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GNATS, CAMELS AND APORIAS: WHO SHOULD BE STRAINING OUT WHAT? CHRISTIANITY AND DECONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Deconstruction seems to be the terminus of all modern literary theories, and it worries Christians because they feel it threatens all language and communication. After a brief survey of the philosophical and linguistic background which underlies deconstruction, three essentially parallel routes are explored for ways of challenging this claim, and in the process trying to show how the existence of deconstructive reading can actually be of help to Christian study of the Bible. The first argument is philosophical, using Wittgenstein (twice) to show what exactly deconstruction is arguing for. The second argument focuses the first by locating the problems in some common Christian attempts to refute deconstruction, which is shown to be an unattainable and in any case misguided goal. The third argument tracks the same course with reference to particular deconstructive readings of the Bible, showing that even in the midst of major reservations and sometimes complete disagreement with the conclusions thereby reached, in almost every case the deconstructive reading underlines the points of benefit which Christians should find in deconstruction. Finally, some brief suggestions are made for making theological progress towards situating deconstruction on the Christian hermeneutical map.

I. WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

Howard Marshall touches on a sensitive issue when he cites the Christian who said to him: 'It seems to me that hermeneutics is simply a way of getting round the message of the parts of Scripture that you don't like.'¹ Certainly it is true that once one starts asking about how the language of the Bible functions then the questions are never-ending. And biblical hermeneutics has tended to follow changing fashions in secular literary criticism, generally lagging a few years behind,² which only serves to heighten the discomfort. Should we buy into it at all? And if so, how far? Deconstruction looms like the primeval chaos monster stirring up the watery formlessness of textual indeterminacy, and no less an author-ity than Stephen Moore has applauded Fred Burnett's

challenging remark that 'reader-response criticism is the last "decompression chamber" for many biblical critics before they surface into postmodernism'.³ For evangelicals it all seems a long way from the 'robust relevance' of the 'plain literal sense in interpreting Scripture', as one recent evangelical symposium puts it, barely concealing its disdain for 'the tinkling cymbals of fanciful literary theories and the grating cacophony of the deconstructionists'.⁴ How then should we read?

Deconstruction, being strategy rather than method, can never be defined, and so the purpose of this introduction is, as Derrida might say, to *situate* it.

Once upon a time words came with ideas attached. They carried them around with some kind of ontological relationship and thus imbued sentences with a thing called *meaning*. Furthermore, words obviously talked about the real world, the same world, in fact, that the speaking subject inhabited. This state of affairs fell apart through the twentieth century as Wittgenstein and others gradually came to realise that words do not 'have meanings' in any ontological sense, but pick up meanings by convention. Words and world were rent asunder.

This is of particular interest to all those trying to make true statements. 'The cat sat on the mat' turns out not to be true because there is a cat sitting on the mat (the *correspondence* theory) but because the way in which language fits into some kind of interlocking web suitably picks out the characteristics of non-linguistic 'facts' in a *coherent* way (the *coherence* theory). There are, if you will, two wheels: the linguistic and the non-linguistic, and on each we construct webs of conventional organisation which approximate to our experience of life.

And so *semiotics* arrived on the scene: the study of signs, which could only really happen after *signs* had become accepted in their own right apart from *meanings*. And it equally became a big question about how exactly the semiotic wheel related to the other wheel (which in turn seemed to admit of several levels: the physical, the spiritual, the psychological . . .). All that seemed to unite the different approaches to this question was the conviction that in some sense they did relate.

This conviction lasted until deconstruction came on the scene. Deconstruction, in this account, is the process of *spinning the semiotic wheel*: loosening it from its moorings in relation to the real world and watching the *signs* slide past the *signifieds* in eternal expectation that at some point the word will relate to some entity. But of course it never does, at least not permanently. Meaning is always deferred as the wheel spins, and can only be guessed at by noting the difference between one word (sign) and another. The defer/differ concept is captured (provisionally?) by Derrida's French neologism: *différance*. The spinning concept is more usually called *slippage*.

Jacques Derrida was of the opinion that we had been held captive by a picture of some permanent connection between the two wheels: some

transcendental signified. This might have been God, or some metaphysical principle, but the crunch was that such a link did not exist. Communication was only possible by fixing an arbitrary link between the wheels, and whatever link you chose immediately suggested some other link, usually subversive of the first one. Deconstruction has been portrayed as profoundly atheistic; at times nihilistic; and seemingly self-undermining: it would seem to offer little of use to Christian biblical scholarship.

