

THE BIBLE FOR THE POST MODERN WORLD

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1. Introduction: The Bible and the Modern World

I had better begin by defining my terms. Most of us are dimly aware that, as someone said recently, 'reality isn't what it used to be'. We are in the middle of enormous cultural changes within Western society, which leave many observers bewildered and many participants bemused. All the signs are that things are going to get more confusing, not less, and that the onset of the Millennium, which at one level had nothing to do with postmodernity and all that, made people on the one hand eager for and on the other hand fearful of great changes in the way we look at the world. The so-called 'Millennium bug', the nasty cold that all our computers were supposed to catch on January 1st 2000, is, at the level of contemporary mythology, a wonderfully symptomatic disease of postmodernity: explorations into cyberspace that forgot a ruthlessly modernist piece of equipment, so that when the new age dawned they, as with Cinderella on the stroke of midnight, may well have turned into pumpkins.

But, in case some feel left behind by all this jargon, what do we mean by 'modernity' and 'postmodernity', anyway? A quick thumbnail sketch is all we have time for. By the 'modern' world I mean, broadly, the western world from the eighteenth century to the present. The European Enlightenment at the intellectual level, and the Industrial Revolution at the social level, produced enormous changes both in how society worked, literally and metaphorically, and in how people thought. The large-scale shift from agrarian economies to factory economies had, of course, profound social consequences, of which some parts of New Zealand at least are, I am sure, very much aware. Those who learnt to think for themselves in the Enlightenment without fear of tradition, and then in the Industrial Revolution, those who learnt to make things for themselves rather than having to grow them, acquired a new confidence: they could take on the world.

Thus there grew up the modernist trinity: first, the confident individual who says, 'I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.' Secondly, there was certainty about the world and about our objective knowledge of it. We can look at the world and know things, and that is objective knowledge. (Someone said facts, like telescopes and wigs for gentlemen, were an 18th century invention.) Thirdly, and perhaps above all, there grew up a new mythology of progress; the belief that the world was actually going somewhere, was progressing, and was about to reach its goal. Reality was then conveniently divided up into facts and values; facts were objective, values were subjective. Or, in another of the great Enlightenment ways of carving up the world, there were the truths of reason 'out there' which the mind might be able to grasp, and the truths of the empirical world, the things that you could actually do business with. There was an ugly ditch, said the German philosopher Lessing, between the two of them. Split level reality, is what the modernist trinity purchased at considerable cost, and we have been paying that cost ever since.

The negative corollaries of all this are quite clear: the European world said we are no longer bound to traditional religions or ethics. We live in the real world, people said, and religion and ethics are a matter of

private opinion. Part of the avowed aim of modernity was to get away from endless European wars of religion, by showing that religions were simply about what people did with their solitude, and that it was therefore absurd to fight one another about such beliefs. We have learnt to think for ourselves, and can use this ability to show up barbarity and superstition, to free ourselves from the tyranny of tradition.

It is this heady combination, I think, that people regularly refer to when they talk about 'living in the modern world.' Its positive achievements are obvious: modern medicine, communications, and hundreds of other social improvements. With a few exceptions, such as the Amish community in Pennsylvania, we all live off the modernist achievement. Its darker side is not always so well known, but they include of course the French Revolution (however much the aristocracy had asked for it, a movement of liberty, equality and brotherhood that kills thousands of people, including many of its own, to make the point is self-defeating, and hardly a good advertisement for its own principles).

Likewise, the myth of progress and enlightenment (which was there in Keats) created the context not only for Charles Darwin, but for that which followed in his wake, namely that Social Darwinism that made talk of eugenics, of racial purity, of selective breeding, and ultimately of final solutions, possible and acceptable, even apparently desirable, not only in Germany but also in Britain and elsewhere. And those whom the Enlightenment enabled to think of themselves as masters of their fate and captains of their souls were of course standing on the enslaved shoulders of millions of workers for whom the main effect of swapping agricultural serfdom for industrial wage-slavery was the loss of fresh air.

And, to pursue the political point, as Western society has levelled out in the last two hundred years, it has increasingly achieved this freedom at the expense of the rest of the world. The brave new reality of modernity, symbolised by the architecture, music, art and politics of the 1950s and 1960s, has looked increasingly hollow. This is the context for the rise of postmodernity.

Before looking at that phenomenon, though, let us think for a moment of what happened to the Bible within modernity. It was seen, of course, as part of the tradition that had to be overthrown. In a world where objective facts were what counted, the Bible was weighed in the modernist balance and found wanting. Since Progress, not Creation, was what counted, evolution must be right and special creation must be wrong. Genesis was therefore out of line. Since science studied the unalterable laws of nature, miracles were out of the question, and half the biblical account stood accused of fairy-tale fantasy.

When the so-called Jesus Seminar in California debated the resurrection of Jesus, and then went public with a press conference to announce that they had concluded that the resurrection didn't happen, as part of their evidence they brought in a young woman who worked in a mortuary in Los Angeles. She testified before the press that she worked all the time with dead bodies; and they always stayed dead! (This was supposed to be some kind of scientific revelation.) That is precisely part of the point of the Resurrection of Jesus-everyone else always stays dead when they die and Jesus didn't. (The incident illustrates that the Jesus Seminar is a relentlessly modernist movement, though not all its members are modernist.)

