

Postmodern
With

RABBINIC INTERTEXTUALITY

AND THE POST-MODERN JEW

A Paper Presented to LCJE-NA, San Diego, 1998

By, Dr. R. Boaz Johnson

(This paper was developed on the insights which I gained during the research work I did for my dissertation entitled *The Theological Conception of the Land, Creation of the Land, and Intertextuality, with Reference to Jewish Texts of Late Antiquity*. It will be necessary for me to explain the concept of "Rabbinic Intertextuality" from Chapter II of my dissertation before we plunge into this paper).

What is Postmodernism?

If *modernity* represents progress through science, *postmodernity* has lost confidence in any such progress. *Modernity* talked in terms of human beings reaching a utopian society through industrialization. Postmodernity sees no such thing happening.

While the talk about postmodernism has grown exponentially in the last ten years, it is also true that it is very difficult to define what postmodernism means. It is

a subject which pervades almost all the realms of education and society. In Economics one talks about the kind of production which will take place in late Capitalism. For example, a postmodern society is said to be a ultra-consumer oriented society. The goods are not defined by their pragmatic usefulness, but rather by the image of the good. This image of the "good" will not be societal utilitarian, but rather individually utilitarian. What may be good for one individual, will be harmful for another individual. Yet, from a postmodern perspective that would be alright. Thus priority in the postmodern society is given to highly individualized advertising, image, and style. Humanistic ideals no longer give the meaning of a product.

Are there other factors which define Postmodernism?

Thomas Pangle describes it thus,

It is a nebulous, diverse, and even contradictory in its meanings . . . has different connotations in different literature, in architecture and fine arts, in political theory, and in history.¹

Postmodernism touches a whole range of areas. In art and architecture, it refers to a new way of looking at art and architecture. In politics, economics and ethics, it affirms all values and thus considers no value as valid.

¹Thomas Pangle, *The Enobling of Democracy: The Challenging of the Postmodern Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 19.

How did we come to a Postmodern world

Those of us who have been involved in Jewish evangelism have, of course, have heard the opinion that this belief in a Messiah is passé. It is generally considered to be an outdated, premodern perspective on life. Reason, since the time of Descartes, has reigned supreme. It has been the hallmark of what is called a modern society.

The modern era was born during the time of the Enlightenment. René Descartes provided the philosophical groundwork for modernity, with the rational autonomy of man. The rational man sought to improve human existence through technology. He sought to bring any and every area under the scrutiny of reason. Knowledge was not only certain, but was also objective. The dispassionate pursuit of knowledge became the nuclear characteristic of modernity. Thus, an astronomer could become a very objective specialist in his field. One could be certain that the theories which he was propounding were the result of very objective scientific methods under the scrutiny of rational man.

However, in more recent times, especially in the last decade, educational circles have come to the stark realization that the so-called "modern" world-view is resting on very shaky grounds. Indeed, Diogenes Allen ~~one of~~ the great Princeton thinker of our time has pronounced "modernity" as dead. He writes,

A massive intellectual revolution is taking place that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern

From a modern perspective.
① The universe was supposed to be self-contained - There was no need for the Transcendent.

4

world from the Middle Ages. The foundations of the modern world are collapsing, and we are entering a post-modern world. The principles forged during the Enlightenment (c. 1600-1780), which formed the foundations of modern mentality, are crumbling.²

On the ashes of modernity a new world view has arisen, which is not quite a systematic world view. To have a systematic world view would be, in fact, modernistic. Instead, the new world views, which penetrate every sector of the academic world, and will soon pervade every aspect of human society is called postmodernism.

Postmodernism and the reading of Jewish History

Among Jewish scholars there is a growing general agreement that the Nazi holocaust and Auschwitz is a shocking indictment of the "pretense of new creation, the hatred of tradition, the idolatry of self" which characterized modernity. It is modernity, especially its intense passion to break with the past that gave rise to movements like Nazism and Stalinism. Descartes' "reason" failed miserably to provide the moral fiber to prevent such horror from taking place in human society. Therefore, the Jewish intelligentsia is looking elsewhere to look for precisely this moral fiber, or at least moral fibers which will deter any such horror from happening again. The answer is found in postmodernism.

²Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*, (Louisville: Westminster, 1989), 2.

The latest theories in postmodernism, especially in French literature is spearheaded by Jewish scholars like the Talmudic scholar Emmanuel Levinas, and others like Theodore Adorno and Jacques Derrida. These studies seek to go beyond the realm of literature to politics, economics, sociology and the sciences. Further, as is pointed by several scholars, the locus of postmodern theories is generally Judaism and the study of Jewish people.³

In the course of these studies, the Jewish experience of the holocaust e.g. is deconstructed to mean something other. A good example is Jean-Francois Lyotard. Commenting on his *Heidegger and "the jews"*, Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg write,

Lyotard deliberately writes, "the jews" in quotation marks and lower case to distinguish them from the real Jews, the followers of the Mosaic faith. For Lyotard, "the jews" are the embodiment of alterity, the Other, scorned as such, murdered as such, exterminated as such, who are sometimes real Jews, as in Nazi occupied Europe, and sometimes not. In Germany today, the Turks are "the jews"; in France, it is the Arabs; in Iran, it is the Bahai or emancipated women; in Hindu India, it is the Muslim and Sikhs; in China it is the students and the "cosmopolitans."⁴

There is a growing number of scholars who seek to explain the horrors of Nazism in postmodern terms. Meaningfulness of history, and the experience the Jewish people, in

³See e.g., Michael Weingrad, "Jews (in Theory): Representations of Judaism, Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in Postmodern French Thought." *JUDAISM* 45, 1 (1996), 79-100.