However, it is our thesis that this portrayal has to some extent been mistaken, being based on what seems at times to be a simple misunderstanding of what deconstruction really is. We shall argue that the existence of deconstructive strategy is of benefit to biblical and theological studies, both in terms of particular readings and wider reflections on scholarly strategy; and also that any analysis of deconstruction which stops short of considering its *spirituality* is necessarily flawed. How, then, to substantiate such a claim?

II. FACTS, FALL AND FREEPLAY

We start by examining two sides of the same coin. Firstly, in what sense must we understand this notion of slippage in meaning and loss of the signified? Secondly, in what sense does deconstruction actually intend to undermine texts, or is there a better way of formulating its purpose? These questions will lead us to two different figures, both of whom are Wittgenstein.

Longman cautiously situates deconstruction apart from general literary theories, correctly noting that it self-consciously sets out to question the whole author/text/reader debate about where meaning is located.⁵ In a survey notable for its refusal to pass simplistic judgment he refers to Michael Edwards' unusual perspective on Derrida as worthy of further exploration: the thesis that the slippage which we encounter in texts is the result of the fall, and that there *is* genuine miscommunication in language as a result of this.⁶ Noting the link between deconstruction's onslaught on *logocentrism* (word-centredness) and the prominent place of the *logos* in biblical thought, Edwards writes:

To deconstruct logocentrism is to discover the fallacy not of Logos but of what our wordly metaphysics has made of it, by proceeding as if there were no Fall.⁷

He further notes how John 1 itself makes clear that just as the elusive presence of the *logos* may be described as light, it sets that presence at a distance from human beings, who perceive it from darkness. He describes the present age as 'the crisis of the sign, which we are aware of passing through now'.⁸ Edwards sees deconstruction as explaining the problematic nature of a faith based on a (problematic) book, and that while its sense of literature is impeccable it does not ultimately connect

with the Bible but merely parodies it because, ironically enough, it does not take humanity's fallenness seriously.⁹

This is a remarkable and disarming argument, which seems to contain a profound half-truth. He is surely correct to tackle deconstruction head on in this way, without the futile attempt to try and show that what is being done cannot be done. But the apparently unperceived corollary of this argument is that in a non-fallen state language does not exhibit *différance*: the wheels stop slipping past each other and, perhaps, whirr contentedly together. What would such a world look like? If we have understood Edwards correctly such a world would, in the absence of fallenness, join sign and signified together never to be put asunder, and hence sentences would look a lot like *facts*, i.e. descriptions of the real world. Names would refer directly to objects, and propositions would combine them in certain ways. This will all sound very familiar to anyone who has read Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, since it is entirely what he set out to do.¹⁰ He did it very well, but subsequently came to believe that it had not been an appropriate thing to do. Doubtless Edwards' version would be different, or perhaps in a non-fallen world Wittgenstein's infamous closing proposition¹¹ would simply not refer to very much; but the problem is that Wittgenstein's whole approach here is reductionist in its view of what language can *do*. Why can we not *celebrate* the glorious indeterminacy of language? Where would be literature, poetry, jokes or subtlety, let alone general everyday communication, in such a scheme? Thus, to explain all linguistic slippage as a result of the fallenness of this world would prove too much.

Our second approach to this same question (which might be seen as the adoption of a different set of signs to attack the same signifieds) will attempt to chart the forbidding terrain of what exactly deconstruction is saying about a particular text when we boil down the philosophical pyrotechnics to the confrontation with a given writing. And here a surprise is in store for any who feel that its essential purpose is to deny communication.

There is a standard argument which evangelicals tend to be very quick to mount against deconstruction: it is self-refuting. The argument comes with more or less philosophical sophistication at different times, but never quite seems to escape a basic confusion about who is actually trying to prove what. Take Derrida reflecting on Searle writing on Derrida:

The answer is simple enough, this definition of the deconstructionist is *false* (that's right: false, not true) and feeble: it supposes a bad (that's right: bad, not good) and feeble reading of numerous texts, first of all mine, which therefore must finally be read or re-read.¹²

Well, says Derrida's interlocutor (who in this case was actually the

linguistic philosopher John Searle), here Derrida is clearly intending to be understood, and so some texts do indeed communicate, and hence he has contradicted his basic claim.

