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# Interpreting the Bible in Postmodern Contexts: Literary Arts, Hermeneutics and Social Relevance

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## ***Abstract***

In an age shaped by pluralism, deconstruction, and narrative fragmentation, interpreting the Bible in postmodern contexts necessitates a critical re-evaluation of hermeneutical models. This paper explores how postmodern literary theory and reader-oriented hermeneutics reframe biblical interpretation, highlighting the Bible's aesthetic depth, polyvalent meanings, and social resonance. Drawing on Reader-Response Theory by Iser and Fish and Narrative Hermeneutics by Ricoeur, the study affirms that meaning is not merely extracted from texts but co-created by readers within their cultural horizons. In this context, the Bible functions less as a closed system of doctrinal certainties and more as a dynamic literary work inviting continuous re-interpretation across shifting social realities. The paper also engages Postmodern Literary Theory by Lyotard and Derrida to demonstrate how irony, inter-textuality, and ambiguity serve as valid interpretive lenses for engaging Scripture's poetic and prophetic genres. Through this lens, biblical texts speak prophetically into contemporary issues such as identity, justice, ecology, and marginalization. Furthermore, the fusion of biblical hermeneutics with literary arts, poetry, drama, and storytelling, restores the Bible's activeness and communal dimensions, aligning with the postmodern critique of rigid textual control. By foregrounding imagination, empathy, and context, this study proposes a socially relevant hermeneutic that affirms the authority of Scripture while resisting reductionist or absolutist readings. In so doing, the Bible emerges not as an archaic *objet d'art* but as a living text that participates in public discourse, offering transformative insight in postmodern societies that are marked by skepticism and fluidity. This interpretive approach holds implications for theological education, preaching, and faith-based activism in a fragmented yet interconnected world.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Hermeneutics, Reader-Response Theory, Social Relevance

## **A. Background to the study**

The interpretation of the Bible has undergone a significant transformation in the postmodern era, necessitating a reassessment of traditional hermeneutical paradigms. This shift is driven by the rise of pluralism, scepticism toward meta-narratives, and a renewed focus on subjectivity and context. In contrast to modernist approaches that sought objective truth through historical-critical methods, postmodern biblical hermeneutics emphasizes meaning as contingent, reader-oriented, and shaped by diverse cultural and ideological frameworks (Thiselton, 2009).

As regards the literary turn in biblical interpretation, one thematic development in this shift is the integration of literary arts into biblical interpretation. The "literary turn" repositions Scripture not only as a theological document but as a text rich with narrative, poetry, metaphor, and artistic form (Ryken, 2011). This aesthetic dimension challenges interpreters to explore genre, characterization, plot, and rhetorical structure. Such literary sensitivity deepens the interpretive process, allowing readers to experience the Bible not merely as a repository of doctrine but as a compelling artistic and spiritual narrative.

Hermeneutics in a reader-responsive age has also given readers the privilege to construct meaning, drawing from approaches such as reader-response criticism and reception theory. Here, the text is not fixed in meaning but open to dialogue between the biblical world and contemporary contexts (Iser, 1978; Fish, 1980). This dynamic reading affirms that interpretation is not neutral; it is influenced by the reader's historical, social, and cultural standpoint. As such, hermeneutics becomes an act of negotiation, engaging Scripture in ways that are imaginative, participatory, and contextually grounded.

Social relevance and liberation are crucial concerns in postmodern interpretation procedures as they emphasize the social and ethical implications of Scripture. Feminist, postcolonial, and liberationist readings prioritize voices historically excluded from theological discourse (Sugirtharajah, 2002). In this view, biblical interpretation must move beyond academic confines to address real-world issues, poverty, injustice, gender inequality, and ecological crisis, thus reaffirming the Bible's relevance in transforming society.

