

# Postmodernism and the Interpretation of Biblical Texts for Behavior

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## Abstract

Postmodernism has many meanings and many names. Whatever it actually means depends on different cultures and different individuals. That explains enough the current American situation, as well as the general condition in developed countries. How much continuity remains from the past? How much discontinuity will characterize the future? How does this affect the interpretation of biblical texts from different cultures and different time periods? Can biblical scholars and religious leaders ever be clever enough to be aware of, and respond to, the lived existence of ordinary believers? This article offers no definite answers—only attempts to orchestrate the problems. Roland Murphy taught me long ago to “pay attention to your audience.” As a scholar he always listened to what ordinary believers had to say and responded accordingly. His sensitivity to the everyday disciples of Jesus living their lives of faith today, made him a noble priest first and then a noble scholar.

Postmodernism entered the stage of linguistics with a furor. For the past twenty years the study of literature has been greatly influenced by the very questioning of any effort to communicate in a coherent manner. Postmodernism differs considerably in English speaking cultures, German cultures and French cultures, with people falling within a spectrum that does not easily bring clarity. All agree, however, that a major shift has taken place in what and how people know.

Recently this phenomenon (the word is chosen deliberately) has begun to influence the interpretation of biblical texts. The very use of the term, moreover, has caused many exegetes—Jewish, Catholic and Protestant—to recoil in fear. Most contemporary biblical scholars are aware of the relativity of many of the texts based on *sitz im leben* and form criticism but now some question the very possibility of language communication itself. The multiplicity of biblical languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—in books written over at least several hundred years, certainly causes further problems in communicating. Many fear that in postmodernist thought little remains for both Judaism and Christianity as religions. Yet, no one can deny the influence of postmodernist thought on American culture and on religious traditions. No good can result from failing to confront this phenomenon which has permeated all contemporary cultures.

Hermeneutics has already contributed to the entrance

of postmodernism into biblical studies. The art of bridging the gap between the classic and contemporary reality allows for differences in understanding the classic. Tracy's description of the “classic” helps us understand how hermeneutics continues to challenge interpretation: “Certain expressions of the human spirit so disclose a compelling truth about our lives that we cannot deny them some kind of normative status” (Tracy 1981: 108). Persons, places, texts, objects, or events function as “classics” and “bear an excess and permanence of meaning, yet always resist definitive interpretation” (Tracy 1987: 112). Knowing how to communicate the meaning of the classic understood by the interpreter and knowing the audience to which the meaning of the classic is directed adds further limitations in interpretation. Tracy continues:

Any contemporary interpreter enters the process of interpretation with some preunderstanding of the question addressed by a classic and the good interpreter is willing to

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put that preunderstanding at risk by allowing the classic to question the interpreter's present expectations and standards [Tracy 1987: 116].

With so many variables can anyone be sure of any conclusion for what has been called the Word of God?

Unfortunately in the history of both Judaism and Christianity individuals and even institutions have taken certain verses from the Bible and used them to demand a specific behavior. Little attention was given to the original language, context, or original purpose of the biblical texts. This has caused not only confusion but often great personal damage. Postmodernism suggests that religious leaders re-examine this tendency. Biblical scholars have an obligation to respond to the questions of postmodernism, and in the meantime ordinary believers draw their own conclusions and live accordingly.

## Language

Language is a good place to begin. The vast majority of Jews and Christians do not know Hebrew or Greek. Added to this problem is the corrupted text. In most cases Christians have a reasonably good chance to reach the original Greek, but the Hebrew text is another matter. The critical apparatus at the bottom of each page of Kittel's Hebrew text offers visual evidence of textual problems. But even if the original text has been established, how can one translate accurately from three-thousand-year-old Hebrew texts or two-thousand-year-old Greek texts?

Language has always caused problems for translators. The English word *fair* cannot be translated accurately into Spanish, Italian, French, or German. The English word means more than "just." The Italian word *disponibile* or the Spanish and French word *disponible* cannot be accurately translated into English. *Available* is not accurate; the word's meaning: "to be actively passive," violates the English language structure.