The problem with the argument is this: good deconstruction (beware pale systematic imitations!) was never trying to deny all communication. Rather, it was intending to show that when written (or linguistic) communication takes place, as it does all the time, it does so only by the assertion of the existence of a meaning which can never finally be pinned down to the words which carried it. The problem which deconstruction attacks, therefore, is less communication *per se*, and more any attempt to systematise or claim to understand communication objectively. It is the latter, and not the former, which constantly eludes us because of the slippage, and subtle though some might find this distinction, it is the basis for the whole existence of deconstruction as a philosophy rather than its half-baked cousin: the deconstructive method.¹³

Thus deconstructive *freeplay*, as its handling of texts is often called, is far from being the nihilistic device it is sometimes made to seem. As Seeley puts it:

The point of deconstruction is not to make nonsense of a text, but to locate structural, systemic faultlines within it.¹⁴

Deconstruction is often misunderstood as allowing readers to attribute to the text any meaning they desire. But . . . nothing could be further from the truth.¹⁵

Space does not permit elaboration of this point, although the celebrated Derrida/Searle exchange is ably documented;¹⁶ but it is clear that certain Christians have to some extent been fighting a straw man.

With this formulation of deconstruction it also becomes clear why the later Wittgenstein becomes the point of appeal for those trying to 'refute' deconstruction. The argument would be that Wittgenstein showed how language worked conventionally, that communication does not in fact admit of systematic explanation, and that the success of our conventions undercuts the deconstructive attempt to show that they do not work. There is mileage in this, as Norris has pointed out in general, and Anthony Thiselton has shown with more specific reference to the application of deconstruction to biblical studies.¹⁷

But at this point there seems to be a confusion about who is proving what. The parallels between Wittgenstein's anti-programmatic programme, as we might call it, and Derrida's anti-systematic system have been helpfully explored elsewhere,¹⁸ and there is perhaps a sense in which Wittgenstein himself deconstructs linguistic philosophy. Thus, what is being shown by an appeal to Wittgenstein, if anything, is the important sense in which deconstruction is correct in its analysis of a certain kind of problem: i.e. the belief that understanding and system-

atisation is objectively rooted in texts; but that at the same time this need not be a matter of concern. For the application to biblical studies the point would be this: deconstruction shows that every biblical reading offers with it the possibility of reading differently. Therefore, in a certain sense, every reading is fundamentally biased, or to put it less provocatively, every reading can be traced to certain presuppositions. But put like this it is difficult to see why in principle it need be a problem for Christian study of the Bible, unless Christians are trying to defend their reading on the essentially Enlightenment grounds that it is objectively the only valid one.

In order to draw out the argument further at this point without becoming too abstract we will adopt two further routes to it, before picking up the theme of moving beyond the Enlightenment in a final section on the wider implications of this study. Our first route will be to look at the way that Christian writers have attempted to deal with deconstruction, including a close reading of the self-refutation argument alluded to above. Our second route will be to examine what actually happens in deconstructive reading of the biblical text, with the aim of showing how the existence of deconstruction can be an ally of sorts for more traditional Christian concerns.

III. CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO DECONSTRUCTION

On a theoretical level deconstruction has prompted reflections on the task and nature of theology. Thiselton helpfully clarifies the two types of issues at stake here by asking:

What elements of deconstructionist theories of texts and language genuinely rest on principles of *semiotics* rather than on a doctrine or world-view which is *clothed in semiotic dress*?¹⁹

Indeed, the whole discussion of method becomes largely a discussion of world-view, as with the attempts to make deconstruction into some kind of bulwark for a theology open to questioning. It is not evident that we can claim to have deduced a correct understanding of how meaning arises, just because we have noticed that it arises in some sense out of the interrelationship of signs, as Thiselton makes clear.²⁰ Kevin Hart articulates the issue in terms of interpretive strategy by saying: 'it turns out there are two ways of playing the game'—which he labels *hermeneutic* and *structuralist*, and thereby points us not just to texts but to readers also.²¹ For Thiselton the result is an essentially pastoral understanding of hermeneutics, drawing on Wittgenstein, Austin and Polanyi to underline the essential part played by the tacit assumptions of the interpreting community.²²

Furthermore, since texts perform various functions it is simplistic to

argue directly from deconstruction to theological method.²³ It begs the question of what a particular text is trying to do.²⁴

These are valuable insights to which we return below, but first it must be noticed that they cut both ways. While on the one hand they should sound alarm bells when claims are made that in some sense deconstruction as a philosophy of language represents an overall system for reading, we should equally beware of attempts to dismiss deconstruction out of hand as inadequate for any reading strategy. It is to this particular argument that we now turn.

A recent paper by Michael Ovey explicitly aims to describe deconstruction and 'examine some ideas for rejecting it',²⁵ and after an extremely cautious survey of literary approaches in general, turns to ways of rejecting deconstruction in particular. Ovey's particular concern, based on his view that its philosophical heritage is one of denying communication, is that deconstruction acts to 'undermine the doctrine of revelation' (which he clearly assumes to be a given, even though he does not say what it is).²⁶ He thus mounts a three-fold attack.