## A. Literature Review

### 1. Postmodern Literary Consciousness and Biblical Interpretation

In postmodernism, literary arts reshape biblical hermeneutics by challenging fixed meanings and emphasizing multiplicity. This view aligns with Stephen Moore (1992), who advocates for reading Scripture as literature within a postmodern framework that foregrounds narrative ambiguity, inter-textuality, and the reader's voice. For Moore, literary criticism dismantles the illusion of a single, authoritative interpretation and opens space for plural readings rooted in contemporary artistic and cultural imagination.

### 2. Reader-Response Hermeneutics and Participatory Meaning

Stanley Fish (1980) asserts that the meaning of a text emerges not from authorial intent, but from the reader's interpretive framework. His reader-response theory deeply influences postmodern biblical studies by shifting authority from text to community. This participatory hermeneutic resonates with marginalized and evolving interpretive communities that find their voices through Scripture, making it socially and spiritually relevant in dynamic contexts.

### 3. Social-Contextual Relevance in Postmodern Biblical Hermeneutics

Postmodernism insists on the genre of interpretation. Fernando Segovia (1995) introduces ideological criticism as a tool to foreground power dynamics, urging interpreters to ask who benefits from dominant readings. His emphasis on the social location of both the text and reader reinforces a hermeneutics that engages with issues like justice, gender, and race, making Scripture socially transformative in postmodern settings.

### 4. Deconstruction and Sacred Texts

Jacques Derrida's philosophical project of deconstruction has influenced biblical interpretation by destabilizing textual certainty. While not a biblical scholar, Derrida's

theory, as applied by scholars like John Caputo (1997), insists that meaning is always deferred and open. This challenges literalist readings and opens sacred texts to ongoing re-interpretation in light of evolving existential realities.

## **5. Aesthetic Engagement and the Bible in the Arts**

David Brown (2004) explores how art, literature, and imagination serve as theological tools for interpreting Scripture in postmodernity. He sees aesthetics not as decoration but as revelation, allowing contemporary art forms to extend the meaning and relevance of biblical texts into modern sensibilities.

## **B. Interpreting the Bible in Postmodern Contexts: Literary Arts, Hermeneutics, and Social Relevance**

In postmodern contexts, biblical interpretation is increasingly shaped by interdisciplinary approaches that integrate literary arts, hermeneutics, and social relevance. Postmodernism challenges the notion of absolute, objective meaning, encouraging interpreters to recognize the plurality of voices, contexts, and perspectives embedded within Scripture (Thiselton, 2009). The literary arts, poetry, narrative, drama, and metaphor, become essential tools for engaging the Bible not merely as a theological treatise but as a complex tapestry of genres that invite aesthetic and imaginative participation.

From a hermeneutical standpoint, postmodern biblical interpretation builds on the understanding that meaning emerges in the dialogue between text and reader. Gadamer's (1989) philosophical hermeneutics emphasizes the "fusion of horizons" where historical context meets contemporary experience, while reader-response theory affirms the role of the reader as an active co-creator of meaning (Iser, 1978). In this framework, the Bible's literary artistry, its symbolic structures, intertextual patterns, and rhetorical devices, functions not only to convey divine revelation but also to invite creative engagement that resonates across cultures and epochs.

Social relevance becomes a critical dimension in this interpretive process. Postmodern readings of Scripture often foreground marginalized voices, interrogating dominant power structures and retrieving narratives of liberation, justice, and inclusion (West, 2014). For instance, liberation hermeneutics reimagines biblical texts in light of contemporary struggles against oppression. At the same time, feminist and postcolonial interpretations uncover layers of meaning that affirm the dignity and agency of historically silenced communities. The literary arts here serve as both a mirror and a catalyst, reflecting lived realities while inspiring transformative action.

In postmodern societies, where skepticism toward grand narratives is prevalent, the Bible's authority is re-negotiated through its capacity to speak into pluralistic and contested spaces. Interpreters who attend to its literary form, hermeneutical depth, and socio-ethical implications can present Scripture as a dynamic, living text that addresses contemporary moral and cultural challenges. This involves moving beyond rigid, propositional readings toward a dialogical approach that appreciates metaphor, irony, ambiguity, and narrative complexity (Ryken, 2015). Ultimately, integrating literary arts, hermeneutics, and social relevance in postmodern biblical interpretation fosters a holistic engagement with Scripture. Such an approach affirms that the Bible's enduring significance lies not only in its doctrinal content but also in its power to inspire justice, foster empathy, and nurture hope in diverse cultural landscapes.