Since according to Reimarus 200 years ago, Jesus was actually a Galilean revolutionary (or whatever), the idea of his being 'the son of man', let alone the Son of God, let alone dying and rising for the sins of the world, must be the pious invention of the later church, on its way to the Constantinian enslavement of the world in religious superstition. (Notice the way in which the Enlightenment borrows at certain points the

rhetoric of the Reformation, while firmly rejecting its spiritual certainties). As for biblical ethics, within modernity they are quite simply out of date; an odd idea, one might suppose, to apply to an ethic, but there it is. Within this modernist context, the Bible is reduced in its public role to being read in the liturgy more as a piece of verbal wallpaper than anything dynamic, and in its private role to being read in order to inspire holy thoughts in individuals, which it might do, some would hope, irrespective of its truth-claims. So strong has been the rhetoric of the modernist worldview that any attempt, and there have of course been many, to show that these negative judgements were ill-founded-in my own field, for instance, I think of half the writers in the so-called 'Quest for the Historical Jesus'-has regularly been dismissed as attempting to recreate a bygone age. The tide of modernity is coming in, and anyone who questions it is a fundamentalist Canute.

2. The Transition to Postmodernity

But, as we all know, the modernist movement has been having an increasingly hard time of it in the last decade or two. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, the masters of suspicion nurtured within the bosom of modernity, propounding their theories as 'scientific' and hence respectable within that frame of reference, have shaken to the core the modernist vision of reality and all that went with it. Again, the briefest of accounts must suffice here.

The context for the cultural change has again been a change in the methods and assumptions of the way we live. The recent British Telecom advertisement, which urged 'Why Not Change The Way We Work', was, like most good advertisements, telling people to do something they were already beginning to do or to want to do. The rhetoric says, instead of commuting boringly and expensively and pollutingly to offices in the middle of the city, why not stay at home in your comfortable home in the suburbs and do your entire work by phone and fax and modem?

The microchip has replaced the factory, the secretary, and a lot of other things and people as well; communities that depended on eighteenth-century ways of doing things have been reduced either to mass unemployment or to the status of theme parks. In the UK we have places where the inhabitants are now paid to dress up as miners, steelworkers or whatever and do to amuse the tourists what their forebears did to produce materials. (Your Christchurch trams are doing a miniature version of the same thing in a smaller way.) This phenomenon is certainly a major feature of the British landscape. Instead of producing and making things, entertainment is the order of the day.

This industrial and sociological change dovetails neatly into the changed vision of reality that is so characteristic of postmodernity. Instead of objective facts-hard-edged things, like lumps of coal or steel girders-we have impressions, attitudes and feelings, floating around in the cyberspace which all of us visit but few of us could describe accurately. At a conference in Dallas a couple of years ago I heard a speaker say enthusiastically, 'Today, attitudes are more important than facts-and we can document that!' A wonderful statement, trembling on the brink between modernity and postmodernity. We have learnt, in the title of a recent book, that 'Truth is stranger than it used to be'; that all truth-claims are made by somebody or some group, and that all persons and groups have agendas, which ingenious critics can smoke out with the help of street-level wisdom that goes back ultimately to Marx, Nietzsche or Freud.

This is, of course, what preoccupies western journalists, not only when they have a President on the run but all down the scale. I find myself thinking when I was reading an article in the London Times that actually most of our journalists, most of the time, at least in the UK only ever tell one story. The details change, but the story is the same; namely, that all the people who think they are somebody have all actually got feet of clay. They are not interested in positive stories.

Only in today's climate could the news that reforms at Westminster Abbey have quadrupled the size of the regular worshipping congregation, producing a nice problem about where to put the regular Christmas tree, be reported by The Times, on its front page, as a snub offered by the Dean to Her Majesty, the regular donor of the tree in question. Facts are not important; spin is everything. Reality is therefore no longer divided, as by modernity, into facts and values, or truths of reason and truths of science. Reality is whatever you make of it. You make it up as you go along.

If reality is thus being merrily deconstructed, the same is even more true for stories. One of the best-known aspects of postmodernity is the so-called 'death of the metanarrative', the critique applied to the great stories by which our lives have been ruled. (Metanarratives are the big stories, or the big pictures—the big story of modernity is the myth of progress.) Again, you can see this clearly at the political level. The post-war generation lived by the myth that world politics consisted of the Cold War, between the East and the West, and that once that got sorted out everything would be all right. When America basically won by default, Francis Fukuyama wrote a piece called 'The End of History?,' suggesting that there was now nothing much more to happen.

But we still had, and have, the Middle East. We still have Northern Ireland. We still have the Balkans, Rwanda, the Sudan, and many other places that no longer make it into the newspapers (the selectivity of the media is another major feature of postmodernity) but that form running sores in our post-Cold-War world. That big story was a lie. There is still all those little stories bubbling along, and we haven't a clue what to do about them. Precisely because postmodernity says my story matters, your story matters, everybody's story matters; so the Kosovo Albanians say this is our story, this is who we are, and the Serbs say, oh well, tough, this is our story, this is who we are. And crunch. The same is true in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. That is the political edge of postmodernity. And the modernist myth we lived in was just a cover up so that now that that has gone, our politicians haven't a clue what to do. One of the reasons is that very few of them have done either philosophy or religious studies at university. They thought that wasn't practical enough.

I had a wonderful moment in Oxford when a bright undergraduate, reading theology, who spent his penultimate long vacation in Zambia working with local churches and came back thrilled with what the churches were achieving, and with the task of theology as enabling the church to be the church in the two thirds world. He was determined to go back and get into development work as a theologian. At the end of the next term, the provost of the college where I was teaching, who had in his earlier life been an economic adviser to Harold Wilson's government, asked this young man, 'What do you want to do?' And when he said, 'I'm going to be a development worker in the third world,.' the provost asked, 'Why aren't you reading economics?' This lad shot back, 'Because theology is so much more relevant.' He was right. The economist hasn't got any answers.

