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Postmodernity: An Invitation to Quiet Confidence in Biblical Studies[*]

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Dr. Phillip E. Davis has offer a timely and thought-provoking paper, with much to reward deep reflection on the nature of both our world and our faith. Our times are exceedingly complex, calling for our best efforts to cope with the constant changes while remaining faithful to the Lord of our traditions.

Davis mediates for us Lyotard's penetrating analysis that the Christian metanarrative co-opts small narratives by insisting that, despite appearances to the contrary, every event is and must be received as from the hand of an all-loving God.[1] It is undeniably true that sufferers have often been told by the Church to set aside their tears because everything will turn out well by-and-by. Nevertheless, it would appear that Lyotard fails to recognize the laments of scripture—likely because the popular theology that he criticizes also fails at this point. This theology fails to note Jesus' tears (John 11:35, but also Matt 26:38 and parallels), and it misappropriates Paul's assertion that all things work together for good (Rom 8:28).

Yet Lyotard does recognize the persistent Biblical eschatology, according to which we see God's final triumph. Significantly, Wolfhart Pannenberg has invited us to view our story, not as eschatologically oriented, but as post-eschatologically oriented.[2] As Pannenberg has noted, the Christian eschatological narrative is proleptic, wherein the eschaton is both past and future. The rehearsal of the Christ-event, therefore, becomes not a re-telling alone, but also a re-being. The future is already in our past, since the

[*] *Editor's Note:* This article is a response to Phillip E. Davis, "The Postmodern Condition and the Christian Open Narrative," *Mediator* 12, no. 1 (2017): 1–44, above.

[1] Davis, "The Postmodern Condition," 22–23.

[2] Wolfhart Pannenberg. *Systematic Theology* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; vol. 3; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 595-607, esp. 605.

quintessential mark of the eschaton, namely, the Resurrection, has already occurred—as the firstfruits. Thus, our present existence is "out of time," and this opens the Christian narrative in profound ways. It adds a note of depth to the already/not yet in which we declare that somehow, through the intricate interweaving of our disparate stories, pain and suffering are, not subsumed as Lyotard perceives, but redeemed.

My own introduction to the thought world of postmodern philosophy came through the writing of Thomas Kuhn, perhaps most famous for popularizing the now-ubiquitous phrase, paradigm shift.[3] For Kuhn, a paradigm shift in scientific knowledge occurs when a cognitive framework previously enjoying widespread acceptance as true is replaced by the widespread acceptance of a competing framework that more adequately incorporates the salient data of the system that the paradigms purport to explain. In other words, the community of scientists holds a particular view about a topic of common interest, such as the nature of gravity. In order to maintain that view, certain data is emphasized, while other data is ignored or deemed anomalous (perhaps due to inaccurate measurements). Over time, the number of anomalous data points may grow to such an extent that the scientific community comes to recognize that its preferred theory can no longer be relied upon to adequately explain the validated data. In such a time, a new theory may emerge that has power to explain those data points unexplained by the old theory. A paradigm shift occurs when the community as a whole abandons the old theory in favor of the new one. It is important to notice, however, that new theory must have greater explanatory power, not merely different explanatory power. That is, the new theory must be able to explain both the previously explained data as well as the previously anomalous data.

This idea of paradigm shift brings to the surface the notion of scientific knowledge as a social construct. The original theory is something that the community held to be true. Anything that did not fit the theory either went unnoticed or was explained away as irrelevant or mistaken. Thus, scientific knowledge is a construct of human processes that does not

[3] Thomas S. Kuhn, "Revolutions and Changes of World View," pages 111–135 in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

entirely conform to the world as it is. The body of knowledge, or theory, both selects what is deemed noteworthy and blinds humans—for a time, at least—from seeing anything that does not fit. In this way, scientific knowledge is a social construct. It is a small step from the realization that truth (with a small "t") is contingent upon human perception to the claim that all Truth (with a capital "T") is relative. But, of course, that is not what Kuhn and the postmodernists are advocating. Theirs is not so much an anti-Truth position as an agnostic one.

If I may illustrate with an example, consider an image that I often use with my Biblical Hermeneutics students. In the image, the cartoonist depicts a boy stands in the distance with an apple on his head. In the foreground is a modern military tank. Overhead stands a burning sun. In order to make sense of the image, one must weigh the communicative value of each its constituent elements. Some elements are assessed to have great weight, while others are assessed to be inconsequential to the communicative task. In this particular image, for example, I would say that the tank and the boy-with-apple are meaningful, while the sun and the gears on the tank are inconsequential. But a competing theory of what the cartoonist intends to communicate might select the sun as significant. By excluding the sun from my field of reference, I have marginalized that competing theory, whether or not it exists at this time.

If I have correctly understood Lyotard as presented through Davis's eyes, I may conclude that Lyotard and Kuhn have much in common. Both appear to adopt a kind of "how-much-more" logic that goes something like this: if even scientific knowledge—which appears to be objectively true because it ostensibly conforms to the way things really are in the material world—is socially conditioned, how much more is social knowledge socially conditioned. Moreover, if knowledge of the physical world and of the social world is so constructed, then metaphysical knowledge must be socially constructed, as well. I suspect, however, that this last statement assumes facts not in evidence. Although much of our understanding of metaphysics proceeds on analogy with physics, there seems to me to be no necessary socially constructed limitation on the former.