The Greek word *porneia* in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 has been translated in many different ways in the various English Bibles. The RSV translates it as "unchastity." The NAB chooses "unlawful marriage"; the Jerusalem Bible as well as the Gideon uses "fornication," and the King James uses "adultery." What is the exception to divorce of which Matthew speaks? If only all contemporary Jews and Christians could be transported back a few thousand years and learn Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, maybe then people could have some idea of what the Word of God actually means.

Postmodernism makes believers uneasy, and when

believers are also exegetes the uneasiness can be terrifying. Throw in religious leaders and the problem intensifies. The scholars often will say one thing, the religious leaders will say another, and the ordinary member of the faithful will live another. Whether liked or not, postmodernism has affected all, especially the young. "Whatever" has become a favorite word for the younger generation, and it expresses quite accurately the affect of postmodernism.

"Whatever" fits well some of the dimensions of postmodernism. From the autonomous self in modernity, postmodernism offers the self situated in the world. Secondly, to modernity's strong conception of reason, postmodernism offers reason that is contingent, fallible, and local. Thirdly, to modernity's reality governed by universal structures and applied deductively, postmodernism offers the empirical, provisional and practical. Fourthly, from language as a neutral medium, postmodernism offers language as a medium in which self and world are mutually constituted. Finally, to the modernity of understanding knowledge and truth with a universal character, an independent reality accessible to all through reason, postmodernism emphasizes the local character of truth and knowledge. (Lokken: 289-96). No wonder exegetes, theologians and religious leaders find themselves at least confused if not alarmed about the future.

## The Traditions

Traditions lay the foundation for religions. Here lies the crucial responsibility. Note the word *crucial* for Christians. It all goes back to the cross of Jesus, from which came the giving of the Spirit and the resurrection. For Jews the cross is more the crossing from the Reed Sea to Sinai. Both groups believe that God has spoken historically, creating distinctive peoples: Jews and Christians. This tradition passed from one generation to another continues the line and binds people together into a common faith. But what is passed on? How is it passed on? How can the traditions affect how people live? Three distinct groups hand on the tradition: scholars, church leaders and ordinary believers (Bell). Often the scholars and church leaders see themselves in opposing camps. The scholars claim to know the interpretation of the texts and how they can and cannot be used for behavior. The church leaders often hold the scholars suspect for their interpretation, and the ordinary believers often feel confused and ill-served by both groups.

## The Scholars

Scholars pass on the traditions in one way. They

“know” the meaning after careful study of language and history (Bell: 1–8). Not unlike the Gnostics of old, they have the secret knowledge, and the world would be better off if only all knew as much as the scholars. The more honest students of the Book know the relativity of their interpretation but still feel confident that what they pass on can actually bring about some understanding of the relationship to God, (called *Adonai*, or another of the host of other titles used by religions). Postmodernism has affected the work of the scholars since they have come to realize that the narrative histories developed over hundreds of years have not been as objective as once thought. The various books of the Bible, for example, have not only reflected their own cultural context but have been influenced by the cultural and political context of the scholars.

The debate on postmodernism among scholars has caused some concern. If all history is subjective and culturally determined and affected by self-interest groups both in the written composition of history and in interpretation of that same recorded history, what is left? Of course, often religious leaders will accuse the scholars, especially those trying to deal with postmodernism, of trying to undermine religion, while the postmodernist scholars claim to actually preserve the true religious traditions. No wonder confusion reigns.

### The Religious Leaders (Bell: 6–7)

Religious leaders have an obligation to lead in the surest of ways, taking care not to disturb the faith of the ordinary believers. The honest ones also know how deeply anthropological elements have influenced their leadership: power and control has affected all types of leadership—even religious. They want to pass on the tradition and use their interpretation of the tradition, especially the Bible, to affect and even control behavior. They often present a body of traditions and beliefs as coherent and timeless. They maintain that the truth of the past remains as relevant now as when it was formulated, giving ordinary believers security and assurance of continuity. But how much of the traditional understanding of leadership with its corresponding efforts to give sure guidance can remain when studied under the scrutiny of postmodernism?