⁴Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, "The Unlearned Lessons of the Holocaust," *Modern Judaism* 13 (1993), 179.

modernism
leads to
response to the
holocaust
modernism
gives an adequate
answer to
the holocaust &
so Jewish scholars
are looking for
answers beyond
modernism.

these writings becomes secondary to the new meanings which can be given for humanity in general. This history as it happened does not carry any meaning. It carries meaning only in so far as, it can create new meaning for a post-modern society.

Similarly, Max Silverman argues that the Dreyfus affair was a result of "ambivalent modernity." He writes,

The Jews were more often than not only too willing to play the *modernistic* republican game. They accepted the idea that the Republican stands for truth, justice, civilization, culture and enlightenment. They gladly accepted this chance to enter the world of light, progress, and modernity. Some said: 'We will continue to practice our faith. But we will do it in the privacy of our own homes, or discreetly in our community.' Others wanted nothing more than to rid themselves of the traditional and ethnic baggage which, given the *modernistic* rules of the game, they themselves see as backward, pre-modern and culturally inferior.⁵

As it turned out, he adds, "Racism is not the opposite of *modern* egalitarian republicanism; it is instead very much its product."⁶ Therefore, both the congenial aspects of modernity, as well as the ugly aspects of modernity turned out to be very harmful for the Jewish people, and for man in general. Modernity failed to safeguard the rights of human beings. However, he adds that in today's postmodern world the issues are far different, "the Dreyfus Affair saw the birth of the human rights association, the Ligue de droits de l'Homme. Today there is a problem of how to for-

⁵Max Silverman, "The Dreyfus Affair: One Hundred Years On," *Patterns of Prejudice* 28 (1994), 32.

⁶ibid., 33.

mulate rights . . . the Dreyfus affair also saw the birth of the modern, politically committed intellectual, armed with the weapons of truth and justice . . . what role can the intellectual play today when values and concepts of truth are in crisis . . . the same words- antisemitism, rights, values, and so on- no longer have the same meanings."⁷ In the postmodern environment, increasingly so, none of these words have any meaning. Meaning will be given by the deconstructing receptor.

Jewish writers are seeing a sense of hope in this kind of an environment. Yet, it seems clear there are more dangers than hope. When the postmodern society is able to deconstruct history, then the painfulness of history is not faced squarely. Postmodern deconstructionism, instead tends to become a reductionary force which truncates the pains of history. The new values which are developed are not developed on the basis of lessons which society learns from history, but rather they are based on no values at all. In many senses postmodernism is used as a tool for escapism.

Postmodern Judaism and Jewish Evangelization

In the rest of the paper, it would perhaps be worthwhile to briefly outline the effects of postmodernism on two denominations of Judaism. Also, I would like to outline the effects of Postmodernism and the reading of the

⁷ibid., 35.

Bible in posmodern society. It is my hope that this brief overview would enable us to discuss the preparedness of Jewish Outreach movements for a postmodern Jewish society.

Postmodern Jewish Theology and the Reform Movement

Eugene B. Borowitz the foremost theologian of the Reform movement of American Judaism has written perhaps the definitive work on Postmodern Judaism in a book entitled *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew*.⁸ In this work he suggests that there is a spiritual crisis caused by a "disillusionment with the modernists' messianic humanism"⁹ and a "rejection of the meaninglessness of secularized reality."¹⁰

He further writes regarding modernism, "modernity has also created new and intense forms of human misery . . . drugs, violence, loss of meaning . . . pollution terrorism, or nuclear destruction." Consequently, a critical pillar of modernism collapsed: the belief that secular enlightenment will make people self-correcting . . . secular ground no longer supplies a secure ground of value."¹¹ This kind of an environment has given birth to postmodern Judaism. This

⁸Eugene Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew* (Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991).

⁹ *ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 29.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 21, 23.

Judaism, he describes, is one in which the Jewish self has turned to "passion, depth, diversity, and endurance of the religious quest of the late 20th century." This quest is essentially characterized by, "self-realization movements, ~~cults, fundamentalisms~~ . . ."¹² He does not see anything wrong in this trend, rather he asks postmodern Jewish theologians to meet the needs of this tenor.

He suggests that postmodern Jewish theology has to be developed around a thorough re-evaluation of basic concepts like self, God, and community. One must always be aware that these concepts should not be based on modernistic presuppositions. Postmodern theologies ought^{to be} developed on the basis of floating concepts.