The same is true, of course, with progress and enlightenment themselves: everybody's liberation turns out to be someone else's slavery, everybody's economic boom turns out to be at someone else's expense. So all our great stories, says postmodernity, our controlling narratives, are broken down into little stories: my story, your story, which may be 'authentic' in themselves ; this really is how we feel things, how we see things ; but which will almost certainly not impinge on one another. (This is fine, of course, if we live in cyberspace, where we can create our own virtual realities, accessed from our suburban sitting rooms, but it makes no sense at all where there are real lines drawn on real pieces of ground and human beings get shot if they cross them, or happen to be born the wrong side.)

This break-up of large narratives into little ones, philosophically, again goes back to Nietzsche, who offered collections of aphorisms as the appropriate way of describing the world. We can see the effect of this in some contemporary novels, which like 'The French Lieutenant's Woman,' offer a choice of endings according to the reader's mood, or which, like Julian Barnes' History of the World in Ten and a Half Chapters, offer no connected narrative at all, but only a succession of images, with, as he implies, the story like a raft adrift on an inhospitable ocean. It is interesting that in contemporary biblical studies some, not least those who have drunk deeply at the postmodern well, have preferred the hypothetical document 'Q' and the proto-gnostic document known as The Gospel of Thomas to the canonical gospels: precisely because they provide, after all, collections of detached sayings, instead of an over-arching story. The same thing is seen culturally in the sudden rise in the UK of the radio programme Classic FM, which offers snippets of music, only seldom indulging the older taste for complete symphonies, concerti, and operas.

And the bottom line of postmodernity is the deconstruction of the individual. No longer are we the masters of our fate, the captains of our soul. We are each a mass of floating signifiers, impulses and impressions, changing all the time, reconstructing ourselves as we go along according to the stimuli we receive, the spin that comes our way. The 'meaning' of a book, a poem, a work of art is not something inherent in the thing itself, but shifts according to the readers. Who is to say there is any objective meaning? If metanarratives are to be killed off, so are authors, whose intentions remain opaque behind the text-and is there even a text, anyway?

Equally, you can see what happens if you transpose the same confusion into other spheres, such as politics, marriage and sexuality, or education. This is the postmodern dilemma: reality ain't what it used to be, the great stories have let us down, we aren't feeling ourselves any more. We are left with a pick-and-mix culture, an if-it-feels-good-do-it culture, a whatever-turns-you-on culture: the hippiedom of the 1960s grown up, all dressed up for the millennium but with nowhere to go. At the personal level, the culture is symbolized by the portable personal stereo, creating for its wearer a private and constantly shifting world of sound; or more darkly the pornography industry, now providing safe telephone or cyberspace sex for those who find that real relationships with real human beings are too complex or messy. At the corporate level, in the UK we have the Greenwich Dome-a giant impressive space which nobody knows what to do with-it is, perhaps despite its inventors' intentions, a near-perfect symbol of this confused, shifting, ambitious yet rootless culture.

3. The Bible In the Postmodern World

What happens to the Bible within this culture I have so briefly described? I content myself with some notes on the way in which the postmodern climate has affected readings of the Bible; these, in good postmodern fashion, are random rather than systematic, but there is no time for the latter anyway.

• **Deconstructing the 'big story'**

The first obvious thing is that the modernist critique of the Bible seems to be heightened. All great stories are suspect, so the Bible is not only politically incorrect because it told the wrong story (as the Enlightenment thought) but because it tells a story at all. Of course, not all the biblical books are in narrative form, but the majority are, and the present framing of the canon of scripture, and for that matter the various framings which the Jewish canon underwent, all emphasize an overarching narrative from a beginning to an end, with various subplots in between, which transcends, though includes, the messages of the individual books.

The Jewish canon, without the New Testament, means we are left with either Genesis to Malachi, (or in the way that it is organised in the Hebrew Bible, Genesis to 2 Chronicles) and it is a story in search of an ending. It ends with a sort of 'Yes, and what next?' The Christian canon as we have it is that same story, with the four gospels saying, in their very different ways, this is the climax of the story, and then the Epistles and the Apocalypse, saying 'Now this is what we do with it.' With the end of Revelation providing this wonderful image of the heavenly city coming down from heaven to earth, we don't end by going back to Eden, instead there is the climax of the story, with the human project, God's project, finished successfully. That's the big story.

And even when there are some books that don't have a big story, Proverbs, for instance, which after Ecclesiastes would perhaps be the most appealing book for a postmodernist, is held in its canonical context within a narrative framework of creation, exodus, promised land, monarchy, exile and restoration. The later books which draw on Proverbs, such as the Wisdom of Solomon, make explicit this narrative setting for detached wisdom, insisting that 'wisdom' is found and known supremely within the ongoing life and story of Israel.

But within postmodernity such narrative settings are suspect. There are other stories, we are told, and these ones may be oppressive. For example, the liberation theology of the 60's made such a big deal out of the exodus. That was the paradigm we were told for all liberations. Now in postmodernity people are realising that if you simply tell the exodus story what are you going to say to the Egyptians at one end and the Canaanites at the other? We are reminded, for instance, that the Jewish way of telling the story of the Middle East is now deeply damaging to the Palestinian communities who comprise most of the native Christians in that part of the world. And so on.