### The Believers (Bell: 7–9)

The believers accept the traditions passed on and try to live according to them. But unlike both the scholars and religious leaders, these individuals instinctively know that some of the traditions and some of the interpretation just

do not make sense. Often they will say nothing but will just not accept or follow what the scholars might say or the religious leaders may try to impose. The traditions both emerge from and express themselves in a culture of practices, customs and attitudes with special attention given to the attitudes of believers. Christians are Christians in their bones no matter what the scholars or religious leaders might say. And they live their faith often with little or no attention to religious leaders and scholars.

### What Post Modernism Questions (Guarino)

#### *Language*

Some continuity exists in the translation of language, but great discontinuity also remains. This is true also within any given language. Meanings change. “Gay” fifty years ago meant happy. Today it evokes anger, resentment, and intolerance on the part of some—and pride on the part of others. Anyone who has lived in English speaking countries other than the United States knows personally the discontinuity of the same language and the same words. “Knock up” in England differs considerably from the same words in the United States.

Postmodernism questions the possibility of accurately translating from one language to another. There may be some continuity, but often nuances are lost. The language comes from a particular moment in history and can be understood only in that context. Further applications can be made only with some hesitation and uncertainty (Guarino: 673–80).

#### *Objectivity and Truth*

Is anything objective? What one generation took as “true” is now lying around in pieces. What is true for me is not necessarily true for you. The old “givens” have been torn down (Jones: 49–51). The loss of objectivity leads us to question the existence of eternal or perennial truths. How can one person unequivocally tell another what is true? How can one person hand on to another understandings that alone will give meaning to life? For the postmodernist, human finitude, sociocultural embeddedness, and contextualized reason lay the axe to metaphysics and ontologies of all types, and they fall. Philosophies can offer neither final answers nor ultimate structures. Radical historicity constitutes every person and every thing. Human nature emerges from a combination of history, cultural clutter, unfinished societies, and ambiguous language, which always belies the existence of a common human

nature for all times and places.

#### *Practical Truth*

Truth in postmodernity is reached by the community through free appreciative inquiry and not through any coercion or the stipulation of first principles. Only public acceptance can redeem practical truth from the cultural and historical experience of diverse peoples in heterogeneous populations, customs and mores. Most ordinary people agree on most ordinary things apart from any metaphysics or transcendental principles.

### **The Bible and Interpretations**

At this point the reader should realize that postmodernism calls into question much of what has been presented as eternal biblical truths, valid for all peoples at all times. The distinction made among the three groups—ordinary believers, scholars and religious leaders—comes into play when members of the second and third group take biblical texts and impose specific interpretations upon the first group. Postmodernism prohibits anyone from giving an eschatological, irrevocable, never-to-be-changed interpretation to any biblical text. The Bible teaches the truth, but not necessarily truths that include eternally valid norms of behavior. Rather the Bible tells stories that help individuals to come to conclusions and hypotheses for living ordinary life. The Bible offers values and virtues, which are practical helps for living to be interpreted and lived out by individuals. Pay attention to the story and not to the individual verses that tell the story. Examine the values and virtues to be handed on, and then encourage believers to make their own application.

When individuals fail to read the whole story, false hypotheses arise which cause disastrous consequences for the one who hears the story. People do not have to accept a jealous, revengeful God who destroys enemies, kills women and children, and imposes punishment on generations. Although verses can be found in the Bible which support this hypothesis, it makes no sense in the overall understanding of the stories told by people in different periods of human history. The stories associated with anger and revenge must also be read in the light of forgiveness and mercy and redemption. Intertextuality prohibits an exclusive reading of a particular verse (von Wolde). Humans usually want revenge and want the destruction of enemies. Naturally they would think God would act according to how humans act but the full stories of God contradict the way ordinary people act. Mercy and for-

giveness overcome all thought of anger and revenge. The stories about God in the Old Testament deal rather with what people do to themselves by their choices rather than what God does to them because of their actions. The good stories outweigh the bad stories and change the context of the bad stories. Intertextuality adds a new meaning to interpreting texts (Claassen).