His first refutation is theological: that 'the God of orthodox Christianity . . . enjoys the advantages of both omnipotence and omniscience',²⁷ which is perhaps a quick way of by-passing the issues of how we knew this, especially if we are supposed to have learned it from some text somewhere. It is a beautiful 'I see no ships' proof: apparently unaware to any extent of the reading strategies he has himself employed.

His second argument, which he calls 'philosophical', is the claim, discussed above (§II), that deconstruction is self-refuting. In the context of this Christian attack on deconstruction, we find it easier to see the problems with this argument. His intended proof by contradiction simply does not produce a contradiction which would unnerve a deconstructionist, who would instead feel that she is being mightily (if ironically) vindicated. How so?

What Ovey would have us believe is that he has demonstrated that his ability to understand what the deconstructionists claim to be doing provides us with a counter-example to their very theory. But what he has actually done is *read* their theory in a certain way: actually, as he must, replacing the text with the meaning he assigns to it at a certain point in his reading;²⁸ and this is precisely what the deconstructionists would say he has to do, except that they would be happy to play around with their own theory and show how such a replacement could be effected in various other ways too (e.g. a purported attempt to say that deconstruction reduces to an ironic affirmation of authorial intention by pretending to deny it).

It is significant that it is only Ovey's third argument which convinces, and it is neither theological nor philosophical, but empirical: based on the observation that we do in fact use language successfully most of the

time.²⁹ This claim echoes the conventionalist philosophy of the later Wittgenstein, and points us towards the largely undogmatic position outlined above from which it becomes possible to affirm the suitability of deconstructive reading strategy in certain types of cases.

Not all commentators go as far as Ovey, although it is possible to find people attempting to dismiss deconstruction essentially by observing that it sits uneasily with traditional Christian views of inspiration, authority, etc.,³⁰ apparently without noticing that the challenge lies at precisely this point.

Unwittingly there is an important half-truth in such a view: the deconstructive challenge is to recognise that in reading we make sense of a text by filling in its gaps in a certain way and constructing an understanding from the words of the text, and that no matter how uncomfortable it might make us we at some point have to jump from signs to signifieds, which is a non-textual move. What then makes some readings better than others, if anything?

Here, then, we can return to the observations of Thiselton *et al.* at the beginning of this section. The answer will be something to do with how *appropriate* we find the move which is made, but this of course immediately relativises the judgment to a particular reading community. The community which is being taken as given by Ovey and Klein *et al.*, is the traditional Christian one, and on one level there can be nothing wrong with this: or rather the judgment about whether and in what sense the Christian community is right will ultimately have to be decided on non-textual grounds. We are propelled into the field of theological anthropology: 'theology and anthropology no longer can be held apart.'³¹ We must also inevitably be led to an analysis of the spirituality of reading strategies as one criteria for making the meta-critical judgments required. It would seem futile to suggest that the biblical texts cannot be deconstructed: the question must really be, *How appropriate is it?*

To summarise: appropriateness will relate to reading aims,³² which in turn depend on two factors: the reading community and the type of text. For the best path to a Christian grasp of deconstruction, i.e. where a certain type of reading community is envisaged, we must therefore turn to particular deconstructive readings of texts.

IV. PLUNDERING THE EGYPTIANS: DECONSTRUCTIVE READINGS

Actual deconstructive readings of particular passages are thin on the ground: Longman's 1987 survey could find only Crossan and Miscal as examples of the approach, and his reference to *Semeia* 23 (subtitled 'Derrida and Biblical Studies') veiled the fact that the essays it contained kept specific texts at arm's length, or as Seeley put it, they

were 'more accurately described as rumination than Derridean exegesis'.³³ The output remains low.

1. New Testament Readings

Stephen Moore somewhat dominates this field, pioneering a poststructuralist approach to the New Testament, and particularly the gospels.³⁴ A flavour of his approach can be grasped from his Derridean reading of the Water motif in John's gospel,³⁵ which works through a two-stage deconstruction of the woman-at-the-well episode. Moore first reverses our expectations by playing with the literal/figurative debate about how to take Jesus' words: Jesus holds to a literal/figurative dualism and is not referring to real water when he talks of the woman's need; she on the other hand sees the two as inseparable. Yet by the time that the highly symbolic *and* literal water flows from Jesus' side on the cross, bringing in the new world-order that Jesus promised the Samaritan woman, the spiritual has been shown to be inextricable from the physical. *Voilà*—the woman was right and Jesus was wrong. The hierarchy of the text is exploded by reversing the oppositions, and water floods everywhere.