• **Deconstructing Biblical reality**

The biblical view of reality is also, of course, under attack. Paul, we are told, saw things his way; but we should also bend over backwards to see things through the eyes of his opponents, who after all thought of themselves as Christians too, and may have had a point which Paul's rhetoric 'the literature of the conqueror, after all, is what survives' has masked from our sight. Graham Shaw's book, 'The Cost of Authority,' a polemic against Paul's supposed manipulation of his readers, is a classic postmodern protest

against taking things at their face value. Shaw said, taking 2 Corinthians in particular, that Paul is not actually arguing passionately from the cross to a particular style of life, but cynically manipulating his readers and hearers with rhetoric which sounds very impressive, but is in fact, just another power trip. That is a classic postmodern deconstruction of a passage of the Bible.

The Biblical view of the whole of reality, in which Jewish-style creational monotheism is by and large taken for granted, is also under attack; some have argued that this rather one-dimensional and puritanical Deuteronomic viewpoint was imposed heavy-handedly upon various other viewpoints, scrunching the little stories of the cheerful and interesting semi-polytheists in Israel under the jackboot of a uniform, and subsequently canonized, monotheism. (The imagery is not chosen at random; memories, and imaginations, of the tyrannies of the first half of the twentieth century provide fertile soil for the protests of the second half. Postmodernism looks back to Hitler and Stalin and says, 'Modernism; that's what it always does.')

• **Deconstructing the Biblical view of the person**

The biblical view of the person, likewise, will not do for the relentless postmodernist. Who are you as a human being? The Jew replies and the Christian replies: 'I am made in the image of God.' The postmodernist asks, 'What could it mean to be made in the image of a god when all god-stories are power-games?' Only that this, too, is a power-game, an example of speciesism in which humans project a glorified version of themselves on to a hypothetical cosmic reality and use this to legitimate their oppression and rape of the rest of their world. Thus postmodern liberation theology, standing shakily on one part of the biblical narrative (the exodus tradition), critiques other parts of the bible for their latent oppressive tendencies.

The hermeneutic which emerges from this kind of reading is itself very much characteristic of postmodernity's pick-and-mix, smorgasbord culture. You read the bits that resonate for you, you give them the spin that suits you, and you use them to subvert the bits you don't like. (When you hear someone preaching like that, that message carries no authority whatever. Allusions to the Bible within that framework are themselves in danger of being just power trips. If you can pick and mix, then all you are saying is, I agree with the Bible wherever it agrees with me.)

This is, in effect, the old 'canon within the canon', but with Marx, Nietzsche and Freud calling the tunes instead of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith. Of course, no serious postmodernist would give any shelf-space to any doctrine of authority; if doctrines are themselves suspect, how much more something so dehumanizing, so tyrannical, as a doctrine of authority, not least the authority of a sacred text? Read this way, the Bible becomes one cultural artefact among many, to be drawn upon when useful and dumped when not. One might in the last analysis read Iris Murdoch, Seamus Heaney, or Francois Lyotard. And many do.

4. The Bible For the PostModern World

But supposing we are not satisfied by having our use of the Bible conditioned by the present cultural climate? Supposing we are not convinced by the postmodern claims themselves, and not happy with the

truncation of a lively and evidently fruitful Christian tradition according to the Procrustean bed of postmodern theory?

There are several good reasons why we might either argue this point, or, in postmodern style, simply feel it. For a start, there are the inner contradictions within postmodernism itself at the level of theory. To say 'all truth is relative' only works if the statement, that all truth is relative, is itself exempt from its own generalization. (All truths are relative, except the statement that all truths are relative!) It has been pointed out often enough that we are an extremely moralistic society, even though the issues we are moralistic about are quite different from before. The person who loses their temper if someone criticizes their alternative sexual lifestyle will be equally angry with the farmer in the UK who hunts foxes to protect his chickens. Even postmodernity's attack on all grand universal ideas becomes itself a grand universal idea; its polemic against all metanarratives becomes itself a new metanarrative, a new Jack the Giant-killer, in which the bold young underdog hero (postmodernism) slays boring old Giant Modernism. For all it deplores big stories, great metanarratives, postmodernity has one itself. The death of the metanarrative is itself a metanarrative. Because belief in postmodernity is itself, eschatological. It is about a history that is going somewhere and when it gets somewhere then it finds cataclysm. It is a secular version of the old *Götterdämmerung* epic, the 'Twilight of the Gods' as in Wagner's opera; this too is a story.

So, too, there are the interesting contradictions which appear within the postmodern agenda. The jazz musician Charlie Mingus declares that 'In my music, I'm trying to play the truth of what I am. The reason it's difficult is because I'm changing all the time.' Observe that fascinating contradiction between two of the great postmodern agendas: the need to tell my story, rather than anyone else's, allied confusingly to the constantly deconstructing self. You can't imagine that troubling Bach, Mozart or even, dare I say, Louis Armstrong. The serious postmodernist would say, of course, that that's precisely where we are at, and that anyone who wants consistency is asking for the moon. But are we bound to accept this verdict? Does the Bible, read for all it's worth and for all we're worth, have anything to say by way of reply? Yes it does.