### **Stories**

Stories are interpretations of history. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle has greatly influenced the physical sciences: "the physical world is bizarrely complicated and unyielding to rational explanation". Something similar can be applied to the human world; human relationships and behavior are bizarrely complicated and unyielding to rational explanation. Thus people tell stories which never should be critically analyzed seeking some objective expression of reality. Rather, the stories are poetic, often conveying more than the actual meaning of the words involved. Stories flow spontaneously in a creative and often occasional manner rather than a detailed thought-out structure to which the storyteller adds the flesh. Good storytellers use poetic words as well as a poetic non-structure. In this way they convey more than just the ideas expressed in the words. In fact such a poetic non-structure often conveys what exists behind the words rather than the actual traditional understanding of a union between word and reality. The good storyteller brings about a union between the listener and the interpretations of reality as presented and lived by the storyteller. Then understanding, even if sometimes non-conceptual and apaphatic, takes place. The stories in the Bible are dialogic inviting the listener or reader to participate and thus allowing a multitude of interpretations. In the language of Bakhtin great time: "the infinite and unfinalized dialogue in which no meaning dies" (Bakhtin: 169) allows for new meaning.

### **Second Testament Injunctions about Women**

Wives, be subject to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord [Col 3:18].

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husband as to the Lord [Eph 5:21–23].

The Greek word for "subject" is *upotasso*, found in Hellenistic Greek as well as translating some ten Hebrew equivalents in the LXX. The word appears in both the

active and the middle voice in Luke, the Pauline corpus, Hebrews, James and 1 Peter. It has a considerable range of meaning, especially in the middle voice. The subordination expressed may be compulsory or voluntary. In the Second Testament it does not immediately convey the thought of obedience (Delling: 39–46).

Paul uses the term in his formulation of important Christological statements. The most significant ones concern Christ and his submission to God in 1 Corinthians 15:28.

The usage in Colossians and Ephesians (whether these letters were written by Paul or not) suggests a readiness to renounce one's own will for the sake of others, i.e. for *agape* and to give precedence to others. In society the submission of those who are properly subordinated, in this case wives to husbands, does not stay the same when done under the control of dependence on the Lord. The demand now has a specifically Christian basis: individuals are to each other as the community is to Christ. The detailed meaning can come only from the context.

Recently the Southern Baptist convention interpreted these texts to mean that the wife must obey her husband. Scholars said such an interpretation or hypothesis or conclusion is unwarranted precisely because of the theological background and the intertextuality of the usage. Religious leaders gave their interpretation; ordinary believers made their own decision. What does submission to a husband mean in the context of contemporary Christianity? Surely it cannot mean obedience, since the giving of the Spirit has made Christians free, subject only to Christ and through Christ to God. Even the English word *subject* does not mean slavish obedience. All are subject to law, but no one is obliged to obey the law in all times and places and under all circumstances. People voluntarily subject themselves to authority, e.g., when accepting a work position; but this does not destroy human freedom.

The injunctions about wives in both Ephesians and Colossians are at best ambiguous: they convey, not demands for specific behavior, but an attitude. Ephesians uses the verb only once and counsels *both* husbands and wives to be subject to each other. Most translations repeat the verb in reference to wives but not to husbands. Colossians uses the word only in relationship to wives but then uses *agapao* in reference to husbands. Surely this does not call for obedience on the part of the wives in relationship to the husbands.

Language plays an important role in the interpretation of these texts. Recall that the word has some First Testament background and comes from a language that, unlike English, has active, passive and middle voice. How

can these differences be expressed accurately in English? How can the injunction apply to Christians today?

It is also worth noting that the verses come from a first-century context in which a woman was considered the property of the man. Jesus does not seem to accept this attitude, and Paul wants to change it—as he remarks in Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but we are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). But what can the injunctions mean? What is conveyed beyond the ordinary sense of the words?