## C. Integrating pluralism, deconstruction, and narrative fragmentariness in Postmodern Biblical Interpretation

Postmodern biblical interpretation emerges in a cultural landscape marked by skepticism toward metanarratives, affirmation of pluralism, and sensitivity to the fragmented nature of texts and identities. Within this paradigm, the Bible is not approached as a monolithic, univocal document but as a dynamic, multi-voiced narrative whose meanings are contingent on reader location and cultural engagement (Thiselton, 2009).

**1. Pluralism:** Pluralism in postmodern hermeneutics reflects both the diversity of interpretive communities and the recognition of multiple legitimate readings of Scripture. This approach challenges exclusivist claims of a single, authoritative meaning, instead embracing theological, cultural, and social perspectives that emerge from different contexts (Smith, 2006). Biblical texts, therefore, become dialogical spaces where marginalized voices, global perspectives, and minority hermeneutics can be valued alongside traditional interpretations. Such pluralism does not negate the sacredness of the Bible but reframes it as a resource for mutual engagement and cross-cultural theological reflection.

**2. Deconstruction:** Deconstruction, influenced by Jacques Derrida's philosophy, interrogates the assumed stability of biblical meaning and the hierarchies embedded within interpretive traditions (Caputo, 1997). In biblical studies, deconstruction involves uncovering tensions, contradictions, and suppressed voices within the text. For example, a deconstructive reading of the Gospel narratives might reveal how power dynamics, gender roles, and imperial contexts shape the portrayal of events and characters. Rather than seeking final closure, deconstruction opens interpretive space for alternative readings, thereby destabilizing rigid doctrinal boundaries while deepening textual awareness (Moore, 1994).

**3. Narrative fragmentariness:** It acknowledges the Bible's composite literary nature, multiple authors, genres, and editorial layers, alongside the postmodern reader's tendency to engage with texts in non-linear ways. In digital culture, scripture is often accessed through isolated verses, thematic studies, or multimedia retellings, resulting in fragmented narrative experiences (Lyotard, 1984). While this risks de-contextualization, it can also invite creative re-composition, allowing contemporary communities to reweave biblical fragments into fresh theological and ethical visions. Recognizing the fragmentary nature of the text can foster humility in interpretation and openness to ongoing re-narration.

In postmodern contexts, literary arts and hermeneutics intersect to position the Bible as a living, participatory text. Pluralism ensures inclusivity of voices; deconstruction invites critical engagement with inherited readings; and narrative fragmentariness accommodates the cultural realities of textual interaction in a mediated world. Together, these elements enable the Bible to retain social relevance, not as an unquestioned authority, but as a generative conversation partner in addressing justice, identity, and meaning in contemporary society.

## D. Postmodern literary theories as interpretive lenses for figures of speech, inter-textuality, and ambiguity in biblical interpretation

Postmodern literary theories have introduced new interpretive possibilities for engaging the Bible, especially through their attention to figures of speech, inter-textuality, and ambiguity. In postmodern contexts, meaning is understood as fluid, contextually negotiated, and shaped by the interplay between text, reader, and culture (Lyotard, 1984). This paradigm shift challenges traditional hermeneutical models that prioritize fixed authorial intent, opening up space for plural interpretations that resonate with diverse social realities.



## 1. Figures of Speech as Postmodern Literary Windows

In biblical interpretation, figures of speech, such as metaphor, irony, hyperbole, and allegory, are not mere rhetorical ornaments but dynamic meaning-making devices. Postmodernism, influenced by thinkers like Paul Ricoeur (1978), emphasizes the surplus of meaning in metaphor, acknowledging that figurative language resists reduction to a single referent. For instance, Jesus' declaration, "I am the vine" (John 15:5), in a postmodern lens, is not only a theological claim but also an evocative symbol open to ecological, communal, and socio-political readings. Postmodern literary criticism values such polyvalence, resisting closure and allowing metaphors to function as interpretive spaces where multiple meanings coexist (Culler, 2000). In this way, figures of speech become vehicles for connecting biblical imagery with contemporary struggles for justice, identity, and environmental stewardship.

