

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Approaches to and Images of Biblical Authority for the Postmodern Mind

WILLIAM J. LARKIN, PHD

1

Biblical authority is unintelligible, if not inimical, to the postmodern mind. Deconstructive, analytical postmodernists are hostile to any "privileging" of a text. Playful postmoderns, many persons in the broader culture, though technologically sophisticated, live "surface" lives indifferent to authority, biblical or otherwise. Constructivist postmoderns promote "Scripture free" paradigms for constructive living. Through reflection on the Bible as "sword" and "grand mural," "mirror" and "CD-ROM," "light for the path" and "map for the journey," this article seeks to commend Scripture to the postmodern mind of whatever stripe.

Key Words: postmodernism, biblical authority, deconstructionism, constructive postmodernism, stability of meaning

Biblical authority is central to the gospel, but to the postmodern mind unintelligible, if not inimical. When Jesus commissions the disciples in Luke he introduces the message they are to carry with an appeal to the authority of Scripture: "This is what is written" (Luke 24:46). When Paul summarizes his gospel he says, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-4).

For the postmodern mind there is, as Henry Giroux observes, "no tradition or story that can speak with authority and certainty for all of humanity."¹ According to Walter Anderson, to appeal to an ancient authority for guidance in contemporary problems "appears utterly ludicrous—[for example, like] trying to find instruction in the Bible for what to do about RU 486."² How may we commend biblical authority to a postmodern who sees the Bible as, in the words of a Jean-Francois Lyotard fable, "the despotic deposit of the divine utterance"?³ Before we can think about how to respond we must consider in more detail the exact nature of the postmodern's aversion to authority.

¹ Henry A. Giroux, "Border Pedagogy in the Age of Postmodernism," *Journal of Education* 170/3 (1988) 163.

² Walter T. Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Use to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990) 244.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, "Retortion in Theopolitics," *Toward the Postmodern* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities, 1993) 122.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Amid the bewildering variety of postmodern expression we consider three streams: analytical or deconstructive, playful, and metaphoric or constructivist postmodernism. In the academy, deconstructive postmodernists practice a hermeneutic which so analyzes texts that its meaning is treated as “deferred” in endless playful irony or unavoidable nihilism. Nihilism is the unavoidable result when one takes seriously, some postmodernists would say too seriously,⁴ the role of “nothing” in the process of generating messages. Derrida contends, “Only *pure absence*—not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced—can *inspire*, in other words, can *work*, then make one work [i.e., speak or write].”⁵ When Derrida applies this pattern of concentrating on the “Other” to divine written revelation, the story of the tablets divinely written, then broken on Sinai, then rewritten by human hands under divine dictation becomes the paradigm for understanding that the Bible contains the absence of divine speech.

God separated himself from himself in order to let us speak, in order to astonish and to interrogate us. He did so not by speaking but by keeping still, by letting silence interrupt his voice and his signs, by letting the Tables be broken. In *Exodus* God repented and said so at least twice, before the first and before the new Tables, between original speech and writing and, within Scripture, between the origin and repetition (Exodus 32:14; 33:17). Writing is, thus, originally hermetic and secondary. Our writing, certainly, but already His, which starts with the stifling of his voice and the dissimulation of his Face.⁶

Such “absence” of the voice of God, however, is not the only option for viewing Scripture according to deconstructive analysis. If one says meaning does not reside within the text but in the passageway of deferred reciprocity which is interpretation, then one may view interpretation not as an infinite regress into the “black hole” of nothingness, but as that playful proliferation of “discursive interventions of every stripe.” The fact that the text does not have a meaning but constantly defers it not only permits but demands such a process.⁷ What about the authority of a text? The analytic postmodern’s hermeneutic both seems to submit to texts by its analysis of them and, at the same time, denies access to authority by the very method employed. In fact, according to Kerry McKeever, it lets loose in the culture method and interpretation which “threaten the plethora of

⁴ Gary John Percesepe, “The Unbearable Lightness of Being Postmodern,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 20 (1990) 132–34.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Force and Signification,” *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 8.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book,” *Writing and Difference*, 67.