The relationship between husbands and wives in society was changing. Jesus had contributed to the change in his personal relationship to women. Paul continues to endorse the change in Galatians, and the authors of Ephesians and Colossians (whoever they may be) further change the context of submission. The text cannot be used to inculcate specific behavior for women today. Rather the relationship between men and women and husbands and wives have continued to change during the centuries since Jesus and Paul. *First* understand the language and the context, and *then* change the context, and the injunction takes on a different meaning for people today. The new readers offer new meanings (Claassens: 136)

### Covering of the Head for Women (Meier: 212–26)

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman, for as woman was made from man so man is now born of woman and all things are from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that for a man to wear long hair is degrading to him but if a woman has long hair it is her pride? For her hair is given to her for a covering. If anyone is disposed to be contentious we recognize no other practice nor do the churches of God. [1Cor 11:11–16].

Following this specific teaching religious leaders should insist that Christian women wear hats or veils in Church. After all this was the requirement until the last three decades, and those who changed would therefore have to be considered unfaithful to the Word of God. They also would have to be considered disobedient, since no proper authority gave them permission to enter Church with heads uncovered.

From verse 11 to the end of this chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul uses various arguments to convince his readers: first cosmological and anthropological arguments, and finally theological arguments. Recognizing that his

arguments are not very strong, he concludes with an argument from his personal decision: "We don't do it"—period. The confusion in the injunction arises especially from verse 11, where both sexes appear to be equal. Distinctions are canceled in the Lord. Paul appeals to the common sense of believers in verse 13, but no argument seems to make much sense, especially in the light of verses 11 and 12. What, then, does the injunction mean?

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### People should not confuse a secularization carried on by individual believers with a secularization accomplished by Christ.

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The relationship between men and women was changing. The relationship between men and women in the worship of God was also changing. Previously, men and women worshipped separately with the honor going to the man. Now they worship together. They all have the Spirit and can be equal. However, perhaps some women went too far in throwing away the custom for women to be veiled in worship. In all probability Paul did not care about the matter itself, but when it affected the unity of the Church he did care. The Spirit brings freedom, but the Spirit also unites. The unity of the Christian community should be expressed externally as well as internally. People should not confuse a secularization carried on by individual believers with a secularization accomplished by Christ. Individualism, even based on the Spirit, can be harmful to the unity of the Church. Although wearing or not wearing a head cover means nothing in the sight of God, if innovation causes friction in the community and harms its unity, the old custom should prevail at least until its modification would no longer cause disunity. That has happened in the past three decades (Conzelmann: 181–91). The postmodern approach supports the value in this matter. People change; relationships change; external expressions change. The need for unity within a community remains the value and the constant.

### Homosexual Behavior

Religious leaders regularly condemn any homosexual activity as an abomination to the Lord. They quote from the First Testament and the Second Testament. The words are clear: the activity is a grave offense against God. Scholars caution the religious leaders that such unequivocal condemnation is not supported by the actual texts, and

the individual believers engage in homosexual relationships and activity and consider themselves as living in the grace of God. For many Christian homosexuals, these verses do not apply. Usually the religious leaders will also condemn any violence against homosexuals and condemn any form of discrimination. They love the sinner and abhor the sin.

### Homosexuality in the First Testament

Three passages are usually quoted from the First Testament: Genesis 9:20–28, Genesis 19 and its parallel Judges 19, and Leviticus 20:13. It seems unnecessary, here, to cite a detailed exegesis of each passage, though many have been published. Let a general summary suffice. Some have tried to remove all reference to homosexuality from Genesis 19 and Judges 20 with an interpretation based on the lack of hospitality but such interpretations do not do full justice to the texts. But whereas the author of Genesis 9: 20–27, himself seems to have suppressed the homosexual overtones, Leviticus 20:19 makes a bald statement: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman both of them shall be put to death for their abominable deed; they have forfeited their lives."

What of these passages? Genesis 9 refers to the attempt of Canaan to make Israel subservient. Ham represents Canaan and Shem (anticipating Israel) represents the Semites (Brueggemann: 88–91). Judges 19 deals with the civil war against Benjamin. The Levite, threatened sexually by the men of Gibeah, permitted the rape of the *pileges* (often translated as "concubine" but the translation is not certain) even though she was given into his custody for protection. The Levite instigated a civil war, which brought about the rape of the virgins of Israel, making the situation more horrendous, especially for the woman of Israel (Schneider: 245–69). Genesis 19 certainly has the overtone of homosexuality but explicitly deals with the treatment and domination of strangers and the mistreatment of women by men.