In the Christian canonical Bible as we now have it we find, without much difficulty, a single over-arching narrative. It is the story which runs from creation to new creation, from Eden to the New Jerusalem. Though this is the backdrop and ultimate context, however, the great bulk of the story focuses quite narrowly on the fortunes of a single family in the Middle East, who are described as the chosen people through whom the creator God will act to rescue the whole world from its plight. The choice of the particular family does not imply that the creator has lost interest in other human beings, or in the cosmos at large; on the contrary, it is because he wishes to address them with his active and rescuing purposes that he has chosen this one family in the first place. But the Jewish story thus highlighted contains a puzzle at its heart. The chosen people are in themselves in need of rescue. (It is like Russian dolls. Inside the creation story is the Jewish story, and inside that is the Jesus story.) Even if we were to rearrange the Old Testament Canon - adopting, for instance, the normal Jewish order in which the Prophets precede the Writings, so that the Canon ends not with Malachi but with 2 Chronicles - we would still find ourselves reading a story in search of an ending, a story in which the people chosen to bring the creator's healing to the world are themselves in need of rescue and restoration.

The early Christian writings we call the New Testament declare with one voice that the overarching story reached its climax in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, whom the early Christians

believed was the promised Messiah of Israel. In Jesus the chosen people had found their rescue and restoration, though their self-appointed guardians and spokespersons had not seen it that way. And now the point. Israel's Messiah was always supposed to be the Lord of the whole world, so the idea that Jesus is the Lord of the world is not a funny early Christian idea wedged on to Jesus, and not really fitting; it grows right out of first century Jewish messianism itself. His followers then saw themselves as royal heralds, claiming the whole world for its new King.

Although it is often (rightly) said that the early Christians saw themselves as living in the last days, it is even more important to stress that they saw themselves as living in the first days, the beginning of the new creation that dawned when Jesus emerged from the tomb on Easter morning. They saw themselves, in other words, as living within a story in which the decisive event had already occurred and now needed to be implemented; even if we were to ignore Acts for the moment, that is the implicit narrative which informs and undergirds all the epistles. The four canonical gospels, in their very different ways, are all only comprehensible if we understand them to be telling how the story of God and Israel reached its climax in Jesus, and telling this story moreover from the perspective of those now charged with putting this into effect in and for all the world. Even if we were to rearrange the New Testament Canon, this implicit story-line would still emerge at every point. It is only in the detached, aphoristic sayings-collections such as Thomas, or the hypothetically reconstructed 'Q', that the narrative perspective is lost, and Jesus is seen simply as a teacher of a strange and subversive wisdom, perhaps even of a religious gnosis, in which the whole story of Israel and the creation is lost sight of in favour of a private religious experience or an individual protest against the ills of society.

Once we grasp this point, we can see easily enough that the interface between the Bible and our own contemporary culture still bears a good deal of family likeness to the interface between early Christianity and its surrounding milieu. When we construe the Bible, in its own terms, as the true metanarrative, the strange history of the creator and the cosmos, the covenant God and the covenant people, the God who becomes human and dies for the sins of the world, the God who breathes his own breath into his followers and equips them to implement his victory in the world-when we read the Bible like this, we discover that this great metanarrative challenges and subverts several other worldviews. (God forgive us, within modernity, when often we as Christians thought that the way to use the Bible to address the world was to abstract large chunky doctrines from the Bible and hurl them at the heads of people who believed large chunky modernist doctrines. You have to deconstruct the Bible in order to do that. Much better to let the Bible be what it is, which is a story, and stories are far more subversive and damaging to other alternative worldviews than large chunky doctrines ever were, which are basically shorthand versions of stories.)

Challenges of the Biblical metanarrative

Let me very quickly sketch out five ways in which this is so, laying foundations thereby for some of the points I want to make in my final section. Here as elsewhere, I am of course cutting several much longer stories very short indeed.

To begin with, the biblical metanarrative challenges paganism, and our neo-pagan world. From creation to recreation, from the call of Abraham to the New Jerusalem which comes down from heaven to earth, what the Bible offers presents itself as the truth of which paganism is the parody. Paganism sees the glory of creation, and worships creation instead of the creator. The grown-up version of this is of course

pantheism, whether Stoicism in the ancient world or the varieties of New Age belief in the contemporary world. The mirror-image of this is dualism, the belief that creation is the work of a lesser god or indeed an anti-god.

One of the remarkable things about the Bible is the way in which, from Genesis to Revelation, these options are systematically refused and undermined. There is one God, the creator; creation is good, but it is not God; the reality of evil in the world is not to be explained in terms either of an evil creation or an evil god, but is seen as an intrusion into the good creation, which is dealt with through the story of the chosen family. This biblical challenge to paganism, and indeed to dualism, is of course huge and basic; I presuppose it in all that follows.

Second, the biblical metanarrative challenges and subverts the worldview of philosophical Idealism, in which historical events are mere contingent trivia, and reality is to be found in a set of abstractions, whether timeless truths or absolute values. Any attempt to see the biblical stories as simply illustrations of such timeless truths or absolute values is confronted by the biblical text itself, in which the opposite is the case: the love of God, the justice of God, the forgiveness of God, and so forth are invoked not to draw attention away from the historical sphere but to give it meaning and depth. (The love of God, for example, is not just an abstract idea; it happened on the cross. The forgiveness of God is not just a nice theory; it what happened when Jesus was hanging there with nails in his hands and feet.) When Israel invokes the justice of her God, what she wants is to be liberated from her oppressive enemies. When the early Christians spoke of the love of God, they were referring to something that had happened in recent history, which had changed the way the real world—not just their real world, but the real world—actually was. If they weren't referring to this, they were, quite literally, talking nonsense.