Moore writes engagingly, and—to freeze his metaphor for a moment—skates easily around his text, rearranging John's *signs* semi-otically to point in hitherto unsuspected directions. He could, 'should space permit it or strategy require it', reverse the reversed reading,³⁶ and point wherever he wanted to. Here, then, we have a fine example of a reading which is impressive technically, but which is *appropriate* only in the sense that it is of academic interest. As argued above, the reasons for choosing not to follow him will have to be non-textual. Perhaps one might say that his ability to show us that the text can be hydraulically deconstructed and capsized does not in this instance persuade us that he has shed any light on the purposes for which we admit the text into our community-shaping canon. At which point both he and we might be happy, and agree to differ, although one might mount the further argument (moving on to *spiritual* ground) that in this case our community is concerned with some such non-textual signification as relationship with Jesus and that for non-textual reasons one position on this is not much like the other position.

Here Derrida's decentering, with which Moore has ably flooded John's gospel, has relativised the truth to one way of looking at things: one particular way of making literal/figurative judgments throughout the narrative. But if the reader's aim in reading John is to meet with the God who created her (and created her as a reader, no less) it is not clear that this need be a problem for her, yea even as an evangelical. Game, set and match to Moore, who thereby loses everything. Which is often how it goes in the gospels.

Very different in nature is Seeley's attempt at what is almost a

deconstructive survey of the New Testament, aiming to show fellow biblical scholars that 'Derrida is already toiling in our vineyard'.³⁷ His book is a fascinating, if uneven, study of the various New Testament authors: essentially attempting to marry together the concerns of more traditional scholarship with the benefits of a strategy which explicitly looks for tensions and inconsistencies. Here a comment made by Moore comes into its own: that deconstruction can be distinguished from various types of literary criticism by its willingness to embrace *aporias* (or fundamental contradictions) as the genuine intent of a passage rather than seek some account to 'explain' them.³⁸ Seeley is certainly happy to let the *aporias* stand.

Thus Mark writes a gospel which moves inexorably towards the essential death of Jesus, but Mark does not know why Jesus has to die,³⁹ Matthew allows differing views of how salvation is to be obtained to jostle side by side, undermining and deconstructing each other, but perhaps representing the confusion of his authoritative, incompatible sources;⁴⁰ Paul composes a letter to the Romans which confuses his two different evangelistic messages (one for the Jews, one for the Gentiles) and which therefore leads to the tortuous argumentation of that famous epistle, as he starts with the wrong argument (!) and works his way back to the right one;⁴¹ and Luke and John are shown to be story-tellers whose narrative art and ideology respectively hide contentless yet winning accounts of a Jesus whom they themselves scarcely understood.⁴²

Seeley's deconstruction is very much on the 'close reading' end of the spectrum, and he clearly repudiates the notion that it is tantamount to interpretive anarchy.⁴³ The real value of his book is in the way it forces the reader into examining the way he deals with tension in the narratives. If perhaps Seeley is too quick to cry 'aporia!' whenever there is tension, he is sometimes successful with the more modest goal of showing how the close reading variety of deconstruction can turn out to be the conservative way of dealing with a text. This is clearest with his patient willingness to let Matthew's gospel have its full multi-vocal say on salvation and law-keeping; and his provocative: 'Those who would read Matthew as healing this division must engage to a considerable degree in eisegesis.'⁴⁴ Whether this finding is anything to shout about will, as with Moore, have to be decided on non-textual grounds.

More in the traditional vein of watching signs skip over signifieds is Burnett's analysis of Matthew, where the proper name 'Jesus' always moves beyond the reach of a decidable *presence*.⁴⁵ This theme of presence and absence so beloved of deconstructionists provides a suitable foil for Burnett's pursuit of a christological key for reading Matthew, and he concludes that we only track down the name in a particular reading, but that the text does not let us decide which reading we should adopt. The elusiveness is then helpful, for Burnett, to show

that Jesus leaves Matthew's gospel with no presence but with a trail which compels the reader to follow.⁴⁶ The proper name is never captured by a signified. The value of the study is not just to show that there is no one christological key to Matthew's gospel, but perhaps to illustrate the wider theme that the God of the Bible is always an inseparable mix of presence and absence.⁴⁷

Here deconstruction provides the categories which may actually yet prove to be liberating for our understanding of the relationship between a God who relates to people both by and by-passing a text. These implications are drawn out in detail by Schad's similar approach to John's gospel, where he perceives the tension between the cosmic indeterminacy of the Johannine 'Word' and the scandalous particularity of the incarnation as mirroring the essence of the deconstructive tension.⁴⁸ He even asserts:

Deconstruction's Christian name is Resurrection in the sense that the resurrected Word does not just defeat every limit but in so doing anticipates Pentecost and that liberation of words, or loosening of tongues, which marks the birth of the church.⁴⁹

This suggestive use of deconstruction as an organising category for understanding theology is somewhat vague and shadowy, but seems at least to be pursuing the argument in terms of *appropriate spirituality*.