## 2. Inter-textuality as a Hermeneutical Bridge

Inter-textuality, popularized by Julia Kristeva (1980), views every text as a mosaic of quotations, shaped by and shaping other texts. In postmodern biblical interpretation, this approach destabilizes the notion of the Bible as an isolated, self-contained work. For example, the Gospel writers' reworking of Hebrew Scriptures, or Revelation's allusions to prophetic and apocalyptic imagery, reveal the Bible's inherent textual interconnectedness. Moreover, inter-textual reading extends beyond canonical relationships to include how the Bible converses with literature, art, and contemporary media (Hays, 1989). This lens affirms that biblical meaning is enriched when situated within an ongoing cultural dialogue. In postmodern societies marked by globalization and pluralism, inter-textuality allows interpreters to draw creative parallels between the biblical narrative and modern texts, from liberation poetry to political speeches, thus enhancing the Bible's social relevance.

## 3. Ambiguity as a Space for Reader Engagement

Postmodern thought celebrates ambiguity as a source of interpretive vitality rather than a problem to be solved. Jacques Derrida's (1978) concept of difference highlights the instability of meaning, where every reading opens new interpretive horizons. Biblical texts are replete with such ambiguity, whether in Ecclesiastes' oscillations between despair and joy or in the layered parables of Jesus that resist straightforward explanation. In a postmodern hermeneutic, ambiguity invites participatory interpretation, allowing diverse communities to find their own voices within the biblical story (Thiselton, 2009). Rather than imposing uniform conclusions, this approach affirms the legitimacy of multiple readings shaped by cultural, historical, and existential contexts. This resonates strongly in contexts of social diversity and marginalization, where ambiguity can serve as a tool of empowerment, validating experiences previously excluded from dominant theological discourses.

## 4. Integrating Literary Arts and Social Relevance

By foregrounding figures of speech, inter-textuality, and ambiguity, postmodern literary theories reframe biblical interpretation as both an artistic and communal act. Literary artistry is not detached from social reality; instead, it becomes a means for addressing contemporary challenges. A metaphor like "light of the world" (Matt. 5:14) can inspire ecological responsibility in climate discourse, inter-textual readings of Exodus can empower narratives of liberation among oppressed peoples, and the ambiguity in Job's dialogues can validate human wrestling with suffering in contexts of trauma. In postmodern hermeneutics, interpretation is not merely about uncovering ancient meanings but also about reimagining the text's potential to foster justice, inclusion, and hope in today's fragmented world (Sugirtharajah, 2002).

## **F. Interpreting the Bible in Postmodern Contexts: Prophetic texts with regard to Identity, Justice, Ecology, Wars, Famine, and Gender Issues**

### **1. Identity**

Biblical texts provide a theological foundation for human identity, particularly in a postmodern era where identity is fluid and contested. Genesis 1:27 affirms that all people are created in the image of God, a truth that challenges narratives of worth based solely on race, ethnicity, or social status. In postmodern literary hermeneutics, identity is constructed through narrative engagement, allowing readers to locate themselves within biblical stories (Green, 2013). The Pauline affirmation in Galatians 3:28 underscore unity in diversity, a counter-cultural proclamation in an age of identity politics and fragmentation.

### **2. Justice**

Justice emerges as a central biblical theme, especially in the prophetic literature where God's concern for the oppressed is evident (Isaiah 1:17; Amos 5:24). In postmodern contexts, where skepticism toward meta-narratives prevails, biblical justice offers an alternative vision rooted in covenantal faithfulness rather than mere political expediency (Wright, 2010). Hermeneutically, the challenge lies in translating ancient calls for justice into advocacy for equitable systems today, resisting both cultural relativism and authoritarian imposition of values.

