In your opinion does biblical wisdom resonate best with a premodern, modern or postmodern worldview? What implications arise for a transformative use of the Bible in the current postmodern worldview?

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MA

1 Feb 12

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Wisdom and Transformation

Contents

1   Introduction

Believers have sought wisdom in the scriptures for as long as they have had them. In this essay, we will seek to understand the difference that the worldviews prevalent in the premodern, modern and postmodern eras have had on the search for biblical wisdom. Having explored the changing attitudes to wisdom, we will look at one approach that may bear fruit in seeking a wise, biblically based life compatible with a postmodern worldview.

2   Premodernity and Wisdom

Pre-modernity covers a vast trench of time that defies singular description. It encompasses cultures from the dawn of history in Africa and the Fertile Crescent, to great Empires like Rome, China and the Maya. However, in the confines of this essay, we must focus on the west, especially Europe in the mediaeval period.

Scholars of the Middle Ages were confident that all wisdom had been written down before them. They read the great ancients like Aristotle to seek out truths that had been placed there. Development or progress was not their aim, in the technological sense we understand it today, it was salvation. Nature was often valued more for its uses in allegories of theological dogma than for any practical application it might have. [1] There were no hard distinctions between theology, science or other areas of academic study; the first universities were founded and staffed by clerics for the training of other priests. It makes perfect sense, then, that theologians rather than scientists created the models of the universe that Dante's writing describes; they were the most qualified to understand the writings of Aristotle and others that this science could be drawn from.[2]

Of course, only a vanishing minority of mediaevals were literate, let alone had access to significant numbers of books. The vast majority relied on 'folk wisdom', an intensely practical knowledge – quite a contrast with the reasoning of the scholastics. The areas of thinking that we associate with scientific, logical and theoretical had not been developed - theory and application had not been divorced in the way they are now. Philosophical questions were always tackled in a contextual way. The argument was not 'whether there could be a just war' but 'whether *this* is a just war'. The theoretical had to come from a concrete, practical situation.[3]

All of reality was comfortably integrated into one complex narrative, beginning in scripture and extending to the furthest limits of the lives of its readers.[4] Typology and figuration were 'a natural extension of natural interpretation', not in conflict with it.[5] For example, the fulfilment of figures of Christ in the Old Testament

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1   Brown, *Science*, 2.
2   Brown, *Science*, 145-6.
3   Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 24.
4   Green, *Hermeneutics*, 168.
5   Frei, *Narrative*, 2.

prophecies was not taken as *evidence* of the accuracy of scripture or the Messiah-ship of Jesus but a way of adding richness to the understanding of his life and work.

The wisdom of pre-modernity was multi-faceted and all-encompassing. It was backward looking but recognised its own limits, managing to be practical without utilitarianism. Since theology was seen as the pinnacle of wisdom, the premodern worldview placed a high value on biblical wisdom.

3   Modernity and Science

As the mediaeval era closed, theology lost its privileged position in academia, especially in the realm of science.[6] Science began to ask her own questions, framing them in her own way and theology was in the novel position of having to respond. There was an increasing sense that progress could be made, that the classical wisdom was not perfect or complete.

Modernity was born in an era of profound suspicion and questioning, a troubled time - in politics, in religion, even in science. How could moderns go further than the great ancients? From this time of doubt and uncertainty came new sources of certainty. Brueggeman says that for moderns: 'Real knowledge is written, universal, general, and timeless; in other words, great truths operate everywhere and thus form a large, coherent whole. In that world, practiced with shameless confidence, there is no need for insecurity self-doubt, or embarrassment.'[7]

Modern thinkers and philosophers searched for a foundation to pin their search for knowledge on, a foundation more fixed and certain than the partial understanding of others. By doubting everything, Descartes eventually settled on the one thing he could not doubt – his own doubting - '*cogito ergo sum*'.[8] Other enlightenment thinkers preferred the idea of inductive science or empiricism, rather than Cartesian deduction from innate principles, but foundationalism was to be the cornerstone of modern thinking.

Theologians and the wider church responded to modernity in two ways – liberalism and fundamentalism. Though their methods and results are diametrically opposed, what the two share is their *raison d'etre* – defending Christian belief from the attacks of reason and science. To do this, each chose a foundation to build on – religious experience for liberals and the biblical text for fundamentalists.[9] Each came to see the Bible as a source of data. Liberals sought data of religious experiences and moral teachings while fundamentalists aimed to draw universally true doctrines.

As scientific and historical research investigated the narratives of the Bible, the 'criticisms' opened up the possibility that the story arc composed by premodern readers might not be accurate history. The connection between the 'literal meaning of biblical narratives and their reference to actual events' broke down.[10] Gaps

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6   Funkenstein, *Theology*, 3-8.
7   Bruegemann, *Texts*, 5.
8   Grenz, *Foundationalism*, 30.
9   Grenz *Foundationalism*, 34.
10 Frei, *Narrative*, 4.

arose between the narratives of scripture and history, reversing the direction of interpretation. Readers sought to fit the Bible into their wider framework of thinking, rather than finding their position within the narratives of Scripture.