The unifying element of all of the references to homosexuality is the domination of one person over another. It is an abomination. Ham wants to dominate humankind by dominating his father. The men of Genesis 19 show, by their desire to dominate the strangers, that they want to dominate all people. In Judges 19, one tribe wants to dominate another tribe, and men want to dominate women. The bald statement in Leviticus also concerns domination: one man over another. In certain languages even different words are used for the active and passive partner. The stories concern the domination of one human over another—especially one man over another, since the domination of

man over woman was an accepted practice. In many cultures even today homosexual rape expresses the domination of one man over another. In fact the active partner is often not considered homosexual; only the passive partner is the true homosexual and only if he truly desires, prefers and enjoys the act. The same is often true in prisons. Thus the biblical stories condemn, not homosexual acts but the domination of one person over another—especially one male over another—but this is broadened in Judges to include the domination of women by men. Even the analysis of the Hebrew words used limits the understanding. Surely the words do not mean the same as gender identity and orientation mean today. Taking intertextuality into consideration and recognizing the change in society in the past two thousand years, make it impossible to isolate what is considered homosexuality today and adopt these texts as normative for behavior.

### Homosexuality in the Second Testament (Scroggs; Fitzmyer; Collins; Keenan)

The Gospels make no reference to homosexuality. The references come from Paul in Romans and in First Corinthians.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women, men committing shameful acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error [Rom 1:26–27].

Do not be deceived. Neither the fornicators, nor idolaters nor adulterers nor *malakoi*, nor *arsenokoitai* nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor rapacious persons will inherit the kingdom of God [1 Cor 6:9].

The condemnation in Romans comes within the context of people without values or virtues. Paul wishes to mention all people in need of redemption, Greeks as well as Jews. Verses 18 to 32 gather up a list of sins that destroy the human spirit. Unless they acknowledge the true God, people do terrible things to each other. That the homosexual activity comes from idolatry and ritual prostitution remains a possibility, but these acts should not be taken out of context. They form part of a list of sins coming from the failure to acknowledge the one true God. The denial of a relationship to God brings envy, anger, murder, gossip, and slander (vv 29–31). Individuals with such vices have no values and no virtues. Paul neither gives motivation for

these sins nor offers a hierarchy of them: “all ungodliness and wickedness” (v 18). Since Paul follows the general attitude of the First Testament, homosexuality in the Second Testament carries with it the same sense of the domination of one man over another. His condemnation of women having sexual relations with other women goes beyond the First Testament, which never mentions lesbianism. The condemnation of this particular type of sexual pleasure may be the condemnation of all types of pleasure without regard to consequences and what encourages the acquisition of virtue. Jesus himself said: “Not on bread alone does one live” (Mt 4: 4). Pleasure alone without discipline destroys the human being. Here also, Paul does not deal with gender identity and orientation as known today.

In First Corinthians *malakoi* probably means men who allow themselves to be treated as women: the degradation of the male by the domination of another male. *Arsenokoitai* might mean pederasts or perhaps male prostitutes. The meaning of the words is not evident and cannot be easily translated into English. And as in Romans, these acts fall within a general list of sins without any hierarchy.

The postmodernist insists that, first, language has changed and that secondly, as human beings change so does the understanding of what is virtue and what is sin. Paul himself offers a good example in his treatment of eating meats sacrificed to idols. For some it is a sin, and for others it is not (Rom 14:13–23).

As readers should pay attention to those stories in the First Testament that carry some dimension of homosexuality, so they should pay attention to relevant passages in the Second Testament. Individual sins should not be separated from the general loss of value and virtue when a person lives without a relationship to the true God. All sins are abominations. Individual verses should not be taken to dictate human behavior, but the Bible should as a whole generate a sense of values and virtues from which the behavior will flow. Once again, intertextuality brings caution to interpretations.