This means, third, that the biblical metanarrative also challenges and subverts the non-storied aphoristic world both of the Gospel of Thomas and of contemporary postmodernity. (That is very relevant to contemporary debates about Jesus, not least with those who are most anxious in our own day to deconstruct what they see as the oppressive narrative and theology of the canonical gospels. They end up with a Jesus who functioned like a wandering Cynic, or perhaps a gnostic, whose whole *raison-d'être* was simply to utter striking, paradoxical and challenging aphorisms, challenging the existing socio-cultural order but offering simply a do-it-yourself way of constructing either one's relation to the outer world or one's inner religious world.)

This is, of course, the reflection (on the screen of historiography) of the postmodern emphasis on deconstructing all metanarratives, and on the individual doing his or her own thing. In neither case does this reconstructed Jesus belong within a story; in neither case does he announce the Kingdom of God as a new fact bursting in upon the public world. Ironically, the attempt to deconstruct Jesus leaves one with a sort of secularized version of the private world of the dualistic pietist, in which Jesus and the Bible only tell me about myself, not at all about public reality.

The biblical metanarrative challenges all such attempts at deconstruction. It insists that there is a public world; it acknowledges that there are all sorts of problems in this public world, including the problem of knowledge itself; but, instead of allowing the problems to dictate the terms, ending with deconstruction, it insists that the problems have been addressed and defeated by the Creator himself. (This is not, please note, a Christian version of the modernist rejection of postmodernity. That is an ever-present temptation

for some types of Christianity, and is I believe to be resisted.) The biblical metanarrative invites us to go through the postmodern critique of modernity, Christian modernity included, and out the other side into a new grasping of reality, a post-post-modernity.

Fourth, the biblical metanarrative challenged, from the very beginning, all pagan political power-structures. (This is in a sense one application of my first point.) This, indeed, is implicit in the very meaning of the word 'gospel,' both in its Old Testament context, where Isaiah spoke of the good news that YHWH had overthrown the idols of Babylon and thus had broken Babylon's grip on Israel, and in its Greco-Roman context, where 'gospel' referred to the good news of the birth or accession of an emperor. The New Testament, firmly rooted in the Jewish world of Isaiah, addressed the Greco-Roman context with the news that Jesus of Nazareth was the new, true emperor of the world, whose accession to supreme power was the good, liberating, healing news for which the whole creation had been waiting. This was either a statement of public truth or it was a statement of public falsehood; the one thing it could never be was a statement of a private truth, of 'how I feel', a belief which involved the speaker's religious interiority but nothing else.

This is actually inherent in the Jewish context from which the essential theme derives. When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God he must have meant, in the Jewish world of his day, a reality which would challenge decisively the kingship of the existing authorities; that is (of course) part of the explanation, both historical and theological, of the crucifixion. When Paul spoke of the Lordship of Jesus, he was using for Jesus language which explicitly and obviously evoked the Lordship of Caesar. There cannot be two Lords of the world.

From a Jewish point of view, the biblical metanarrative challenges all pagan power, deconstructing it in terms of its underlying idolatry and dehumanization; in its place it offers the kingdom of God as promise and hope. From the Christian point of view, the fuller biblical metanarrative makes the same challenge, but now with the sharp edge that on the cross the one true God has in Christ, as Paul said in Colossians, defeated all principalities and powers, and led them in his triumphal procession, as a bedraggled, beaten bunch of has-beens. In their place is one who says, in a way that postmodernity would never even dream of, 'all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' (Do you see the point of who it is who is saying that? If you or I said that, in postmodernity it would be another power trip. But when it is the crucified Jesus who is saying it, we know that it was not a power trip. It was about love.)

Fifth, the biblical metanarrative-in which the story of God and the world develops, takes shape, and points to or reaches a climax-challenges all rival eschatologies. This is so whether the biblical metanarrative in question is Jewish or Christian. Consider, for instance, the various political eschatologies which are advanced from time to time: the belief, held by some in Augustus' court, that with the establishment of the Roman Empire a new Golden Age had begun; or the way in which the story of the development of democracy is told as though the establishment of one-man-one-vote, and then one-person-one-vote, or even dare I say it, proportional representation, would usher in the new Golden Age. Part of the reason for the deep cynicism of Tacitus, Juvenal and others at the end of the first century, and for the deep cynicism of many commentators at the end of the twentieth, was and is that the Golden Age has let us down. We pressed all the buttons and the toy didn't work. That's the point about Diana's death. People said Diana was a modern princess; but she wasn't, she was a postmodern princess. She had lived in the 'great dream;'

she had found her Prince Charming, she had everything going for her, and the dream let her down. That's why in Western culture she was an icon of where we are in postmodernity.

Consider, also, the great eschatological claim represented both by the word 'Renaissance' and by the word 'Enlightenment.' Whoever invented the idea of the Middle Ages was, in retrospect, one of the most powerful people in Western history. Whoever invented the idea that humankind had 'come of age' in the eighteenth century was equally powerful, if not more so. (People didn't sit there during the Middle Ages saying, 'It's a bit boring in the Middle Ages, I wonder when they are going to end.' It was a later invention by someone telling a three stage story, and guess where he was; in the New Age, wasn't he?)

The Enlightenment did exactly the same thing. (Before the Enlightenment people didn't sit around saying, 'It is rather dark, isn't it?') The Enlightenment was not merely a return to a previous cultural golden age: now, all history was to be seen as leading up to the great climax of technological advance, historical and theological scepticism, political revolution and so forth, which were then to be implemented to dispel the long night of pre-enlightenment superstition and slavery. And these are rival eschatologies to Christianity, because Christianity tells a story about the world reaching its climax in Jesus of Nazareth. That is hard to believe as we realise that the world isn't actually a better place. Paul said that the world had reached its climax in Jesus Christ-he was in prison much of the time so that he knew the world was not a better place! But he said God has already in Christ defeated the powers, and we are now working towards the implementation of that. That is too difficult for many, so they tell alternative eschatological stories. If the Biblical story is told truly, it will subvert the alternative stories. But to tell it truly, you have to be living it.