A gap also appeared between the story itself and the meaning of the story.[11] While liberals sought to 'demythologise' the narratives in order to separate 'what really happened' and the meaning, conservatives sought to prove the exact historical veracity. This was not so much to preserve the narrative nature of scripture but rather to establish its 'truthfulness' as a foundation on which to build doctrines. Theologians from the nineteenth century onwards came to see their work as a science in the new 'modern' sense - 'the study of "the ordered phenomena which we recognise through the senses"'.[12] The Bible was seen as a source of 'propositional truth' which would be revealed by careful examination of the data available in scripture. McLaren describes the modern use of scripture as constitutional.[13] Proof texts are used to validate a single belief and methodology is spelled out on how and why to over-rule other texts.

Modernity brought a new era of progress and learning. As moderns sought to find a rational basis for all knowledge they learned by looking in minute detail at any question that was posed. Science appeared to have no limits and the scientific method came to dominate all forms of study, including theology. Biblical wisdom may have been valued less than the data or doctrines that could be drawn from scripture.

4   Postmodernity

Just like the modern worldview that it grew from, postmodernity is springing out of suspicion and questioning. The optimistic attitude of the 19th and 20th centuries that science, technology and progress would create a utopia and answer every question we might ask is fading. Increasingly, rather than solving every problem, science is seen to create new problems. As the 20th century closed, the awareness of environmental issues like climate change and ozone depletion and the threat of nuclear annihilation led people to suggest that technology was not good in its own right, that we must think carefully about which ones should be pursued and how they can best be employed.

Philosophers of science started to explore the idea that 'all data are theory laden', that even the objective detachment of a scientist in a lab was illusory. They suggested that the context and beliefs of the observer help organise the image on the retina into the idea that is 'seen' in the mind.[14] The idea that seeing required a linguistic and even hermeneutic component led to the recognition that all knowledge and wisdom depends on faith. Postmodernity seeks to apply this to its wider implications outside the scientific world.

While in many ways the tendencies of modernity are being reversed, it is important to notice that true postmodernity does not simply eschew all that has been before. Postmodernity has grown organically from

11 Frei, *Narrative*, 6.
12 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:152, as cited by Grenz, *Foundationalism*, 34.
13 McLaren, *Christianity*, 78-79.
14 Suppe, *Theories*, 152-6.

modernity, taking up and taking further some of its features while modifying and rejecting others.[15] While science is no longer a totalising metanarrative for postmoderns, we cannot ignore the advances it has provided us with. In the same way, the 'criticisms' of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries cannot be forgotten; they have provided us with many of the tools we use to explore scripture. However, we must remember as we use them that they have been created with assumptions behind them that are different to the ones that postmoderns are operating with.

Postmodernity offers many potential ways to interact with the wisdom of scripture and the freedom to choose our own path. Biblical wisdom will need to compete with many other 'wisdoms' for postmoderns, not just science, so thinking about appropriate ways of using scripture is essential.

5   Drama and the Transformative use of Scripture

There are three possible responses in our use of scripture in the light of these three worldviews. We might continue with a modern mindset despite the problems we detect in it; we might attempt to return to some of the lost topics of premodernity that were sidelined in our rush to science and theory. Finally, we might embrace and develop ways of operating in a postmodern, more practical way.[16] Undoubtedly, the paradigm of modernity has not vanished and will continue to inform many of our contemporaries. Its priorities will still be important for decades to come, both in academic theology and in churches. There are many who seek to return to the un-mined seams of treasure that were left behind in premodernity, especially in theology. It must be done with sensitivity, we cannot pretend that modernity never happened or overlook the reasons for the directions it took.

Engaging with postmodernity will be challenging, not least because it is not yet clear what postmodernity might become. There are many metaphors that we could employ to explore how we might approach transforming our use of Scripture. Grenz says that "In a sense, the theater is perhaps the most appropriate artistic venue for the expression of the postmodern rejection of modernism ... Postmoderns view life, like the story being told on the stage, as an assemblage of intersecting narratives."[17] While Balthasar writes of the 'Theodrama' between God and the world, and within the Godhead,[18] Vanhoozer and others writing into the postmodern context extend this to encompass our response and Christian life.[19] The metaphor of dramatic imagery is one way to describe a postmodern approach to Christian faith that we should explore further.

Postmodern philosophers like Lyotard have characterised postmodernity as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.[20] Postmoderns treat the great stories of modernity with suspicion – all the -isms, especially scientism. The cosmos is irreducibly complex; no single description or even collection of descriptions can

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15 Leithart, *Solomon*, 38-9.
16 Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 11.
17 Grenz, *Postmodernism*, 26.
18 Howsare, *Balthasar*, 116.
19 E.g. Vanhoozer, *Drama*.
20 Lyotard, *Postmodern*, 60.

represent the multiplicity of viewpoints. What we have is a collection of our own narratives. These stories give meaning to their own context and community.