2. Old Testament Readings

Hebrew narrative has proved to be fertile soil for locating slippage between reaping and sowing. Miscall provides extended readings of two Old Testament passages: Genesis 12–25 and 1 Samuel 16–22. His aim is to focus on the gaps and indeterminacies in the narrative, and by careful textual analysis he successfully demonstrates that, for instance, David's character is undecidable, or that Abraham's actions in Genesis 12 are open to different interpretations.⁵⁰ The text authorises more than one way of looking at things, and Miscall employs the device of meta-commentary (without calling it that) to demonstrate with consummate ease the principle that commentators make sense of their narratives only by filling in the gaps.⁵¹

But it is entirely unclear what he hopes to prove by this. As he observes the commentators twisting this way and that to smooth out 1 Samuel 17 (e.g. with its problematic 'sword' verses 50 and 51), he writes:

The issue is not whether the specific text with its details, lacunae, etc., will be read or not; the issue is how and at what point in the analysis the specific text will be put aside and replaced by or reduced to other 'texts'.⁵²

Whether he intends this as a triumphant accusation or an unusually lucid articulation of the necessary nature of commentary is left unsaid, but it is in fact the latter, and a very important point too. *It is in the nature of texts and reading* that we do what Miscall says we must, as we have argued earlier, and we can only thank him for pointing this out. It is a separate and altogether less impressive claim that the necessary consequence of this is that texts remain undecidable. Rather, the consequence is that decidability requires some kind of (signified) world implied by the text, not just the signs of the text, and some assertion on the part of the reader; or perhaps one might say that he has simply shown that a text without a reader is undecidable. We have thus discovered another route to the issue of relativisation to a particular reading community. Miscall's work is only tangentially deconstructive, being much more an early model of a 'close reading',⁵³ but it does point the way towards the niche within literary criticism which deconstructive readings have developed in biblical studies.

This niche is most prominently occupied by David Clines, whose analysis of Job is probably the best example of deconstruction in the field. Clines draws on Culler's formulation of deconstructive strategy, aware that he is thereby cutting his cloth to suit his purpose:

To deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies.⁵⁴

This turns out to be a gift for his analysis of Job, since he is able to conclude that 'deconstructive strategy eliminates dogma as dogma',⁵⁵ which is precisely what seems to be happening over the vexed question in the book of Job of what kind of person suffers: is it the righteous or is it those who in some sense deserve suffering? Clines demonstrates how the body of the book cries out to say that it is unjust that Job suffers, and in some sense challenges the dogma of retribution, until the epilogue gaily restores Job's camels, oxen, donkeys and offspring, in short his prosperity, and undercuts the very challenge which the book has made so ably. Furthermore, the reader is left puzzled over the extent to which Job can be a model, since he is described in the book's opening verse as 'blameless and upright', which makes the blameworthy reader uncomfortable about Job's relevance as a model.

For Clines, the book of Job is 'inoculated against its deconstructibility by its rhetoric',⁵⁶ which is how, in this case, he is able to hold the essential position that deconstruction is not the same as incoherence. The deconstruction is subtle: assertion and counterassertion operate at different levels with different voices and yet co-exist in the text once one knows how to look for them. This key distinction secures the success of his analysis, because it coheres in turn with the purpose of the book of Job. Indeed, Clines himself avers that we had all along experienced the

disorientation which the book offers as 'the psychological registering of the deconstruction that was in progress', but that until now we had had no name for it and hence had not been able to appreciate it properly.⁵⁷

This subtlety is significant, for in his subsequent forays into deconstructive reading this essential tension has collapsed, and he seems willing to reduce deconstruction to incoherence, and often a rather oblique kind of incoherence at that. Thus Psalm 24 is shown to deconstruct itself in four ways, but these seem to be the result of some particularly creative gap-filling exercises on the reader's part, with a reader who is unwilling to make any allowance for poetry either. For example, his first claim is that the whole earth is the Lord's, but that the notion of a holy hill 'deconstructs' this,⁵⁸ but if there is any tension at all here it is not clear why it is not simply contradiction and hence incoherence.