### **3. Ecology**

The ecological crisis of the 21st century invites a rereading of biblical texts with a creation-care lens. Psalm 24:1 affirms God's ownership of the earth, while Genesis 2:15 frames humanity's role as stewards, not exploiters. Literary art in Scripture—such as poetic descriptions of nature in Psalms and prophetic visions in Isaiah 11—invites an aesthetic appreciation that deepens ethical responsibility (Bauckham, 2010). Postmodern hermeneutics challenges anthropocentric readings, urging interpretations that honour the intrinsic value of creation beyond human utility.

### **4. Wars**

The Bible addresses the reality of war while envisioning peace as God's ultimate goal (Micah 4:3). In postmodern discourse, where global conflicts often involve complex geopolitical and ideological factors, biblical prophetic visions critique the idolatry of militarism and call for peacemaking rooted in divine justice (Yoder, 1994). Hermeneutically, such texts must be read both historically, acknowledging the ancient Near Eastern context of warfare, and prophetically, challenging contemporary justifications for violence.

### **5. Famine**

Famine narratives in Scripture, such as Joseph's provision in Genesis 41 and the widow's jar of oil in 1 Kings 17, reveal divine concern for the vulnerable in times of scarcity. These stories model resilience, foresight, and community responsibility. In a postmodern era marked by economic disparity and food insecurity, biblical famine accounts challenge consumerist excess and inspire sustainable practices (Brueggemann, 2014). The hermeneutical task is to discern principles that address systemic injustice in food distribution while nurturing communal compassion.

### **6. Gender Issues**

The Bible speaks into gender relations in ways that both reflect ancient patriarchal contexts and offer transformative visions. Jesus' inclusion of women in his ministry (Luke 8:1-3; John 4) subverts cultural norms, while texts like Proverbs 31 honour women's economic and social contributions. In postmodern hermeneutics, gender readings require a literary-

critical approach that identifies oppressive structures while affirming the liberating trajectories within Scripture (Spencer, 2019). Such readings resist both uncritical traditionalism and selective revisionism, fostering a biblical ethic that promotes dignity and mutual respect.

## **E. Biblical Hermeneutics in the Postmodern Context: the use of poetry, drama and storytelling**

Postmodernity challenges traditional hermeneutical approaches that assume a single, objective meaning of the biblical text (Grenz, 2001). Instead, meaning is understood as relational, shaped by the interplay between text, reader, and context (Thiselton, 2009). In this interpretive landscape, literary arts become valuable tools for engaging Scripture, enabling readers to experience its narratives not only as doctrinal statements but also as dynamic, living stories that resonate across cultures and times. This aesthetic approach aligns with reader-response hermeneutics, which acknowledges the active role of the interpreter in constructing meaning (Iser, 1978).

### **1. Poetry as a Hermeneutical Lens**

Poetry in biblical interpretation enhances sensitivity to metaphor, rhythm, and imagery. The Psalms, prophetic oracles, and wisdom literature demonstrate that Scripture often communicates through poetic forms, inviting emotional and contemplative engagement. Modern interpreters can use contemporary poetic expression to reframe biblical themes such as justice, lament, and hope in ways that address present-day social issues. For instance, poetic reinterpretations of Psalm 23 in contexts of displacement or economic struggle allow communities to voice both their faith and their realities (Brueggemann, 2014). Poetry's capacity to condense profound truths into evocative language makes it a potent medium for postmodern biblical engagement.

### **2. Drama as Embodied Interpretation**

Drama transforms biblical interpretation into an embodied and communal event. From medieval mystery plays to modern biblical theatre, dramatization allows audiences to inhabit the narratives, fostering deeper empathy and understanding. In postmodern contexts, drama can subvert dominant readings by foregrounding marginalized perspectives, such as the voices of women, foreigners, or the poor in biblical narratives. Staging the Book of Ruth with emphasis on immigrant experience, for example, contextualizes the text for societies grappling with migration and social inclusion (Walsh, 2006). This performative approach resonates with postmodern values of plurality and participation.