Regarding the "concept" of God, he writes, from a postmodern perspective, "it is so heavy with question and misconception that I have mostly avoided using it."¹³ In today's postmodern world view a Jew cannot, "objectively make the assertion of the reality of God."¹⁴ In postmodern terms the "theological metaphor" of Transcendence does not make much sense.¹⁵ The postmodern Absolute, instead is "weak," because (1) it is relational, (2) it creates free agents, and (3) it makes covenants. This weak Absolute has no

¹² *ibid.*, 23

¹³ *ibid.*, 114.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 193.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 100.

attributes because of "our limited ability to specify its nature or its exact entailments."¹⁶ Thus, Borowitz suggests that postmodernism has no room for either the interventionist God of modernism, nor the equally modernistic, demythologized God of Kaplan or William Kaufman. Instead, it opts for a "non-rational God."¹⁷ This God creates. However, the postmodern conception of creation is that of a continuous process. In its deconstructed form it is found in the experience of the prayer book. This God is the one "who renews daily in his goodness the work of creation."¹⁸

The kind of Jew who emerges from these floating concepts is "a non-orthodox self that is autonomous yet so fundamentally shaped by the covenant that whatever issues from its depths will have authentic Jewish character."¹⁹ It may be noted that Horowitz's concept of the covenant also is not based on the Torah, rather it is a "relational term." Covenant is almost like the *nirvana* experience of Buddhism, or the *brahman*. Yet, this experience is given Jewish clothing. In many senses, he is not talking about a Jewish covenant, but rather a multiplicity of covenants.

Borowitz claims that this postmodern Jewish identity will not be a "person-in-general" who happens to be a Jew.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 102.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 128.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 140.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 284.

But, rather he is a "Jew/person at once."²⁰ Thus the Post-modern Jew-self while being very different for each individual, will not be a "schizoid" person. This is quite different from most modern Jewish thinkers who present the Jewish self as an autonomous, unsituated self. These are Jews who are emancipated and universalized. And of course, it is very different from Orthodoxy which refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of autonomous self, and has urged Jews to think of themselves as heteronomous selves, that is selves who must define themselves as obedient to the *halak-hah*, the Jewish law. Borowitz suggests that the modernistic view of self is built on individualistic, humanistic, highly secularized, philosophic universalism. All the modern Jewish thinkers from Hermann Cohen, the German Jewish philosopher to Richard Rubenstein, the author of the pioneering *After Auschwitz* seek to deny the covenant of faith and build the Jewish self on memory, ritual and community. However, he suggests that postmodern Jew is less confident of the promise of emancipation, less trusting in the goodness of God's creation, and the humanness of the world. The postmodern Jew/person is whatever he sets himself to be in the light of this ethereal postmodern experience.

Further, he suggests that the Orthodox self is also based on a pre-modern concept of divine revelation of the

²⁰ *ibid.*, 215.

Torah. This Torah needs to be deconstructed. As a result of this the concept of the covenant needs to be deconstructed. So why does he use the word "covenant" at all? He claims that modern Jews have avoided the use of the term "covenant" because of its Christian connotations, as well as, the exclusivistic denotations of choice of an exclusive God. Instead of this he proposes the Postmodern God is a Weak Absolute who chooses all humanity. The choice of the Gentiles is expressed in the Noahic covenant and the choice of the Jews is expressed in the Sinaitic covenant. Postmodern theology puts both of these conceptions on a equally deconstructionist footing. Both, the "Torah," as well as the "covenant" for the postmodern Jew are indeterminate concepts. The new "Jew/person at once" seeks to have the torah revealed to him in mystical experiences. This torah becomes the framework of covenant relationships with a "Absolute weak" God.

Borowitz claims that any theology which is based on the presuppositions of modernistic world view will not be valid for a postmodern theology or theologies. For example, he claims that in the postmodern world of "our more global, more class-, more gender-, more race conscious pluralism,"²¹ the modernistic assumptions of universalism no longer carry any weight. Universalism, as it is defined from the perspective of the modernistic era will no longer be the guid-

²¹ ibid., 188.

ing principle. For example, he suggests that Hans Küng's search for a "general ethical criterion" which "differentiates "between the true and the false religion in all religions" no longer holds any water. Thus, the ethics and the theology of pluralism also will need to be redefined from a postmodern perspective or from postmodern perspectives.

Postmodernism in the thought of the Reconstructionist Movement

In this brief section it would be worthwhile to see the effects of postmodernism on Reconstructionist thought. It would be easy to note that Reconstructionism, of all the denominations of Judaism, is most conducive to postmodern thought. The Reconstructionist movement, for example, has rapidly turned from rationalism to different forms of mysticism. Most theologians of the Reconstructionist movement view incipient forms of postmodernist Jewish theology in the thought of Mordecai Kaplan. Daniel Breslauer, one of the Reconstructionist movements star theologians writes,

Kaplan did not link his philosophy to any single view of reality. As a utilitarian he adjusted his philosophy to the dominant paradigm of society. He could adjust to another paradigm shift, particularly the postmodern paradigm in which change and flexibility are the primary realities . . . he anticipated a turn toward Jewish mysticism and had justified finding ever new ways of reviving Jewish tradition.²²