Again, when eschatology comes and goes and things don't after all get better, you have the contemporary equivalent of that great twentieth-century myth about the first century, the so-called 'delay of the Parousia.'. Before the eschatological climax is reached, you are hoping that it will happen soon; if you believe that it has already happened, hope consists in the belief that the climax, the great victory, the great enlightenment, will soon be fully implemented. When everything is done to implement it and still things haven't got better-as has happened, more or less, in the Western world of the twentieth century-what you get is a failure of hope; which is, more or less, where our culture is right now. Nobody in America really thought that by impeaching Clinton, or not impeaching him, things were actually going to get significantly better. Not many people in Britain, I think, supposed that under New Labour we would do much more than rearrange the deck-chairs on a rudderless vessel in heavy seas. We have, as I said, the world of *Götterdämmerung*: the gods have let us down, and all we can now do is to play.

The biblical eschatology challenges all such rival eschatologies, with the strange news that world history actually reached its climax in the first century, in the Middle East, with the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish Messiah, the Lord of the world. This is of course found by many today to be quite incredible, but this has always been because of the presence of rival and powerful counter-eschatologies. Now that these have collapsed or are collapsing, it is up to those who read the Bible and take it seriously to set about living by its eschatological message and so forming the community that cannot be deconstructed, because it is a community of love. This leads me to the final, and climactic, things I want to say today.

A Biblical Challenge to Postmodernity

Let me take the three elements of postmodernity and suggest what a reading of the Bible might have to say at each point.

a. A Biblical metanarrative of love. I have already stressed that the Bible as a whole, as well as in most of its parts, presents us with a large, overarching narrative. Postmodernity is bound to object: metanarratives are controlling, dominating, and we all know the ways in which this story too has been used politically, socially and personally to bolster this or that power-trip. But the Biblical metanarrative itself resists being abused in this fashion, because it is the story of love. The Biblical metanarrative offers itself as the one story which cannot be deconstructed, to which the criticisms of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud are not relevant. (Look at Jesus on the cross-was he doing that for money? Was he doing that for power? Was he doing it for sex? It was an act of love.) The story speaks from first to last of a God who did not need to create, but who did so out of overflowing and generous love. It speaks of a God who did not need to redeem and recreate, but did so as the greatest possible act of self-giving love.

The problem is, of course, that our telling of this story has been, and our living of the story as Christians, not least as modernist Western Christians, has often been, God help us, a power-play of our own. (Those of us who live and work within an established church feel that problem even more acutely, believe me.) But the Biblical metanarrative itself is not a controlling narrative: it is a self-giving narrative. Those who read it and are formed by it have to become a self-giving community in order for it to make sense. It is not a power-play; it is a love-play. The fact that postmodernity cannot recognise love, but insists on deconstructing it, is its Achilles heel.

Somehow if we are to address contemporary culture with the message of the Bible we must get used to combining two things which are normally at opposite poles-humility and truth-telling. For us, humility intellectually has come to mean 'I would want to argue x, y or z'; in other words, I wouldn't go so far as actually to assert this, because that might offend you. And truth-telling has come to mean arrogance: there are two ways of looking at things-the right way, and your way. Somehow we have to tell the truth but to tell it as the liberating story, the healing story, the true story. And of course, as you might expect me to say, the best way we can do this is by telling, again and again, in story and symbol and acted drama, the biblical story, focussed on the story of Jesus himself, the true story of the Word made Flesh. (That is why the great symbol at the heart of Christianity is the symbol of the eucharist; it is the symbol of that story.)

b. Biblical promises for the deconstructed self. If we are telling and living the true story we will discover, within it, that it contains promises for deconstructed selves. We Christians shouldn't actually be afraid of deconstruction; it points in its own way to the truth that Jews and Christians and many others regularly acknowledge, that all our righteousness is as filthy rags. Of course if we are arrogant modernist lonely individuals (captains of our fate, and masters of our soul) we need to die with Christ, and if deconstruction is a rather 'through-a-glass-darkly' way of pointing us to that, so be it. But what postmodernism never notices is that after death comes resurrection: the truth of baptism is precisely the truth of new life the other side of death. Here we need, I believe, to develop as an essential part of the engagement between the Bible and contemporary culture a better and richer theology of worship, the worship of the true and living God, whereby we are renewed in the image and likeness of God; renewed, coming up the other side after deconstruction. Those who tell this true story are invited to be not, lonely

and Enlightenment individuals, there are many parts of the church still, which are run by and encourage Christian versions of the lonely Enlightenment individual. it's a dangerous way to go. No, resurrected selves in community is what we are called to be.

c. A Biblical way of knowing. And thirdly, in this life, we can and must think in terms of reconstituted reality and genuine knowing. Yes, we must take on board the full postmodern critique of those arrogant Enlightenment epistemologies (ie theories of knowledge) in which a supposed objectivism was actually a cloak for political and social power and control. (Look how the empires of the 18th and 19th century made a way on the back of technology etc. We know what the world is, so we are just going to take it over and use it for our ends.) But when all is said and done it is part of the true human task, given in Genesis and reaffirmed in Christ, that we should know God, and one another and the world, not with a spurious hard objectivity as if we were flies on the wall, but with a genuinely human knowledge. Paul speaks of being 'renewed in knowledge after the image of the creator.'