### **3. Storytelling as Narrative Theology**

Storytelling integrates the interpretive goals of biblical hermeneutics with the imaginative power of the arts. Narrative theology emphasizes that the Bible itself is a grand story of God's interaction with humanity, and retelling these stories in fresh, culturally relevant ways helps audiences internalize theological truths (Hauerwas & Jones, 1997). In oral cultures or communities with low literacy, storytelling remains an effective hermeneutical tool for transmitting biblical values. Within postmodernity, where personal stories are often privileged over abstract principles, retelling biblical accounts through local idioms and contemporary analogies makes Scripture socially relevant without diminishing its sacred authority.

### **4. Social Relevance through Literary Arts**

The fusion of biblical hermeneutics and literary arts facilitates not only theological reflection but also social transformation. By framing biblical themes through poetry, drama,



and storytelling, interpreters can address pressing social issues such as injustice, gender inequality, environmental stewardship, and reconciliation. Brueggemann (2014) argues that imaginative engagement with Scripture opens possibilities for envisioning alternative realities grounded in God's promises. This creative hermeneutics aligns with liberation and contextual theologies, which prioritize lived experience and communal struggle as interpretive lenses.

In postmodern contexts, where authority is diffused and meaning is negotiated, integrating literary arts into biblical hermeneutics enriches both interpretation and application. Poetry deepens affective engagement, drama fosters embodied understanding, and storytelling contextualizes biblical narratives for diverse audiences. This fusion respects the Bible's literary nature while responding to contemporary cultural sensibilities. By embracing these forms, interpreters can bridge the gap between ancient text and modern life, ensuring that Scripture remains a dynamic, socially relevant witness to God's ongoing work in the world.

## **F. Resisting Absolutists and Reductionists in Biblical Interpretation**

In the postmodern context, biblical interpretation faces the dual challenge of resisting both absolutist and reductionist approaches. Absolutists treat their interpretation as the sole, definitive meaning of a text, often ignoring the historical, literary, and cultural plurality that shapes Scripture's reception (Thiselton, 2009). Reductionists, on the other hand, strip the text of its theological and multi-layered dimensions, confining it to a narrow historical-critical reading or a purely sociological, political, or literary artifact (Green, 2011). In resisting both extremes, interpreters can foster a more nuanced, faithful, and socially relevant engagement with the Bible.

### **1. Postmodern Hermeneutics and the Need for Resistance**

Postmodern hermeneutics challenges the Enlightenment's quest for a single, objective, and universal meaning. Instead, it affirms interpretive plurality, recognizing that meaning emerges through the interaction between text, reader, and context (Schneiders, 1999). This awareness compels interpreters to resist absolutist tendencies that claim one interpretation as final. Absolutism aims at doctrinal clarity, and it risks silencing other voices, particularly those from marginalized or non-Western communities. Conversely, reductionism often dismisses the Bible's theological authority, treating it as a mere cultural relic. Postmodern hermeneutics invites interpreters to acknowledge complexity, embrace dialogical engagement, and maintain the Bible's transformative potential without collapsing it into either rigid dogma or secularized minimalism.

### **2. Literary Arts and Multi-Layered Meaning**

The literary artistry of the Bible, its narratives, poetry, parables, and apocalyptic visions, demands an interpretive posture that resists simplistic readings. Absolutists may impose a singular doctrinal lens that flattens literary richness, while reductionists may deconstruct the text to the point where its theological voice is muted (Ryken, 2015). A literary approach that honours metaphor, narrative tension, and polyvalence enables interpreters to appreciate the text's depth. For instance, the parables of Jesus resist absolutist doctrinal codification, yet they also defy reductionist readings that strip them of their eschatological urgency. To recognize the Bible as both divine revelation and literary art safeguards against interpretive impoverishment.