²²S. Daniel Breslauer, *Mordecai Kaplan's Thought in a Postmodern Age*, SFRSLS (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994),

He further adds,

Reading Kaplan carefully leads one to find sentiments that would shock those who, like David Hartman, characterize his thought as pedestrian and dismay those who like Samuel Dresner, worry about a return to paganism. The basic motivation, however, is utilitarian—that of finding ways to motivate Jews to fulfill their personal potential through the social mechanism of the Jewish people. Jews today can look to Kaplan for guidance and motivation in their lives. Not only Kaplan's view of the kabbalah, but his entire system presenting Jewish thought in its democratic form stimulates a *postmodern* commitment to Judaism. Kaplan identifies in every person an "inner drive to outdo himself, not to accept as final and unchangeable the conditions of life." He interprets the existence of this drive as evidence that people move "in a direction toward self-transcendence." (*Questions Jews Ask*, p. 110) Religion as he understands it serves to point in that direction. Judaism in Kaplan's thought earns its right to survive by furthering the goal of transcendence. While rationalism once filled that task, Jewish mysticism served it in the past and may do so in the future. Certainly the decision to reclaim medieval Jewish mysticism as a resource for modern democracy represents such self-transcendence consistent with Kaplan's thought. He would, on the basis of his own thinking, embrace the new ways that render his earlier system more utilitarian and thus more appropriate for the postmodern Jew.²³

The key word, of course, in Kaplan's thought is "utilitarianism." Judaism, in his opinion, should be like the chameleon which changes colors according to the flow of the reigning philosophy. The postmodern theology which thus emerges is quite close to that envisaged by Eugene Borowitz, in the Reform movement. Indeed, in the light of "utilitarianism" it is easier to banish modernistic notions.

The goal is the self-transcendence of the postmodern Jew. Therefore, this new Jew-self ought to deconstruct any

²³ *ibid.*, 320.

concept which comes in the way of the emergence of this postmodern Jew-self, which is a self-transcendent being.

Postmodern Judaism and Some Contemporary Jewish Thinkers

Borowitz's ideas and Kaplan's embryonic thought are only two of the many avenues which give us a glimpse of postmodern thought in the realm of the Jewish religions. In this paper, I will not discuss some of the other theologians. That will be contained in a larger work, which is a part of my present project. However, in this section it would be good to briefly appreciate the comments of a few contemporary Jewish thinkers as they reflect on the face of the 21st century postmodern Jew. These comments are taken from a recent issue of *MOMENT*.²⁴

1. Alan Dershowitz writes,

American Jewish life in the year 2100 will not look like American Jewish life today. Except for the orthodox, Jews will be far more assimilated in the American mainstream in every way . . . Jewish ideas, too will become more assimilated into the mainstream . . . Judaism is embarking on a new phase in its history as an evolving civilization. It is no longer a civilization characterized by persecution, ghettoization, and anti-Semitism. Judaism must define itself anew, develop a state of mind more adaptive to its contemporary condition, and move beyond its long history of victimization into its post-persecution era of Jewish life . . . It must write new literature, create new philosophies, sing new songs, and paint new pictures reflective of its changing outlook- of its new Jewish state of mind. (*Moment*, p.36)

²⁴ *MOMENT: The Jewish Magazine for the 90's*, December, 1997.

The "evolving civilization" of Dershowitz may or may not have any relationship to Jewish tradition or Jewish Scriptures. The emphasis is rather on the "newness" in a postmodern age. The goal of the postmodern Jew which Dershowitz envisages, is that of a person who is no different from the rest of the postmodern society.

2. Similarly Rachel Cowan a scholar from Hebrew Union College sees the face of postmodern Judaism to be very different from Judaism as we know it today. The theological forms of Hinduism and Buddhism will inform the tenets of Jewish theology, not Christianity. She writes,

Jewishness will imply a spiritual identity rather than a tribal one. Because of intermarriage, adoption, and assimilation, Jews will not be ethnically distinct. There will be no bubbes or zeides who can tell heroic stories of surviving the Holocaust, or of their immigrant journey, or of the fortune they forged from a family scrap metal business. The holocaust will not provide the emotional resonance that has shaped the identity of so many contemporary Jews . . . The major cultural forces with which it will be in dialogue will originate in Eastern contemplative traditions rather than Christianity . . . Judaism will have adapted transitions of Eastern meditation and reconstituted Jewish meditation practices. (Moment, p. 37)

The postmodern Jew in her estimation will completely deconstruct history. History will not have any meaning for the postmodern Jew. Instead, he/she will only be concerned with the an eastern encounter with himself/herself. There will therefore be no need for a postmodern theology, since each person will construct his own mystical theology.

3. Julius Lester, Professor of Jewish Studies calls this paradigm shift *Reconservadoxy*. He describes the face of 21st century postmodern Judaism in a rather funny but scary manner.

