter Brueggemann that interpretation of Scripture be performed as a rhetoric of a classic text as a political act; that each interpretation include "a hermeneutic-evaluative discursive practice exploring the power/-knowledge relations in contemporary biblical discourse and in the biblical texts themselves."<sup>18</sup>

Postmodern interpreters are aware of the danger of "repressive tolerance" that interpretation so practiced within the framework of a thoroughgoing pluralism might seek to enforce.<sup>19</sup> Yet, they seem blind to the coercion entailed in their insistence on unswerving allegiance to the political agenda of liberation for the oppressed.<sup>20</sup>

Evangelicals would certainly identify positively with many of the agenda's concerns and applaud the emphasis on praxis. Still, hermeneutics as "power play" has no way to sustain reasoned debate over the validity of rival interpretations. There will only be "winners" and "losers" based on factors other than appeal to the evidence.

Evangelicals are in a unique position to make a contribution at this point. As Gabriel Fackre has pointed out, they are one of the consistently more or less marginalized parties in the biblical scholarship

fashion the intention of Scripture or assumes an impossible position: a transcendent stance outside culture (W. J. Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988] 191-324; Sidney Greidanus, review of *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* by W. J. Larkin, *CTJ* 25 [1990] 105-7; Edward Rommen, review of *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* by W. J. Larkin, *Trinity Journal* n.s. 10 [1989] 223-26).

John Cobb, ("Two Types of Postmodernism," 157) notes that postmoderns under the influence of process thought are only willing to address the matter of truth after a worldview has been articulated.

17. Moore, *Literary Criticism*, 117.

18. E. S. Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Interpretation: DeCentering Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 107 (1988) 16; Walter Brueggemann, "At the Mercy of Babylon: A Subversive Re-reading of the Empire," *JBL* 110 (1991) 20.

19. Tracy, "Concluding Reflections," 465.

20. K ung's ("New Basic Model," 452) new paradigm for theology with its political dimension hopes "to unite all who are concerned for the all embracing liberation of human beings in a post-colonialist, post-patriarchal--in short, post-modern-paradigm embodying what Schillebeeckx aptly called 'the cry for the humane'."

enterprise.<sup>21</sup> Thus, from their "oppressed" status they can raise an authentic voice calling for a reconceptualization of the interpretational mandate. Can evangelicals develop and put into practice a biblical realist "speaking the truth in love" mandate for criticism which both serves the truth of the text and those with whom they differ?

Finally, there is the challenge of framing a meaningful and convincing concept of biblical authority in an age which has no certainties to which that concept can be lashed.<sup>22</sup> And it must be done to a generation weary and wary of authoritarianism, in fact a generation definitely unwilling to submit to any authority which it has not first corrected according to its own liberation agenda.<sup>23</sup> Can evangelicals find a biblical metaphor or series of metaphors to commend to the postmodern age a fully and finally authoritative Word of God?<sup>24</sup>

In sum, by a comprehensive hermeneutical framework, grounded in biblical realism, which relativizes postmodernism's relativity; by

21. Fackre, "Evangelical Hermeneutics," 117-18. This continues in the framing of a Christian response the paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism. The point is consistently made that the way ahead can never be a return to a premodern or pre-critical position which it is assumed that evangelicals hold (e.g., Tracy, "Concluding Reflections," 465). Wallace (*Second Naivete*, 123) asserts that a mature hermeneutic will 'recognize that the road back to the 'precritical' or 'scientific' biblicism of the first naive is no longer available to us.'

22. Jodock, *Church's Bible*, 71. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza ("The Crisis of Scriptural Authority, Interpretation and Reception," *Int* 44 [1990] 363) suggests "constitution" as a way of conceiving Scripture's function as an authority. But note this quote and evaluation from the recent Supreme Court nominee confirmation hearings of Judge Clarence Thomas. "'The world didn't stop with the framers,' Thomas told the Senate Judiciary Committee. The meaning of the Constitution 'is not frozen in time,' he said, but, instead, 'moves with our history and our tradition'—a thoroughly mainstream judicial sentiment" ("Thomas Sounds Like Court Middleman: Analysis," *The State Newspaper*, 14 September 1991, p. 1A).

Francis Schüssler Fiorenza ("Crisis of Scriptural Authority," 358) notes another challenge in the developing of a concept of biblical authority. He contends that once historical consciousness took over and the meaning of Scripture became historical, "the issue of authority has become integrated with the issue of meaning. It is no longer simply a question of whether the scriptural text has authority or not. Instead the question of the meaning of the text takes priority and only in the context of the resolution of the issue of meaning can the issue of authority be resolved."

23. Sandra Schneiders ("Does the Bible Have a Postmodern Message?" 71) warns, "But unless the Church as a whole takes this entire issue (the Bible as a patriarchal text, as revealed by liberation theology and feminist criticism, and its appropriation as sacred literature in a postmodern world) much more seriously . . . I . . . may be forced to conclude that the Bible does not have a life-giving message for the postmodern world but belongs definitely to an age in which the domination of some humans by others could appear to be a God-given right."

24. Mark Wallace (*Second Naivete*, 123) sees as especially apt for postmodernism Barth's imagery of Scriptural authority as "not tyranny but power of appeal, command and blessing."

an interpretational process that gives interpreter and text each its proper role in the construal of meaning and conducts itself by "speaking the truth in love"; and by a concept of biblical authority which is winsome to the postmodern and as well leads to Scripture's full normative functioning, the evangelical can meet the challenges of critical hermeneutics in the postmodern nineties.