Perhaps the agenda at work here is made more explicit in his deconstruction of Haggai, where he shows to his own satisfaction that the book of Haggai is a piece of propaganda and that Christian readings of it which find it possible to affirm the book's ideology are thereby buying into the same propaganda.⁵⁹ But we arrive again at the conclusion of our analysis of Moore's writing: yes there is an ideological 'bias' at work, but the only alternative would be an unrealistic repression of the human identity of the reader in the hope of some mythical objectivity, and Clines' appeal here to the Enlightenment age of biblical scholarship perhaps focuses the issue in ways he does not intend. Again, deconstruction is shown to be of little use in the details, and on the grand philosophical level (which is where Clines seems to be hoping to show something) it decentres the so-called *logocentrism* of biblical scholarship, and the Christian finds himself responding with a suitably cautious 'Amen'. Who is deconstructing what?

V. LOCATING CHRISTIANITY ON THE DECENTRED MAP

We have surveyed the terrain both from on high, watching the philosophical duels over the nature of interpretive strategy, and from down in the trenches of the text, very much under fire and riddled with gaps as those texts have proved to be. Our aim has been to steer a path between, on the one hand, the wholesale rejection of deconstruction as a philosophy which seems ultimately to rest on a denial of the evidence about linguistic slippage as well as a profound misunderstanding of what deconstruction is about; and, on the other hand, a willingness to embrace semiotic freeplay and celebrate textual indeterminacy which seems to be not only dancing with the dragon (or any other chaos monster) but to be inadvertently (and delightfully, deconstructively) wedded to Enlightenment rationality. This path, largely uncharted, seems to offer the Christian a way through the hermeneutical minefield

which offers immense promise for developing a Christian understanding of how God communicates through the Bible.

Where are we, then, on the hermeneutical map? Some pointers must suffice. Firstly, we must not end up defending the Enlightenment just because its canons of rationality provided clear demarcation of right and wrong in interpretation. That would be ironic in the extreme.⁶⁰ We seriously run the risk of straining out the gnats of deconstructive infelicity while swallowing the camels of deadening Enlightenment dualism.

Secondly, all reading is interpretation, and deconstruction is less about denying the possibility of communication and rather about making explicit the kind of interpretive stance that any reading betrays. There can be little problem with this, if we are careful.

It should lead us, thirdly, to ask questions about the nature of humans as readers, and ask what kind of gap-filling and general interpretive strategy are appropriate for Christians.⁶¹ If we are created in the image of God then the kind of interpretation which will make sense of who we are will, for example, implicitly acknowledge the role of the Holy Spirit in our interpretive activity.

A world-view centred on relationship, and with an understanding of textuality which has freed truth to function in *personal* contexts, will be better able to do justice to the Christian agenda than any strategy which rests on depersonalised objectivity. In the process we will be able to nod in the direction of the deconstructionists, acknowledge our indebtedness to their critique of objective ideology, and thereby disarm it most comprehensively. Which is quite a stunning victory out of defeat, in fact.

Endnotes

- 1 I. Howard Marshall, 'Are Evangelicals Fundamentalists?', *VoxEv* 22 (1992), 19.
- 2 John Goldingay, 'How far do readers make sense?', *Themelios* 18.2 (1993), 5.
- 3 Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 125, citing Fred W. Burnett, 'Postmodern Biblical Exegesis: The Eve of Historical Criticism', *Semeia* 51 (1990), 54.
- 4 David F. Wright, 'Introduction: William Tyndale and the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical and Theological Research', in Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright (eds.), *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 4.
- 5 Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Leicester: Apollos, 1987), 41. Longman's survey (41–45) is a very helpful brief introduction to deconstruction from a Christian perspective. See also Gene Edward Veith, *Guide to Contemporary Culture* (Leicester: Crossway, 1994), 47–70.
- 6 Michael Edwards, *Towards a Christian Poetics* (London: MacMillan, 1984), 217–37.
- 7 Edwards, *Christian Poetics*, 221.
- 8 Edwards, *Christian Poetics*, 223. One cannot help but envisage here a new dispensationalism of poetics!
- 9 Edwards, *Christian Poetics*, 230, 233.
- 10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: RKP, 1961 [originally 1921]), which sought to correlate sign and signified in an ordered way, despite