The large synagogues of the 20th century were replaced by small synagogues, sometimes five in a block. As the synagogues of Eastern Europe had been known by the occupation of a majority of the worshipers- the Tailor's Shul the Butcher's Shul- so the synagogues of the mid-21st century. On one block of Manhattan's Upper West Side, there was the Gay Shul, the Intermarried's Shul, the Feminist's Shul, the Convert's Shul, the Black Muslim Jewish Shul, the I Am Jewish because I say I Am Shul, and the Jewish Buddhist Tai Chi Daveners' Minyan. (In an effort to prevent divisiveness at the last synagogue, the Board of Directors decided that firecrackers will be set off on Rosh Hashanah, an the shofar would be blown on the Chinese New Year.) (Moment, p. 40)

Postmodern theology, in his estimation, will be informed by the social experiences of the individual. The Torah will not be the base, rather the individual social experience will be the base. This will result in a multiplicity of theologies. However, each of these theologies will be equally valid.

4. Finally, Ruth Fagin the Director of She'arim, who also taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary suggests that the above picture of postmodern Judaism will be prepared by the rise of a post-denominational society.

In 2100 American Jewry will be largely a post-denominational community. Large groups of Jews will not identify themselves as belonging to any denomination, rejecting the notion that "authentic" Judaism comes from any one particular set of practices and beliefs, thereby

paving the way for a community that can embrace diversity

Since the realm of "authentic" Judaism will no longer be the various denominations, one will find as many "authentic experiences" as there are postmodern Jews. Each of these experiences are equally valid. Each of these "authentic experiences" also deconstruct each other. This process of deconstruction takes place not merely from one individual to another, but also within the series of "authentic experiences" that any individual has over a period of time.

Postmodern Judaism and Jesus/Christianity

There is a lot of literature which is emerging from a postmodern perspective. The scope of this paper would not allow me to go into extensive details. However, there are two authors who perhaps illustrate the scope of the debate quite well.

1. Eugene Borowitz, the scholar we have already studied in this paper, has used deconstructionist language to facilitate a dialogue between Jews and Christians. Some of his thinking may already be seen in a book entitled, *Contemporary Christologies: A Jewish Response*. In this volume, on the basis of his emerging postmodern thought, Borowitz suggested that one needs to "find a mutually respectful way

of rejoining the acrimonious issues that divide."²⁵ However, this "respectful way" in his opinion can only be reached when we move beyond the "phenomenological exchange."²⁶ In doing so, he suggests that the postmodern Jew would enrich the primary Jewish self and help to reach the "therapeutic goal: bringing Jews to a greater wholeness of Jewish selfhood."²⁷ When one goes beyond the realm of texts and words, one gets to the realm of "experience." At this level one is able to deconstruct the meaning of texts and this in turn, will bring about greater religious understanding between Jews and Christians.

In the more recent volume, *Renewing the Covenant*, he sets out his full blown postmodern theology of Judaism. As we have seen earlier, this postmodern theology would really bring postmodern Christianity and postmodern Judaism in perfect religious harmony with each other. Both the religions would have a very similar multidimensional concept of self, God, and communities.

2. Another scholar who perhaps illustrates the effect of postmodernism better, is John Shelby Spong, the Episcopal Bishop of Newark, New Jersey. Recently he has

²⁵ Eugene Borowitz, *Contemporary Christologies: A Jewish Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 19.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 18.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 20.

written two books which illustrate the impact that post-modern Judaism can have on postmodern Christologies

i. *Resurrection: Myth or Reality? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994).

and ii. *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996)

Significantly, Spong has written these two books after he has been exposed to Deconstructive Rabbinic Intertextuality.

In *Resurrection: Myth or Reality* he suggests that the Passion narratives ought to be de constructed in the light of Hinduism, Buddhism, Joseph Campbell and the like. He writes in that book, "My faith in Jesus' resurrection . . . does not demand that I claim a non mythological literalness for the words I use to talk about resurrection. Nor do I insist that Easter be understood as an objective supernatural event that occurred inside human history."²⁸ The text needs to be reconstrued in postmodern language. This language is at best relative.

The answer to the debate in postmodern society lies in a new way of looking at the text. Modernism, he claims, "resulted in extravagant literal claims for the historicity of what were in fact midrashic retellings of ancient themes

²⁸ John Shelby Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality? A Bishop's search for the Origins of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), xi.

in new moments of history."²⁹ In a postmodern midrash, "when one enters the Scriptures, one must abandon linear time. This also means one must abandon literal certainty in favor of a living open-ended faith tradition."³⁰ The fact of the matter is that while Spong seeks to espouse Rabbinic methodology, in reality he uses Rabbinic midrash to forward the goals of postmodernism. Since no text can be treated as historical, and historicity needs to be deconstructed, the text of the New Testament also ought to be treated so.

According to Spong the biblical authors used deconstructive midrash, therefore they added stories, words, actors, and events which did not actually occur. They were the receptor texts, who were merely seeking to deconstruct the old texts. Therefore, any event in the Bible including the resurrection ought not to be treated as history. It ought to be regarded as "deconstructive midrash." For example, he writes that Mark, "simply searched the Hebrew Scriptures to find material that could be attached to Jesus' life and that would indicate that Jesus had in fact been validated, claimed and inserted into the developing saga of God's relationship with his special people."³¹ He suggests that the major themes of the Hebrew Bible, e.g. the

²⁹ *ibid.*, 17.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 20.