⁷ Percesepe, “Unbearable Lightness,” p. 124 n. 15.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

institutions which rely on traditional hermeneutic strategies to enforce, regulate and perpetuate a variety of agendas."⁸

Analytical postmoderns also question the legitimate normativity of grand or metanarratives, a culture's universalizing explanations of life. The many illogical turns of history: two world wars, the Jewish holocaust, the nuclear arms race, and the ecological crisis, have made a lie of the main tenets of modernism's metanarrative: knowledge is inherently good; cultural progress fueled by technological and scientific advances is inevitable; reason can provide the basis for morals and society.⁹ The postmodern has adopted a studied incredulity about any and all metanarratives. In fact his hermeneutic of suspicion exposes them as the socially constructed stories of the dominant culture. For instance, the metanarrative of the modern industrialized nations "serves to privilege Western, patriarchal culture, on the one hand, while simultaneously repressing and marginalizing the voices of those who have been deemed subordinate and/or subjected to relations of oppression because of their color, class, ethnicity, race, or cultural and social capital."¹⁰ To treat the Bible as the source of a metanarrative which communicates certain and universal truth is an impossibility for the postmodern mind for no metanarrative can exist which is not the product of a particular time and place. Nor should it exist, since it represses voices at the margins.

Playful postmoderns, many persons in the broader culture, are indifferent to authority, biblical or otherwise. They live laid back "surface" lives of depthlessness in an environment governed by simulated images about reality. Television or other visual media have become their world. It is almost a commonplace to indict television for its "deliberate superficiality, its multiplication of empty, merely interreferential images." Lawrence Grossberg illustrates:

Miami Vice is, as its critics have said, all on the surface. And the surface is nothing but a collection of quotations from our own collective historical debris, a mobile game of Trivia.... The narrative is less important than the images.... And the spectator as subject all but disappears in the rapid editing and rather uncomfortable camera angles.¹¹

"Baywatch," the most watched TV program in the world, is self-confessedly "all image."

⁸ Kerry McKeever, "How to Avoid Speaking about God: Poststructuralist Philosophers and Biblical Hermeneutics," *Journal of Literature and Theology* 6 (1992) 237.

⁹ Diogenes Allen, "Christian Values in a Post-Christian Context," *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World* (ed. F. B. Burnham; San Francisco: Harper, 1989) 22–24.

¹⁰ Giroux, "Border Pedagogy," 162.

¹¹ Lawrence Grossberg, "The In-Difference of Television," *Screen* 28/2 (1987) 28–46.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

That everything is surface and image points to the effects new forms of technology and information have had on all of life in Western culture. We have moved from a business society founded on the making of products to a knowledge or information society where the chief economic function is reproduction, not production; what is made is not product/substances but simulations/images. No wonder in such an environment, in our leisure and in our serious pursuits, we have seemed to lose depth, any real substance, when we consider texts, the world, or ourselves as knowing subjects. Indeed, as Craig Van Gelder observes when he expounds on postmodernist Jean Baudrillard, "We have lost our signifiers and any meaningful narrative, which have been replaced by a series of intensified sensations led by experiences and images."¹² Life on "the surface" enamored as it is with the intensified sensations and participating as it does in a distrust of authority, born of the sixties, Vietnam, and Watergate, is understandably indifferent to biblical authority. Still, as Todd Gitlin observes, "beneath the surface, as David Byrne and Brian Eno have put it, 'America is waiting for a message of some sort or another:' "¹³

If for the playful postmodern space is "surface," then time is only "now." The electronic lightning pace of the computer age has reordered people's perception of "time" and what endures. Phil Mullins sees several effects of the advent of electronic texts on the relation of an authoritative sacred text, the Bible, to its original historical context, to its readers, and to its meaning. He proposes that the so-called information explosion, the proliferation of "texts" via computerized desktop publishing is to some degree swallowing up the Bible and every other sort of special text. Such a proliferation he claims will make it less and less important to study the original historical context in order to understand the text.¹⁴ There may be another reason, however, also tied to the computer and other electronic "information flow" devices: time compression and what it does to our sense of connection with the past. Frederic Jameson observes that the past as referent has ceased to effectively exist for us. History has been replaced with nostalgia.¹⁵ How many of us while in grammar school or high school celebrated decade days the way our children now are encouraged to celebrate the fifties, sixties, or even seventies?

The reader in an interactive computer age plays a part in determining the text. Hypertext applications, "the nonsequential retrieval of a document's text," enable the reader to

¹² Craig Van Gelder, "Postmodernism as an Emerging Worldview," *Calvin Theological Journal* 26 (1991) 414; cf. Peter F. Drucker, *The New Realities: In Government and Politics/In Economics and Business; In Society and Worldview* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989) 173.

¹³ Todd Gitlin, "The Postmodern Predicament," *Wilson Quarterly* 13 (Summer 1989) 67–76.

¹⁴ Phil Mullins, "Sacred Text in an Electronic Age," *BTB* 20 (1990) 104.