### Tassels and Fringes

The Lord said to Moses, “Speak to the Israelites and tell them that they and their descendants must put tassels on the hems of their garments, and to put a violet cord on this tassel at the hem . . .” [Numbers 15:37–38]

A woman shall not wear an article proper to a man nor shall man put on a woman’s dress, for anyone who does such things is an abomination to the lord. [Deuteronomy 12:5].

These injunctions may cause some levity, but the Bible calls the latter “abominations.” The purpose of the tassels is to remind the people of the commandments “without going wantonly astray after the desires of your hearts and eyes” (Num 16:39). Even here, however, maybe the Hebrew word *gedilim* means twisted threads, or a cord or a rope or plaited locks or tassels or fringes (Brown: 152–53). How can people obey God if they do not know what the word means? Fringes are not the same as tassels!

Men usually do not wear women’s garments unless they have some psychological problem, but women often (contrary to the Torah) wear men’s garments. Evidently things have changed. But who institutes, or renders judgment on, such changes?

Words change and people change. These passages cannot be used to control human behavior. But what does the story mean? People should always keep the commandments of God in their consciousness, and men and women have different roles in life, which are expressed externally. But *how* the externals express the differences will vary. Evidently people have come to these conclusions on their own since they show no interest in following these clear prescriptions of the Bible.

## Food Commands

Of course in early Christianity one of the great struggles between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians involved the food laws in Judaism. Leviticus 11 contains the largest list of what could and could not be eaten according to the Law. Some animals are clean, and others are unclean. Most of the prohibitions concern meat and animal derivatives (Schramm: 648–50). The Acts of the Apostles (chapters 10–11) does away with these laws, but the meaning of the prescriptions remains. God surely has given all into human hands, but people need discipline in eating and drinking. While historically some have discerned health and hygienic reasons for the dietary prohibitions in the First Testament (“The rationale behind *kashruth* from the biblical and rabbinic standpoint is simply a concern for sanctity”—Schramm: 650), the early Church did away with the prohibitions but did not exclude the need for discipline in eating and drinking. As times changed, so did early Christianity.

Paul deals with the issue differently in Galatians and Romans. When he wrote Galatians he opposed all efforts to maintain any Jewish laws, but by the time he wrote Romans he recognized the different needs within the community

regarding eating and drinking. Chapter 14 encourages believers to eat and drink as they wish but not to despise someone who differs in eating and drinking practices. The Bible teaches values and not specific ethical behavior. At first, Paul evidently thought that more had changed than ordinary believers thought. Paul as a religious leader gave way to the practices of ordinary believers in Rome.

## The Sermon on the Mount

Of course the great area of dispute concerning behavior is the Sermon on the Mount. This great charter of Christianity presented by Matthew demands a whole study, seeking to understand the values and virtues behind the various laws and injunctions. Others (Betz, e.g.) have done this. The Beatitudes should be seen, according to Betz, as an exordium for the entire Sermon. Pay attention first to the virtues involved. The central section, again according to Betz, involves four principles: Jesus teaches the Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures have authority, the interpretation of Jesus also has authority, and righteousness is an important virtue. The concluding section (7:13–23) has three exhortations: first, your choice of values affects your destiny: eternal life or everlasting destruction; secondly, make sure false prophets do not invade your values; and and thirdly, beware of self-delusion. The individual verses make sense only when understood in context.

## Conclusion

Can individuals interpret a particular passage in Scripture and apply that interpretation to human behavior? Of course. Both Jews and Christians have done this for centuries. They: religious leaders, scholars, and practitioners, will continue to do so. But postmodernism has affected all people whether they acknowledge it or not. The Bible can offer justification for any particular behavior from murder to incest to seduction to cheating and stealing provided the reader looks long enough and has sufficient command of the languages. Such efforts, however, destroy the value of the word of God. Intertextuality and the dialogic nature of all discourse with new listeners and new readers cautions especially religious leaders and scholars to proceed slowly when giving instruction to ordinary believers. If the guidance makes no sense to people today, both leaders and scholars contribute to their own demise. People may not say anything; they just will ignore both religious leaders and scholars alike. Better for all to listen to the Word of God and to develop values and virtues. Let

the Word of God become the subject and the listener become the object. Then the dialogue will continue, and the right behavior will follow.

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