³¹ *ibid.*, 56.

"third day" theme,³² the "sacrifice" theme,³³ the "Suffering servant" theme³⁴, the "Son of Man" theme,³⁵ the "burial theme,"³⁶ etc. were merely deconstructively applied to the life of Jesus to freshly apply the themes to a new era. Therefore, when the postmodern reader takes this perspective seriously, he himself will "deconstruct the deconstructed text" from his postmodern perspective/s.

The question that Spong and other postmodern readers must ask themselves is, "Did the New Testament or the Hebrew Bible authors themselves view the text as they propose they viewed the text?" It seems obvious that if they looked at the perspective of the biblical authors, they will come to realize that they took history and reality seriously. Nowhere in the Bible is history and reality devalued. The characters take their encounters with God and with each other seriously. The future of the nation of Israel, in the writings of the Prophets depends on the reality of the past experiences of the ancestors. The New Testament authors took the Hebrew Bible narrative as historical. So why are themes like "three days" "forty days" etc. emphasized? Are they merely emphasized to deconstruct the previous occur-

³² *ibid.*, 213.

³³ *ibid.*, 111-20.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 131-43.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 144-60.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 222-224.

rences of the theme? It seems very clear that the biblical authors underline these themes not to devalue or deconstruct the previous occurrence of the theme. But, rather to underline the previous occurrence of the theme. There is no indication that they either did not take the Hebrew Bible's narrative seriously or that they did not themselves treat their own writings as historical. The repetitions of the themes like "third day" "forty days" etc. validates the continuity of the events in history. There is not indications in the writings that these events did not happen the way they are reported, just as the Hebrew Bible narrative also seems quite clearly takes history seriously.

In *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes*, John Shelby carries on the thought process further. He suggests that his most recent works are influenced by Jewish midrash. He says that the Modernistic question is "Did it really happen?" The modernistic answer of the believer is "yes," the modernistic answer of the unbeliever is "No." He says that both are wrong. He writes e.g.

For years I identified myself as one of the *modern* liberals . . . this liberal approach to scripture and its objective truth is as empty, vapid and meaningless as the conservative approach to scripture is uninformed, unquestioning and ignorant . . . Does this mean that I have experienced a late life conversion and am now prepared to return to a conservative understanding of traditional Christianity? Am I now ready to defend the literal truth of the gospel tradition? No. That approach also offers me no hope for the future. No matter how hard I try, I cannot bend my mind into a first

century pretzel. I cannot turn my postmodern mind into a premodern shape.³⁷

He suggests that there is the need for a post-Christian, postmodern understanding of the Scriptures. Where does he turn for an answer to this suggestion? He turns to Rabbinic midrash. He rightly points out that the New Testament is a Jewish book. Therefore it must be read from a Jewish perspective. However, as he does this he very carefully falls into the error of imposing on the New Testament authors and the Rabbis, postmodern thinking. He suggests that they did not have any concept of "time."³⁸

Secondly, he rightly notes that there is a deep intertextuality between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. He writes,

The confusion of tongues at Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) is surely related in some way to the overcoming of the confusion of tongues at Pentecost (Acts 2). The story of Pharaoh seeking to kill the Jewish boy in Egypt (Exodus 1:22 ff.) is surely connected to the story of Herod seeking to kill the Jewish boy babies in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16-18). The story of Moses, who, after meeting God on the Mountain, had his face shine so brightly that it had to be covered (Exod. 34:29 ff.), surely related to the story of Jesus being transfigured so that he too shone with an unearthly radiance (Mark 9:2-8, Matt 17:1-8, Luke 9:28-36). The account of Palm Sunday procession (Mark 11:2-10, Matt. 21:1-9, Luke 19:28-38) is surely related to the story in Zachariah (9:9-11) where the king came to Jerusalem, lowly and riding on a donkey.³⁹

³⁷ John Shelby Spong, *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes*, (HarperCollins: San Francisco, 1996), 17.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 33.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 34.

This intertextuality is indeed there. However, his conclusion is in error. He imposes on the New Testament authors postmodern methods of reading. He suggests that the New Testament authors were merely deconstructing the Hebrew Bible. This is not fulfillment, rather it is destruction.

Thirdly, he suggests that the New Testament authors never saw the text that they were writing or the text of the Hebrew Bible as historical or literal. The modern scholar because of "this ignorance imposed a non-Jewish literalness on the gospel texts that the Jewish authors, I am convinced, would never have understood or appreciated."⁴⁰ According to Spong, in the writings of the Gospels, "Stories about heroes of the Jewish past were heightened and retold again and again about heroes of the present moment, not because those same events actually occurred, but because the reality of God revealed in those moments was like the reality of God in the past."⁴¹ This was the essential goal of the New Testament authors.

It is clear from this that Spong is fitting the New Testament authors into a postmodern deconstructive mold. While the modernistic scholars, like the Jesus Seminar movement sought to examine the text of the Scriptures under a modernistic conception of history. The postmodern scholar seeks to read the ancient texts of the New Testament under

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 35.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 37.

postmodern presuppositions. In this case the essential thing is not the details of the story, but rather a post-modernish "encounter with God." What kind of God^J he, is beside the point.