¹⁵ Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July–August 1984) 64–71.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

manipulate the text.¹⁶ No longer are there borders to a document. The “electronic medium for reading and writing is dissolving book culture’s notion that the printed word, even in the Bible, is or can be an eternal deposit of truth.” As to meaning, Phil Mullins concludes,

[in] the electronic medium, textuality is seen as a reader dependent opening to meaning, rather than an unchanging structure in which meaning is resident, enduring, and universal. Electronic text invites and often even demands reaction. In a culture shaped by the organizational “thickness” of the electronic word, the written word cannot readily function as a literal *locus classicus*; instead, the word can only be considered as meaning on the way to further meaning or association. The Bible as a text will acquire some of these open-textured associations common in an electronic era.¹⁷

If the Bible, that ancient text, must be viewed as “open-textured” for the postmodern, for whom “now” is the only point of reference, how can the final authority of its eternal truth be commended?

Constructivist or metaphoric postmoderns stand independent of biblical authority. Whether of the “embodiment” or panentheistic variety, they promote “Scripture free” paradigms for constructively living today and building a better future.¹⁸ In its “embodiment” form, through a positive appropriation of the deconstructivist hermeneutic of “difference,” this approach so lets “signs” (words) do their work that “the moment of difference now discloses the transcendental backlighting of immanent everydayness; it is the *signature* of a pure presencing.”¹⁹ In such a holistic understanding of reality, religious aspirations collapse into those of popular culture. R.E.M. can win a grammy for a rock video, “Losing My Religion,” fill the video with religious imagery, and then explain the title as slang for “at the end of your rope, on your last mile.” And still the lyrics tantalize with such religious phraseology, “the slip that brought me to my knees ... I’m choosing my confessions,” that they generate theological analysis.²⁰ “Immanent everydayness ... pure presencing,” such an understanding of reality is not only “Scripture free,” it has no place for Scripture to stand and speak normatively.

¹⁶ Bryan Pfaffenberger, *Que's Computer User's Dictionary* (Carmel, Ind.: Que, 1990) 225.

¹⁷ Mullins, “Sacred Text in an Electronic Age,” 105.

¹⁸ Carl A. Raschke, “Fire and Roses: Toward Authentic Postmodern Religious Thinking,” *JAAR* 58 (1990) 671–89; David R. Griffin (ed.), *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1988).

¹⁹ Raschke, “Fire and Roses,” 686.

²⁰ Iwan Russell-Jones, “The Contemporary Text: Media and Preaching—‘Losing My Religion on MTV,’” *Journal for Preachers* 15/4 (1992) 36–39.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The postmodern spirituality of the naturalistic panentheist sort sees a dispersion of spiritual energy throughout creation so that a co-creativity of deity and world is at work.²¹ It claims the “body, society, and nature (in both their structural and historical dimensions, all part of a single whole) are the primary mediators of the Mystery to us.”²² For guidance, then, this spirituality reaches within and beyond in such a way that norms and values at one and the same time have a natural abode, thus avoiding a return to supernaturalism, and are perceived at a nonsensory level, thus overcoming empirically based relativism. Though there is a direct perception or intuition of values, it is “vague and often incompatible.” Indeed, the conscious formulation of the norms is culturally conditioned. Aesthetic and ethical debate must be entered into to clarify them. In such a process, though Scripture may be viewed as an important part of our cultural past, a necessary resource in living out a “transformative traditionalism,” it cannot serve as a final norm. The naturalistic postmodern vision implies that the divine reality does not unilaterally and hence infallibly implant norms and beliefs into any one tradition, such as Christian Scripture.²³

6

We must approach the postmodern mind initially with the stance of a learner, a dialogue partner who proposes by asking questions. Later it will be time to be a witness, a proclaimer, who subverts the postmodern world view with the strange message of Scripture: that the transcendent God is active in space and time for man’s salvation.²⁴ This is not only biblical; compare the example of Paul at Thessalonica and Athens, where dialogical reasoning preceded monological proclamation (Acts 17:2–4, 17–20). It is essential, for the postmodern person eschews confrontation and will receive new ideas only when presented in postmodern vocabulary and constructs. He will respond to the subtlety with which the biblical discourse makes subversive turns. These were the constant themes in a brief conversation I had with an English literature professor concerning a summary of this paper.²⁵

Though I will propose an approach in concise form, the intention is that its implementation be continually sensitive to postmodern sensibilities. We should adopt

²¹ David R. Griffin, “Introduction: Postmodern Spirituality and Society,” *Spirituality and Society* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988) 17. Raschke criticizes Griffin’s approach as coopting the word “postmodern” and applying it to outmoded empirical theology (“Fire and Roses,” 679).