However, instead of the normal contemporary accounts of knowing, which underlie so much current discourse, I believe we have to work towards a better one. In modernity, normal current accounts of knowing privilege the would-be objective scientific knowing: test-tube epistemology, if you like. Every step away from this is seen as a step into obscurity, fuzziness, and subjectivism, reaching its peak in metaphysics. Instead, I believe that a biblical account of 'knowing' should follow philosophers such as Bernard Lonergan, a great Catholic philosopher of the last generation, and take love as the basic mode of knowing, with the love of God as the highest and fullest sort of knowing that there is, and working, so to speak, down from there.

The thing about love is, of course, that when I love I affirm and celebrate the differentness of the beloved; not to do so is of course not love at all, but lust. But, at the same time, when I love I am not a detached observer, the fly-on-the-wall of objectivist epistemology. I am passionately and compassionately involved with the life and being of that-whether a thing, a person, or God himself-which I am loving. Do you see what this does? In other words, though I am fully involved in the process of knowing, this does not mean that there is nothing which is being known; or, to put it the other way, though I am really talking about a reality outside my own mental state, this does not mean I am a detached observer. I believe we can and must give an account of human knowing for the post-postmodern world which will amount to what we might call an epistemology of love.

Living out the story

I hope you notice what I have just done. I have tried to give an account of narrative, selfhood and knowing which embodies and reflects the biblical metanarrative itself. I have suggested, in other words, that it is our task not just to tell but to live out the story; that the model of God's self-giving love in creation, covenant, judgment, mercy, incarnation, atonement, resurrection, wind and fire, and ultimately recreation must be the basis for our self-understanding, our life, and our vocation. And when we do this, we discover, I believe, that the reality of which we are dimly aware, but which our ontologies, pre-modern, modern and postmodern find slipping through their fingers, is best described in the biblical language of heaven and earth, created, sustained, redeemed and to be renewed by the living God known in Jesus and in the Spirit.

The Bible does not tell us to ignore postmodernity and carry on as though modernity were still what mattered. Far from it. The Bible tells a story which will lead us through postmodernity's necessary critique of modernity and on, through, out the other side. And all this leads me to what I most passionately want to say today.

I believe we have an enormous opportunity, here and now, for serious and joyful Christian mission to the post-postmodern world. There are those who seem to yearn for the days when things were nice and simple, when a supposed biblical gospel could be preached to people who were, in effect, unsuccessful Pelagians, trying to pull themselves up by their moral bootstraps. But we can't go back to the 1950s. (Someone said of the church that it is now finally and gloriously ready for the 1950s! God help us—we have got to be ready for 2020 and 2040, and teaching our young people how to engage with those issues, and not to preach to the world we grew up in.) Nor, however, can or should we succumb to postmodernity itself, though it may well be that for some people and groups a time of penitence, in which modernist nonsense can be purged and rethinking can begin, might be a good idea.

We live, as I have said, at a time of cultural crisis. At the moment I don't hear anyone pointing a way forward out of the postmodern morass; some people are still trying to put up the shutters and live in a pre-modern world, many are clinging to modernism for all they can, and many are deciding that living off the pickings of the garbage-heap of postmodernity is the best they can do. It isn't simply that the Bible, and the Christian gospel, offers us a religious option which can outdo other religious options, can fill more effectively the slot labelled 'religion' on the cultural and social smorgasbord. It is, rather, that the Bible and the Christian gospel which it offers us point the way to something which should have meant a celebration of the Millennium with the Christian meaning it ought to have had. They point us, and indeed urge us, to be at the leading edge of the whole culture, articulating in story and music and art and philosophy and education and poetry and politics and theology and even, heaven help us, biblical studies, a worldview which will mount the historically rooted Christian challenge to both modernity and postmodernity, leading the way into the post-postmodern world with joy and humour and gentleness and good judgment and true wisdom.

I believe we face the question: if not now, then when? And if we are grasped by this vision, we may also hear the question: if not us, then who? And if the Bible is not the key book for us to have at our elbow as we go to this task, then what is?

I end with a parable. Last autumn my wife and I went to Paris for a conference, and in a spare moment visited the Louvre for the first time. There, a disappointment awaited us. The Mona Lisa, which every good tourist goes to goggle at, is now not only as enigmatic as she has always been. One has always been faced with the question, what that smile means, and whether we are really only reading our own meanings into it. (A classic epistemological problem.) But now, following a violent attack, she has been placed behind thick protective glass, so that all attempts to look into those famous eyes are befogged by glimpses of other eyes, one's own and dozens of others, reflected back from the protective casing. Ah, says Postmodernity: that's what all of life is like. All that you think you see is really a reflection of something in your own mind. But is it? With the Bible as my evidence, I believe that there is such a thing as a love, a knowing, a hermeneutic of trust rather than suspicion, which is what we most surely need in the twenty-first century:

Let me leave you with some lines I wrote the next day after the visit to the Louvre;

*A Paris newcomer, I'd never been
Followed by those dark eyes, bewitched by that
Half-smile. Meaning, like beauty, teases, dancing
In the soft spaces between portrait, artist,
And the beholder's eye. But now, twice shy,
She hides behind a veil of wood and glass;
And we who peer and pry into her world
See cameras, schoolchildren, other eyes,
Other disturbing smiles. So, now, we view
The world, each other, God, through prison glass:
Suspicion, fear, mistrust-projections of
Our own anxieties. Is all our knowing
Only reflection? Let me trust, and see,
And let love's eyes pursue, and set me free.*

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