Fourth, he seeks to show that the Gospels are really built around the Jewish Liturgical Year, and the Jewish Calender. For example, following Michael Goulder he writes,

The five teaching blocks in Matthew were not related to the Torah, said Goulder, as attractive as that theory had once seemed. They were related rather, he argued, to the five celebratory festivals in the Jewish liturgical year. Those festivals were Pentecost (Shavuot), New Year (Rosh Hashanah), Tabernacles (Sukkot), Dedication (Hanukkah), and Passover . . . Goulder began to develop a startling new principle through which one might begin to understand the inner structure of all those works that came to be called the Gospels. The Gospels were not, Goulder asserted, written as a "literary genre" as all. "A gospel is a liturgical genre," he asserted. The Gospels, at least the synoptics of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, were designed, he argued, to be lectionary books.⁴²

These lectionary books went along with the Jewish lectionary, or Torah parashoth and haftarah readings.

It seems to me that there is great insight here. However, one could well make a case for the Gospels being liturgical material, as well as, literally historical material. Afterall, the life of the ancient Jewish person revolved around the Jewish liturgical year. There is no problem in viewing Jesus life in the realm of the liturgical year. There is no need to construe from this that the

⁴² ibid., 91.

Gospels are a-historical, and therefore ought to be read from a postmodern literary perspective. This is a huge unnecessary paradigm jump on Spong's part.

He concludes with the repeated words, "My studies have concluded . . ." In doing so he always reverts back to "modernistic philosophy" of there being a "truth" which he has discovered. Although, to the New Testament authors he applies the rules of postmodernism. Therefore he writes,

There might well have been no such person in history called Joseph, the spouse of Mary, the earthly father of Jesus, who was said to have guarded the manger when Jesus was born. Indeed, there was in all probability no manger . . . there was no temptation during the forty days in the wilderness; nor did Jesus ever preach the Sermon on the Mount. Both of these narratives were designed, I have suggested to portray Jesus reliving the life experiences of Moses. There was no literal raising of Lazarus from the dead. This was Johanne attempt to turn a Lucan parable into history. There was no miraculous feeding of the multitudes. This was part of the early Christian effort to bring Elijah and Elisha material into the story of Jesus, blending it with the manna in the wilderness story of Moses. I have also suggested the probability that Jesus did not himself either create or deliver such parables as the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, the Pharisee and the publican, or even the judgment day account of the sheep and the goats. These were the creations of the early Church as it tried to relate Jesus first to the Book of Deuteronomy and later to the parables found in the Latter Prophets . . . My studies have also concluded that there was no cosmic ascension of Jesus that began its flight from a spot just outside Jerusalem and carried him into the heaven of a Ptolemaic universe.⁴³

So if all of the New Testament is really a fiction, what can one get out of it. He responds,

I have tried in these pages to open the eyes and minds, perhaps even hearts, of the spiritually hungry but

⁴³ ibid., 322, 323.

Church alienated generations of this postmodern world. I have sought to introduce them to the essence of the Christian gospel that has been so smothered in the literalistic past of Christianity.⁴⁴

He writes that the essential question is not, "Who is this Jesus?" because you will not find one. But, rather "Who is this Jesus for you?" Each person has to come up with his own deconstructed picture of a postmodern Jesus, indeed a postmodern Jesus'.

W

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to raise some of the most important issues which need to be addressed before we can effectively reach out to the postmodern Jew. The paradigm is rapidly shifting. Modernism is already dead in academic circles. Modernism will soon be dead in the rest of the society. Unless we are adequately prepared to handle the concerns raised by this dramatic paradigm shift we will be caught napping.

It will be necessary, for example, for the Messianic Jewish Community to develop an adequate theology of history, economics, and society to deal with the concerns raised by the postmodern Jew. One of the areas which needs a good response is the postmodern philosophy of Nazi history. Similarly, the Messianic community will need to develop an adequate response to postmodern theologies of God, man, com-

⁴⁴ ibid., 331.

munity and the like. Closely, akin to this is the recent debate on "Who is a Jew?" It is quite obvious from our discussion above that the postmodern American answer to this question will be significantly different from that of the Chief Rabbinate in Israel. Also, of great importance would be the development of theologies of Revelation, Mysticism, and Pluralism, in the light of postmodern Jewish thought.

At present I am working on at least a preliminary response to some of the issues which I have raised in this paper. May I invite others to reflect on the immense challenge and scope which postmodernism lays before us. This would be crucial, if we want to be ready for the postmodern 21st century.

However, due to the influence of the scholars of literature mentioned above, he claims, literary theory has entered a new phase called the Post-New Criticism phase. One of the crucial theories which has been floated as a part of the Post-New Criticism is the theory of intertextuality. This literary theory of "intertextuality," according to its proponents treats a literary text, not in terms of itself, but rather in terms of its dependence on other literary texts and on the literary and cultural tradition reflected by the reader. It closely follows Derrida's suggestion that the "intertextual" critic no longer views the "text" as a finished product. *(or even meaningful product)*.