²² Joe Holland, “A Postmodern Vision of Spirituality and Society,” *Spirituality and Society* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988) 51.

²³ Griffin, “Introduction,” 17.

²⁴ Mark I. Wallace, “Theology without Revelation?” *TToday* 45 (1988) 210; compare Wallace’s “Postmodern Biblicism: The Challenge of Rene Girard for Contemporary Theology,” *Modern Theology* 5 (1989) 309–25.

²⁵ Conversation with Amittai Aviram, Assistant Professor of English, University of South Carolina, March 30, 1994.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

three stances when relating to the postmodern. (1) *Communication*: As learners, we should investigate which concerns, thought constructs, and values in postmodernism are congruent with biblical truth, may be affirmed, and even appropriated in communicating the biblical message. This appropriation must be based on a thorough understanding of postmodern thought in its primary sources. Since "Question authority!" will always be a staple of postmodern thought, are there any other concerns or values present which may serve as a basis for identifying thought constructs and imagery which will commend Scripture as an authority?

(2) *Correction*: As proclaimers calling for repentance, we need to ask and answer the question "What of the biblical message is 'bad news' to postmodernism because it corrects it?" We need to make clear to the postmodern that we ask and answer this question not from a privileged position which places our human cultural world view beyond evaluation. Rather we operate from the standpoint of one whose human thoughts have already been and continue to be judged and redeemed as we have in repentance and faith taken to ourselves a biblical world view. Part of such a conversation must also include a case for the divine origin of Scripture, which establishes its right to serve as a referential standard by which to judge world views.

(3) *Capture the Significance*: The postmodern admits that all humanly constructed world views are partial, limited. Unless he is going to "privilege" his approach,²⁶ he should be open to hear the answer to the question "How is the Biblical message 'good news' to the postmodern as it speaks to needs his own mindset does not address or addresses incorrectly?"

Now we will put "communication, correction, and capturing the significance" to work in engaging the deconstructivist, playful, and constructivist postmodern approaches to authority. We will look at the implications of this engagement for the church's life and witness. We can certainly agree with the deconstructive postmodern that God's transcendence, his "Otherness," makes him utterly different from man in his finitude. We can grant it makes sense to suppose that he must be silent if man is to speak. But the lesson of Sinai, and especially of the broken tablets, is actually the exact opposite of what Derrida proposes. God in his graciousness continues to speak in a living voice to Moses with a message which must be given to the people. Note it was not man's finitude but his sin that caused Moses to break the tablets. In the second fashioning of the tablets, Moses is even entrusted to write what God dictates to him (Exod 34:27–28; contrast 31:18).

²⁶ Huston Smith claims that they do ("Postmodernism's Impact on the Study of Religion," *JAAR* 58 [1990] 660).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Writing is not presented as secondary to speech but as an equally adequate vehicle of communication.

As to the adequacy of human language in either form to communicate divine revelation, note that in the very center of this episode, when God causes his glory to pass by Moses, he uses human language to declare his very nature (Exod 34:6–7). Yes, Moses must hide his eyes from the holy and transcendent one, but wonder of wonders he must not stop his ears. The “good news” is that God has spoken and in such a way that his “living voice” may be heard and understood across time and culture. This is the necessary implication of Jesus’ last command: to disciple the nations with the one gospel until he returns (Matt 28:18–20). Here, of course, is a challenge to postmodern epistemology, which cannot affirm texts with stable and definite meanings, and we must do our homework to seek to persuade them that such is the character of meaning. And we must also let Scripture in all its genres, especially figure, parable, and narrative, do its subversive work on the holism of postmodernism. “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12). Our preaching of the Word must wield the “sword” with the boldness and skill of a surgeon, who exposes in order to heal.

The Scriptures shares the same concern for the marginalized with the analytical postmodern who distrusts all metanarratives because they are products of the dominant culture. Were not God’s people during part of their history a marginalized, oppressed slave nation in Egypt? Did not Paul say to the Corinthians, “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth” (1 Cor 1:26). But Scripture’s content goes even further in two other directions to commend itself as the authoritative source from which a “grand mural,” the one true metanarrative, may be understood. It views humans both in creation and redemption in terms of a unity which is more basic than the cultural diversity that leads to prejudicial, oppressive relations (Acts 17:26; Col 3:11; Gal 3:28). The Bible’s concept of authority based on love and the suffering of the cross stands as a necessary corrective to the authoritarianism which the postmodern mind rightly rejects (John 13; Phil 2:1–11).²⁷ The public ministry of the Word can commend this “grand mural” by consciously teaching the grand panorama of salvation history the text relates. Educational programs like “Walk thru the Bible” should be promoted. The church can demonstrate the authenticity of Scripture as truly a charter of liberation for all of life by, with intentionality, living out the Scriptures’ precepts in relating to “persons at the

