

What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism? By A. K. M. Adam. Guides to Biblical Scholarship. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995, xiv + 81 pp., \$10.00 paper.

Engagingly written by an exponent and practitioner of postmodern Biblical criticism, this little book is the best introduction to the subject now available. Though he apologizes profusely (and engagingly) for any reductionism or gross oversimplification into which he might fall, he makes only one or two factual errors and provides no better point of access for the complete novice. Even those widely read in postmodern literature, though they will learn nothing new, will find Adam an informed and entertaining guide.

Whatever its complexities and the diversities of its forms, postmodernism, Adam tells us in his first chapter, is “a movement of resistance,” a reaction against modernity. The moderns elevated reason against tradition, the present against the past. Modern knowledge became specialized knowledge, each sphere based on foundational assumptions that could not be questioned. In the arena of Biblical studies, there is a chasm not only between modern interpreters and precritical interpreters but also between the Bible and ourselves. The latter chasm can be bridged by scientific inquiry.

But all of this is called into question by postmodernism. Adopting the analysis of Cornel West, Adam asserts that, by contrast with modernism, postmodernism is “anti-foundational, antitotalizing, and demystifying.” Postmodern thinkers point out that no posited foundational belief has commanded general assent, with the result that foundationalism itself is called into question. Foundations, they argue, are not necessary anyway: One can reason and evaluate and make judgments within the flux we cannot escape. Modern arguments and judgments are replete with totalizing tendencies, i.e. with contrived “givens” and definitions and analyses that control and therefore oppress opposing arguments (and people). This is even reflected in modernism’s focus on the individual. But who decides what counts and what does not? Postmodernism overturns totalizing claims, and aims instead for local relevance. Moreover, while the modern critic advances specialist claims to justify the structure of his or her argument or discipline (claims that mystify the subject for those who are outside the discipline), postmoderns insist that these mystifications usually mask much more concrete and worldly reasons as to why the discipline is shaped as it is: There is profit in it for someone, or the mystique of belonging to a protected guild, or hierarchical structures of power, or the like.

These new perspectives are engagingly defended with interesting examples. The first chapter ends with comments on an array of other common features in postmodern literary analysis: a profound suspicion of metanarratives (i.e. of “big stories” that explain all the little stories—e.g. like the Bible’s story line), the importance (in some analyses, like those of Stanley Fish) of identifying the distinctive features of competing “interpretive communities,” the polyvalence of meaning. Moreover, postmodern

criticism is “willfully transgressive; it defies the boundaries that restrict modern discourses to carefully delimited regions of knowledge.”

The second chapter is a gentle introduction to deconstruction, with illuminating application to 2 Thessalonians. The third chapter probes the political dimensions of much postmodern Biblical criticism by focusing on some of the contributions of Michel Foucault and of the new historicism. While modernist historians commonly read texts so as to paint coherent pictures, Foucault hunts out discontinuities: He aims to destabilize the big stories others advance, seeing them as manipulative, merely reflective of the biases of the historians and their communities. Similarly, the new historicists regard the pursuit of objectivity as a charade. “Great books” merely reflect someone’s (or some group’s) dominant ideology. Adam sensitively unpacks the ambiguities even in the term “ideology,” and then briefly demonstrates how feminist Biblical criticism reads Biblical texts (criticizing typically androcentric interpretations, offering alternative readings of the texts, and deconstructing the texts themselves because of their androcentric biases), how racial ideology has bred a new generation of postmodern critics, and how (and why) postmoderns are little impressed with the claims of the historical-critical method.

The fourth and final chapter depicts some of the ways in which postmodern readings of texts self-consciously cross boundaries that the traditional disciplines have erected. After all, the texts themselves are inevitably the results of *bricolage*, i.e. an improvising compilation of oddments of antecedent materials: Every text is constituted by other texts (and hence the postmodern analysis of “intertextuality”). Adam shows what happens, for example, when we boldly cross (arbitrary) barriers between fiction and nonfiction.

An appendix tries to help hesitant readers take the first steps in postmodern criticism, primarily by encouraging them, at every level, to “think the opposite.” Typical of the series, each chapter concludes with an annotated bibliography.

Detailed engagement with this introductory book in brief compass is not possible. But five things must be said.

(1) This is the work of a convinced convert. Adam is pushing a case. There is no attempt at evenhanded evaluation of postmodern epistemology. Had I space, I would argue that thoughtful Christians should be committed to neither modernism nor postmodernism, though there are important things to be learned from both epistemological stances.

(2) Adam offers no word on how postmodern Biblical criticism might be affected if there is a sovereign/transcendent and omniscient God out there who talks, i.e. who chooses to disclose himself to his finite image-bearers in *their* language. Not for a moment does he attempt to evaluate how postmodern criticism might be forced to change if the Bible’s metanarrative is true, i.e. if it lays out what is in fact the case, as an omniscient God sees it, however much his disclosure of the same to us is inevitably in accommodated language.

(3) The brief treatment of science is typical of postmodern analysis, but it is woefully inadequate. Readers might usefully compare Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1994). Gross and Levitt are unreconstructed modernists, of course, but at least they understand science, and the foils they put up in the current welter of literature from postmodern philosophers of science should cause all but the most committed to pause.

(4) Typically, Adam repeatedly denies that what he is advocating descends to absolute relativism. Postmodern interpreters cannot make the Bible mean whatever they want it to mean, “unless there are audiences that find those interpretations

convincing. And thereby hangs the hermeneutical dilemma: No interpretation is self-authenticating, but the validity of any interpretation depends on the assent of some audience." But this confuses relativism and arbitrariness. Besides, does Adam really want to say that the validity of an interpretation depends on the assent of some audience, such as the Ku Klux Klan, maybe, or the Nazi party, or the coterie around Mao Zedong? Again, he insists that "the fact that there are no necessary criteria does not imply that there are no criteria. Even transgressors [i.e. literary critics who cross boundaries] depend on prior definitions of rules and practices, if only to flout them the more extravagantly." True; but then that is merely another way of saying that these are not "criteria" in more than a relative sense.

(5) Above all, Adam resorts to the absolute antithesis I have found in every one of the hundreds of books I have read by postmodernists. Either human beings have absolute and exhaustive knowledge of some subject, or all their knowledge is necessarily relative, based in the interpretive community or the like. Objective truth must be absolute and exhaustive, or one is left with many "truths" whose "validity" is demonstrated in their relevance or their interest or their usefulness. If you buy into this antithesis, the postmoderns are right, for we finite mortals can never enjoy absolute and exhaustive knowledge about anything. If their antithesis stands, and the first pole is excluded, there is not much left but the second. But there are alternative models, of course; I summarized some of them in *The Gaggling of God*. I have not yet seen serious postmodern engagement with these alternatives. Certainly Adam does not attempt such engagement.

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