### **3. Hermeneutics as Contextual and Communal**

In resisting absolutists and reductionists, interpreters must affirm that hermeneutics is both contextual and communal. Absolutism often presumes that one's own tradition or exegetical method is universally normative. Reductionism tends to isolate interpretation within academic specializations detached from ecclesial or faith contexts. Postmodern

hermeneutics, drawing from Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 1989), advocates for interpretation as a dialogical encounter where multiple perspectives, historical, theological, literary, and experiential, interact. This requires humility, recognizing that no single interpreter exhausts the meaning of the text, and accountability to communities of faith that test interpretations for coherence with the broader biblical witness.

#### **4. Social Relevance and Ethical Responsibility**

Both absolutist and reductionist readings risk rendering the Bible socially irrelevant, absolutism by clinging to rigid dogmas disconnected from present realities and reductionism by emptying the text of its theological force for ethical transformation. In postmodern contexts marked by pluralism, justice struggles, and intercultural encounters, biblical interpretation must be ethically alert and socially engaged (West, 2016). This entails resisting interpretations that justify oppression, marginalization, or exclusion, while also challenging readings that dilute the Bible's prophetic and liberative dimensions. Interpretive practices should aim at what Wright (2018) calls "faithful improvisation," where Scripture speaks afresh into contemporary realities without betraying its theological core.

#### **5. Balancing Authority and Openness**

Resisting both extremes requires a balance between recognizing Scripture's authority and remaining open to fresh insights. Absolutists may idolize past interpretations, while reductionists may discard the notion of divine authority altogether. A balanced approach affirms that Scripture is authoritative not because it is a static set of propositions but because it bears witness to the living God in ways that transcend cultural and temporal boundaries (Noll, 2022). This dynamic authority invites ongoing re-reading in light of new contexts, without capitulating to relativism or authoritarianism.

Postmodern hermeneutics offers both a caution and an opportunity. It warns against the rigidity of absolutism and the flattening of reductionism, advocating instead for an interpretive stance that is literarily sensitive, contextually aware, communally accountable, and socially relevant. By embracing the complexity of the biblical text and the diversity of its readers, interpreters can engage Scripture in a way that is faithful to its theological witness and transformative in contemporary contexts. Such resistance is not an abandonment of truth but an affirmation that the fullness of biblical meaning unfolds in the ongoing conversation between the sacred text and the living community of faith.

#### **G. The Bible Not as an Archaic Artefact but a Living Text in Public Discourse**

Postmodern society is often characterized by pluralism, scepticism toward meta-narratives, and a heightened awareness of the relativity of meaning (Lyotard, 1984). In this cultural climate, some perceive the Bible as an archaic artifact, an ancient relic with little relevance to contemporary public life. However, a closer hermeneutical engagement reveals that the Bible is not merely a static historical document; rather, it is a living text capable of actively participating in public discourse. Through the literary arts, contextual hermeneutics, and social engagement, the Bible can offer moral vision, cultural critique, and transformative narratives for the postmodern world.

The concept of the Bible as a "living" text is rooted in its capacity to continually speak meaningfully into new cultural and historical situations (Hebrews 4:12, New International Version). Biblical interpretation is not limited to uncovering a fixed, original meaning but includes an ongoing dialogue between text and reader (Thiselton, 2009). Postmodern hermeneutics, with its emphasis on reader-response theory, aligns with this dynamic

understanding by recognizing that meaning emerges through interaction between the text and diverse communities (Fish, 1980). Thus, the Bible's relevance does not diminish over time; rather, its interpretive possibilities expand as it engages with fresh contexts.

## **H. Literary Arts as a Bridge to Contemporary Discourse**

The literary artistry of the Bible, its poetry, narrative, parable, and metaphor, gives it a unique capacity to resonate with postmodern sensibilities. Postmodern culture often privileges narrative over rigid propositions, valuing stories as vehicles of identity and moral imagination (Smith, 2016). Biblical narratives such as the Exodus, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and the Sermon on the Mount have shaped public moral vision by offering alternative imaginations of justice, compassion, and community (Wright, 2010). When interpreted through the lens of the literary arts, the Bible speaks to contemporary audiences not merely as a historical record but as a repository of living metaphors and symbols that address existential and societal concerns.