- Bertrand Russell's mistaken foreword representing it as a piece of positivist philosophy.
- 11 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 7: 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.'
 - 12 Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989 2nd edn.), 146, cited in Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1991 rev. edn.), 158.
 - 13 This distinction is upheld by, e.g., Longman, *Literary Approaches*, 43; Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991), 382–83; and, in general, by introductions to deconstruction, e.g. Norris, *Deconstruction*, 1; and even, perhaps with reservations, Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge, 1983), 85–89.
 - 14 David Seeley, *Deconstructing the New Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 38.
 - 15 Seeley, *Deconstructing*, 157.
 - 16 E.g. Norris, *Deconstruction*, 108–14.
 - 17 Norris, *Deconstruction*, 130, 132, who notes that Wittgenstein ably disposes of the methodical imitations of full-blown Derridean deconstruction; Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), 124–32.
 - 18 H. Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), esp. 64–108.
 - 19 Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 92.
 - 20 Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 591.
 - 21 K. Hart, 'The Poetics of the Negative', in Stephen Prickett (ed.), *Reading the Text: Biblical Criticism and Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 289.
 - 22 Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 591.
 - 23 *Contra* e.g. P.J. Hartin, 'Deconstruction and Theology', *JTSA* 54 (1986), 25–34.
 - 24 Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 132.
 - 25 Michael Ovey, 'Deconstruction: Gaggling the Speaking God?', *Cambridge Papers* 2.4 (1993), 1.
 - 26 Ovey, 'Deconstruction', 3.
 - 27 Ovey, 'Deconstruction', 3.
 - 28 This notion of reading as filling textual gaps anticipates our discussion of P.D. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Chico: Scholars, 1983), below in §IV.2.
 - 29 Ovey, 'Deconstruction', 4.
 - 30 E.g. William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 441.
 - 31 M. Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology* (Chico: Scholars, 1982), 102; whose discussion of the issue we would not follow, however.
 - 32 This is the thesis of Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 197 and *passim*, which informs much of our discussion, but which is accurately characterised by Thiselton as a tantalising half-truth (*New Horizons*, 502) since it remains restricted to evaluating the text side of the equation only.
 - 33 Longman, *Literary Approaches*, 44; Seeley, *Deconstructing*, 1.
 - 34 In addition to *Poststructuralism and the New Testament* (above n. 3), see Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Approaches to the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives: Jesus Begins to Write* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); 'Deconstructive Criticism: The Gospel of the Mark', in Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (eds.), *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 84–102.
 - 35 Moore, *Literary Approaches*, 151–70; Moore, *Poststructuralism*, 43–64.
 - 36 Moore, *Poststructuralism*, 62, n. 69.
 - 37 Seeley, *Deconstructing*, 3.
 - 38 Moore, *Poststructuralism*, 71.

- 39 Seeley, *Deconstructing*, 73.
- 40 Seeley, *Deconstructing*, 39.
- 41 Seeley, *Deconstructing*, 156.
- 42 Seeley, *Deconstructing*, 125, 102.
- 43 Seeley, *Deconstructing*, 157.
- 44 Seeley, *Deconstructing*, 49.
- 45 Fred W. Burnett, 'The Undecidability of the Proper Name "Jesus" in Matthew', *Semeia* 54 (1991), 123–44.
- 46 Burnett, 'Undecidability', 136–37.
- 47 Cf. J. Schad, '“Hostage of the World”: Poststructuralism's Gospel Intertext', *Religion and Literature* 25.3 (1993), 4.
- 48 Schad, 'Hostage', esp. 12–13.
- 49 Schad, 'Hostage', 13.
- 50 Miscall, *Old Testament Narrative*, 2, 25.
- 51 'Metacommentary' may be defined as noticing what commentators do rather than reading what they say: David J. A. Clines, 'Metacommentating Amos', in H. A. McKay and David J. A. Clines (eds.), *Of Prophets' Visions and the Wisdom of Sages: Essays in Honour of R. Norman Whybray on his Seventieth Birthday*, JSOTS 162 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 142.
- 52 Miscall, *Old Testament Narrative*, 76 (cf. n. 28 above).
- 53 As Miscall himself claims: *Old Testament Narrative*, 140.
- 54 Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 86; cited in David J. A. Clines, 'Deconstructing the Book of Job', in David J. A. Clines, *What Does Eve Do To Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament*, JSOTS 94 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 107; with the acknowledgement that it would not be accepted as a definition by everyone.
- 55 Clines, 'Job', 123.
- 56 Clines, 'Job', 107.
- 57 Clines, 'Job', 112.
- 58 David J. A. Clines, 'A World Founded on Water (Psalm 24): Reader-Response, Deconstruction and Bespoke Interpretation', in J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTS 143 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 83–84.
- 59 David J. A. Clines, 'Haggai's Temple, Constructed, Deconstructed and Reconstructed', in T. C. Eskenazi and K. H. Richards (eds.), *Second Temple Studies*, JSOTS 175 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), esp. 77–78.
- 60 As R. W. L. Moberly observed in his review of Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Texts Under Negotiation* (London: SCM, 1993), in *Themelios* 20.2 (1995), 25.
- 61 This so-called 'theological anthropology' has been helpfully explored in C. Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton (eds.), *Persons, Divine and Human* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).