But it matters very little whether my suspicion on this point is accurate, because the paradigm of what it means to know has already shifted.

Unless we proceed with care, we will find ourselves in the laughable position of the king in *The Little Prince* who proudly claims that even the stars obey his every command because they recognize that he is so wise, since he is wise enough to command them only to do that which they already intend to do. Far from speaking powerfully and relevantly into the broken places of our world, we become the benign, kindly old sovereign who is harmless enough, but essentially useless.

The above train of thought impinges on Biblical Studies on several points, including that of hermeneutics, or the study of how meaning is created, transmitted, and apprehended. Since creation, transmission, and apprehension are human processes, they are subject to the same kinds of constraints as other forms of knowledge. Thus, one's ability to know what a Biblical text means is limited due to the social location of the interpreter. That location shapes the interpreter's sensitivity to the relevant data, determining to a certain extent what textual attributes are deemed to carry significance for meaning and those features that are incidental. Of course, one's sensitivity to more features is enhanced through training, but that training becomes itself the seedbed for a new social location of the interpreter. Thus, there appears to be an escapable limitation to our ability to know what a Biblical text means. It is this realization that has led to postmodern hermeneutical projects that despair of any attempt to recover the authors' intended meaning, such as reader response criticism, deconstructionism, social location interpretation, and certain forms of liberation theology and feminist hermeneutics.

Nevertheless, one should not mistake this widespread despair of knowing the authors' intent for an insistence that the author had no intent. We may not know the authors' intent with the degree of accuracy we imagine, but that does not mean that we cannot make considerable progress toward recovering the intended meaning. It does mean, however, that there must be an abandonment of triumphalism in Biblical interpretation. Yet a triumphalist stance was never the path toward true understanding, at all. As the very word itself implies and as others of noted, "understanding" requires that one "stand under" the text in readiness to submit to its claims on our lives, not to "stand over" the text in triumphant mastery over its message.

On the other hand, while we ought not to stand with puffed chests proclaiming that we have mastered the meaning of the Bible, neither should we cower behind our desks or our doors in despair. There is no need for timidity at this point. While we may not know everything we wish to know, we have understood much. Yes, paradigm shifts will surely occur in our interpretation of what the original author intended, but we should not fear that those shifts will amount to an absolute destruction of understandings that have gone before. Just as a paradigm shift in scientific knowledge must incorporate all that older theories had explained plus all that was previously unexplained, so also paradigm shifts in Biblical Studies do not absolutely reject that which came before. Rather they take up the previous perspectives and enlarge them to include previously unexplained factors. In this way, theology arising out of scripture is not so much rejected by paradigm shifts as refined thereby.

What is required of us, then, is a kind of quiet confidence. Confidence that our interpretations of Scripture are substantially aligned with its intended meaning, as well as confidence that we can identify and reject those interpretations that are clearly aberrant. But quiet because we also recognize that at any given point our interpretations may need to be refined. This kind of quiet confidence is perhaps something akin to the "open narrative" that Boeve urges us to embrace.

To return to the language of Lyotard, phrase implies subject and event (for isolated being) or subject, event, and object (for being-in-relation). But as Martin Buber emphasized, the Judeo-Christian phrase exists as subject-subject (I and Thou)[4]—with or without event. A meaningful phrase, therefore, can exist in the absence of a phrased event that co-opts all other phrases. As a result, the Christian narrative is not necessarily hegemonic, as Lyotard implies—though, of course, it can itself be co-opted by those whose experience renders them unable or unwilling to enter into a subject-subject relation. Instead of being hegemonic, as Boeve has shown, the Christian narrative can avoid the tendency to hegemony by maintaining an open stance toward the other. But one should note that this openness

[4] See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (trans. Ronald Gregor Smith; Edinburgh,: T. & T. Clark, 1937).

is precisely what the core of the Gospel has always insisted, based as it is on a God who by nature eschews privilege in favor of embracing the marginalized (Phil 2:6–7. This becomes, to borrow the favored expression of our colleague, Larnie Sam Tabuena, intersubjectivity.

In this connection, it is noteworthy that at a recent international gathering of scholars from the guild of Biblical Studies, a program section was offered on the topic of Open Theism. Whether Open Theism will prove to be a paradigm shift or a passing fad remains to be seen. Of course, there are many who feel deeply threatened by the very idea of Open Theism. They fear its apparent challenge to the immutability and sovereignty of God. But it should be recognized that the Wesleyan critique of Reformed Theology has always questioned the formula of that immutability and sovereignty—without, it should be noted, denying that God is sovereign. Thus, Open Theism may someday prove to be a theology that embraces that which came before while more adequately explaining those elements of the scriptural witness that had been marginalized.

One should recognize that the centrality of scripture to the life of believers is not threatened. In part this is because scripture itself continues to offer its careful readers the privilege of finding our own stories within the stories of scripture—stories that affirm those who find themselves marginalized by the power structures of our metasystems.

In sum, if I may be permitted to borrow the language of Paul in his letter to the Galatians, let me conclude thus: "All [Lyotard and Boeve] asked was that we should continue to remember the poor [and marginalized], the very thing [we] had been eager to do all along" (Gal 2:10). And these thinkers have added greatly to our ability to articulate our message in a way that resonates with the thought world of our postmodern context.