²⁷ Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion, “Canterbury Consultation 1993: Summary Findings Report,” *Transformation* 10/4 (Oct.–Dec. 1993) 31.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

margins" by modeling a multicultural harmony. Indeed, "unified diversity" will have to characterize congregational life, if the church is to survive in an increasingly multicultural society.²⁸

To the playful postmodern, biblical authority can commend itself if the church will present personal Bible study as a stimulating adventure which will probe beneath the surface with that "message" which postmoderns are waiting for. The Word as a transforming "mirror" is an apt image. Anyone looking "intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continu[ing] to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does" (Jas 1:25). The church should promote attractive personal Bible study by reintroducing a synthetic study of the text approach. The emphasis will be on direct encounter with the text in whole literary units and an experience of its personal impact. Discourse analysis and computer formatted continuous texts will also be of aid here.

The playful postmodern has experienced the effect of the computers' electronic textuality with its "reader dependent" meaning on claims that any volume, including the Bible, contains an "eternal deposit of truth." Perhaps the "CD-ROM," the "Read Only Memory" compact disk, is a metaphor which will both communicate and commend the reality of Scripture as an unchanging eternal and universal norm. Though CD-ROMs may be erased and used over (and thus the analogy is not complete), their basic function is to provide information which may not be tampered with on the CD-ROM itself. Indeed, if Scripture functions authoritatively in any other way than as an unalterable referential standard, the very nature of biblical authority is changed (Luke 16:17).²⁹ Though the church certainly desires all to be biblically literate and interact with Scripture, in a day when "interactive" means an exchange between text and interpreter which changes both, a hermeneutic must be taught which permits the Bible to have the final word.

The constructivist's naturalistic, immanental metaphysic, and epistemology of personal spirituality provides no basis for meaningfully introducing Scripture as the final norm of the transcendent God. Biblical truth indeed becomes nonsense, if not "bad news." But the proponent of biblical authority does have "good news." In place of "difference"

²⁸ Craig Van Gelder, "A Great New Fact of Our Day: America as a Mission field," *Missiology* 19 (1991) 417; cf. Vinay Samuel, "Modernity, Postmodernity and Ethnic Minorities," *Transformation* 10/4 (Oct.–Dec. 1993) 14–16.

²⁹ Robert K. Johnston, "Biblical Authority and Hermeneutics: The Growing Evangelical Dialogue," *Covenant Quarterly* 50/3 (August 1992) 12, citing Clark Pinnock; cf. Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1979) 4.474. The other options, Scripture as "Sacred Word" or "Transforming Word" (see Johnston, "Biblical Authority," 13–15), while contributing valuable insights and being potentially attractive to the postmodern, should not displace "referential standard" as the primary way the Scripture's functioning as an authority is understood.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

providing illumination through “the transcendental backlighting of immanent everydayness” he offers the “spotlight” of God’s Word which can by its truth give corrective guidance (Ps 119:105). Instead of direct intuition of “vague and incompatible” norms, Scripture offers itself as a fully adequate “compass” (2 Tim 3:16–17). Where the Christian can intersect with the constructivist postmodern is in his concerns for wholistic living, stewardship of the planet, and relational acceptance. Any Bible study group that would attract this type of postmodern must be holistic both in its concern for the whole person and the whole interpretation/application process. It must have an agenda to turn its orthodoxy into orthopraxy aimed at bringing wholeness to the world.

Like a dialogue partner, who proposes by asking questions, and a proclaimer, who bears witness to that radically subversive and true biblical message, the church must reach out to the postmodern person. He does so, commending Scripture as a “living voice/sword” and “grand mural”; a “transforming mirror” and “unalterable CD-ROM”; a “light for the path” and a “compass.” Earnestly, we desire the postmodern to know and embrace the truth of Peter’s question: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).³⁰

William J. Larkin Jr. (Ph.D., University of Durham) is professor of Biblical Studies at Columbia International University Seminary and School of Ministry in Columbia, South Carolina. An ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America, he is the author of several books.

³⁰ Larkin, W. J. (1998). “Approaches to and Images of Biblical Authority for the Postmodern Mind,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, Vol. 8, 129–138.