As we approach scripture, we find a collection of writings in a variety of different genres – books, letters, prophetic oracles, psalms and more.[21] Some, for example the Gospels and the history books of the Old Testament, contain narratives, while others do not. A purely narrative theology may run the risk of privileging one genre at the detriment of the others – orthodoxy tries to live with all the scriptures in their various forms and settings. While the scientific view of the Bible as a source of 'data' provided singular and narrow views, we will aim to be 'nonreductive' in our orthodoxy.[22]

Even beyond the many genres, there is an deep complexity to the scriptures – a broad range of characters or both sexes, all social locations, many ethic backgrounds, a range of understandings of God. Every church Paul wrote to was different, with different strengths and needs. This diversity sometimes means apparent contradiction and certainly tensions in understanding passages that say remarkably different things about the same topic. We cannot reduce it to a simple narrative or a single metanarrative, rather, scripture is a drama that we put ourselves into.

Stripping the words from their narrative contexts so that all can own them may end in the modern constitutional use of scripture. But a narrative could be one person 'narrating', telling the story of how it has been and how it will become. However deep the wisdom of that person, it can sound like the didactic premodernity that the reformers struggled with. Drama is a superior metaphor to narrative for us because it does not focus on one narrator, whether theologian or preacher, but integrates a whole community of players to interact and grow in God. Rather than 'telling' as our primary way of interpreting Scripture, drama is a way of 'showing' the story of God, encouraging others to join in the performance.[23]

Green writes that 'to read the Bible as Scripture *is* to interpret it – and to interpret the world and oneself at the same time [emphasis his].'[24] With this metaphor of community performance/interpretation we find ourselves in the triangulation that Vanhoozer speaks of as 'Scripture, Church and World'. We look to the 'Spirit's speaking in Scripture' while coordinating with the traditions of the church and our fellow players – 'the world made new in Jesus Christ.'[25] This triangulation ensures we do not end up in monological narrative, but explore the dialogical 'biblical theodrama'.[26] It is a 'live' environment, not a static one, practical and active rather than theoretical and academically detached.

But does the metaphor of drama go far enough for us? Are we doomed to play out the same story, word for word, over and over again? Life two thousand years after the early church looks different in many ways to

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21 Fee, *Bible*, 22.
22 Vanhoozer, *Drama*, 29.
23 Vanhoozer, *Drama*, 48.
24 Green, *Hermeneutics*, 176.
25 Vanhoozer, 'Triangulating', 176.
26 Vanhoozer, 'Triangulating', 168.

what the Apostles faced. Vanhoozer suggests that the practical wisdom of postmodern interaction with Scripture is best described by improvisation.[27]

Improvisation is not the same as originality unrelated to what has come before.[28] In Jazz, the constraints are as important as the freedom to improvise. Musicians know when and how they can change metre, harmony and melody to create a musical event.[29] Jazz is an especially particularised form of playing: music cannot be written apart from the instrument,[30] a performance may capture a piece but never exhaust its potential. The music must be inaugurated, embodied, incarnated.

Jazz is so often performed, as with most music, in *ensemble* – to mix metaphors, 'it takes two to tango and rather more to perform King Lear.'[31] As jazz takes life, it so often comes as an 'exchange of gifts' between musicians,[32] not so much a competition as an Odyssian voyage. A jazz group that aims to upstage one another will not have the trust to really create anything interesting or authentic and neither can we. Improvisation within the community of the church is an exercise in taking and transforming the themes and rhythms we have been handed; listening, taking and receiving from our fellow players. It will be responsive and transformative.

The contingency and temporality of improvised jazz or drama means that there is never a universal or final version, but ongoing exploration of the range of meaning that can be applied in a context. The texts of the Bible can no longer be seen as simply 'data' from which universal propositional truths can be deduced scientifically. As we play out, we are constantly interpreting the scriptures into our own context and we must be aware of our own constraints, beliefs and context. It is a never-ending task – and that is a good thing![33]

6 Conclusion

The concern of premoderns with the wisdom of the ancients, including biblical wisdom, was eclipsed by the desire for science by moderns, even among theologians and other Christians. Postmodernity gives us an opportunity to realign our priorities and explore different metaphors for engaging with the Bible in a wise way. Biblical wisdom can resonate strongly with a postmodern worldview but we have to work at integrating them.

We cannot rely on scepticism in this postmodern world, for doubt can lead to blind alleys just as certainty has. The crumbling of foundationalism does not mean we can know nothing at all. Rather, it leads to the acknowledgement that all knowledge rests on faith. That faith is not just a list of beliefs that must be mentally assented to, it is living and vibrant, expressed by entering into the drama of Christian life.

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27 Vanhoozer, *Drama*, 332.
28 Vanhoozer, *Drama*, 335-340; Wells, *Improvisation*, 67-69.
29 Begbie, *Music*, 208-211.
30 Begbie, *Music*, 232.
31 Lash, *Emmaus*, 43.
32 Begbie, *Music*, 249.
33 Green, *Imagining*, 177.

This transformational drama has to be played out in the context of all that has come before in the church: premodern wisdom, modern science and postmodern improvisation. It is broad and accepting, for no one can stage the single definitive version of a play, rather each company seeks to show meaning and honesty to the script.

Word count: 2998

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