All those boundaries that form the running border of what used to be called text, of what we once thought this word could identify, i.e. the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame, and so forth. What has happened, if it has happened, is a sort of overrun [*débordement*] that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a "text," of what I still call a "text," for strategic reasons, in part- a "text" that has henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces.¹⁹

Thus according to Derrida, literary language constantly undermines its own meaning. What it says, in the end, is

¹⁹Jacques Derrida, "Living On: Border Lines," trans. James Hubert, in *Deconstruction and Criticism* ed. Harold Bloom et al (New York: Continuum, 1992), 83-84.

device used by a poet to "go from one word to another which sounds like it, to yet another, thus developing a chain of auditory associations getting the poem from one image to another remote image."²⁶ Mischal argues that the book of Isaiah uses *transumption* to trope on Genesis 1 thus making images, concepts, words, themes and so on to pile on each other. Thus with this transumptive style, "Isaiah seeks to close further figuration. This is a new book and a new vision of the new heavens and the new earth which the LORD is creating; the things of the past, whether acts, words or books, are to be forgotten."²⁷

The role of intertextuality, therefore, is the replacement of the "old" literature, by the "new" literature. The process of *transumption*, in "Deconstructionist intertextuality" does not end with the biblical text. It continues on until it reaches the modern day reader. The modern day "Intertextual Deconstructionist" uses *transumption* to trope the biblical text. Thus producing a new Intertextual-Deconstructionist reading.

In the light of the above, we may come to the following conclusions regarding the use of Post-New Critical intertextuality by biblical scholars:-

²⁶Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1964), 241.

²⁷Peter D. Mischal, "Isaiah: New Heavens, New Earth, New Book," 55.

1. It is glaringly evident that the emphasis of this group of scholars is directly in line with the central thesis of the literary Deconstructionists, that is the goal of intertextuality is not the relationship between two texts. Instead, the main aim is to ascertain how the "latter" text, which we may call the *receptor text*, obliterates the meaning of the "former" text, which we may call the *conceptor text*. In fact, in the form of intertextuality which is influenced by modern literary theory of the Post-New Critical school of Deconstructionism, the *conceptor text* may only be recognized as a text or gains recognition as a text in so far as the *receptor text* makes something of it. Any point which is emphasized by the *receptor text*, even if it is not contained in the *conceptor text*, becomes the new defining emphasis. Any de-emphasis, by the *receptor text*, becomes the new de-emphasis. However, this emphasis and de-emphasis, or new motifs will also be replaced by other motifs. There is therefore a built in obsolescence in each biblical text.

2. It may be noted in the biblical "users" of this form of intertextual methodology, there is no autonomous "writer" of the biblical texts. Each composition is essentially an attempt at the Deconstruction of *conceptor* compositions. In this sense, one cannot talk in terms of the message of a biblical book and a biblical author. Rather, one must talk about the "intertextual destruction" of *conceptor* texts.

In the theories set out by the Post-New Critical school of Intertextuality, the author of the text is not an individual. He becomes a part of the intertextual universe himself. In bringing his intertextual universe into his reading of the text he brings with him his own contexts' codes and conventions. The codes and conventions of his time interact with the codes and conventions of the *conceptor* text. However, the codes and conventions of the *receptor* author obliterate the codes and conventions of the *conceptor* author. The outcome is not a unique contribution of the *receptor* author. Nor is it a reproduction of the *conceptor* text. It is rather the transforming of the *conceptor* text into the intertextual universe of the *receptor*, with all its codes and conventions. Of course, this *receptor* text is further due to be changed by later *receptor* authors according to the codes and conventions of their times.

3. In the intertextual methodology advocated by the Post-New Critical school of Deconstructionism, the *intertextual reader* himself is the final *receptor text*. He becomes the center of attention. The codes and conventions of the reader are the determinants of the intertextuality. It is the modern reader who reconstructs the series of *conceptor* texts and frames it according to his own living and reading experiences. The end result of his intertextual study is an actualization of the *conceptor* texts into his own universe.

4. Finally, It seems very hard to control the methodology of "*Intertextuality*," either in the domain of literary theory, as it is found in the works of Post-New Critics, or in the field as it is applied to biblical studies. The definition of intertextuality, as it is set out by the Yale school of Post-New Critics itself evades definition. It seems like the field of intertextuality becomes a victim of its own methodology, that is it cannot be contained within any particular methodological principles. This seems clear in the methodological pluralism which is found in the volume dedicated to *Intertextuality in Biblical studies*.²⁸

Thus, it seems clear that the "intertextuality" as espoused by the modern literary theory, specially that advocated by the Yale School of Deconstructionism, in the ultimate analysis does not do any justice to the text of the Hebrew Bible. The intertextual reader, as the "final" receptor is the center of such methodology.

These Post-New Criticism *methodologies* when applied to the text of the Hebrew Bible carry with them far more serious dangers than the Old New Criticism or the Literary Criticism of the documentary Hypothesis, which we have outlined in the last chapter. These methodologies would give us a "Deconstructionist conception of the Land," which has

²⁸Danna Nolan Fewell ed., *Reading Between the Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*.