## **I. Hermeneutics and Contextual Interpretation**

In postmodern contexts, hermeneutics moves beyond rigid historical-critical methods toward a dialogical approach that takes culture seriously (Westphal, 2001). Contextual hermeneutics acknowledges that each reading is situated, shaped by social location, cultural identity, and historical moment (Sugirtharajah, 2002). This openness allows the Bible to participate in public discourse across diverse communities, whether addressing racial justice, ecological crisis, or economic inequality. Far from diminishing the authority of Scripture, contextual readings demonstrate its adaptability and capacity to inform moral reasoning in pluralistic societies.

## **J. The Bible in Public Discourse**

Public discourse in postmodernity is fragmented, yet moral and ethical debates persist in areas such as human rights, environmental stewardship, and social equity. The Bible's prophetic tradition offers a robust resource for addressing these issues. The calls of Amos for justice to "roll on like a river" (Amos 5:24, NIV) or Jesus' Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12, NIV) continue to inspire movements for social change (Brueggemann, 2014). By engaging with public concerns through thematic preaching, social advocacy, and interfaith dialogue, the Bible remains a relevant voice in shaping societal values.

## **K. Engaging Postmodern Challenges**

A challenge for biblical engagement in postmodernity is overcoming perceptions of exclusivity or irrelevance. To participate credibly in public discourse, biblical interpretation must embrace humility, dialogical openness, and ethical accountability (Vanhoozer, 2005). This means resisting the imposition of the text as an authoritarian rulebook while affirming its capacity to offer wisdom and moral vision for common life. In doing so, the Bible's public role becomes one of constructive conversation rather than coercive proclamation.

In conclusion, the Bible is not an archaic artefact frozen in the past. It is a living text whose narratives, metaphors, and ethical imperatives can speak powerfully into the complexities of postmodern society. Through the literary arts, contextual hermeneutics, and socially engaged interpretation, it can contribute to public discourse on justice, identity, and meaning. By embracing a hermeneutic that honors both the historical rootedness and contemporary vitality of Scripture, faith communities and scholars can ensure that the Bible continues to shape moral imagination and civic conversation in our pluralistic age.

## **K. The Bible, Hermeneutics, and Social Relevance**

In the postmodern era, the interpretation of the Bible requires a hermeneutical approach that engages with both the complexity of the text and the lived realities of its readers.

Postmodern contexts challenge traditional interpretive frameworks by questioning universal truths, privileging plurality of meaning, and foregrounding the role of the interpreter (Thiselton, 2009). Within this environment, biblical hermeneutics must not only address theological fidelity but also ensure social relevance, making Scripture speak into the ethical, political, and cultural concerns of contemporary communities.

## **1. The Bible as a Living Text in Postmodern Contexts**

The Bible, in Christian tradition, is both a historical record and a theological witness to God's redemptive purposes. In postmodern contexts, its authority is often contested, not necessarily because of outright rejection, but due to the rise of interpretive relativism and suspicion toward meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1984). Yet, the Bible's continuing influence is evident in public discourse, literature, and social activism. Interpreters must therefore view the biblical text not as a static document, but as a living, dialogical witness capable of engaging with the complexities of human experience in pluralistic societies (Wright, 2013).

## **2. Hermeneutics and the Art of Interpretation**

Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpreting texts, with biblical hermeneutics focusing on uncovering meaning in light of historical, literary, and theological contexts (Keener, 2020). In the postmodern setting, hermeneutics is enriched by dialoguing with literary arts, poetry, narrative, and metaphor that shape the communicative power of Scripture. The literary dimensions of the Bible invite imaginative engagement, allowing the text to be encountered not merely as doctrinal instruction but as transformative art (Ryken, 2015). Postmodern hermeneutics moves beyond the historical-critical method to incorporate reader-response criticism, narrative criticism, and contextual approaches that acknowledge the interpreter's social location (Vanhoozer, 2005). These methods foreground the interplay between text and reader, affirming that meaning emerges in the encounter rather than being fixed solely in the author's intent.

## **3. Social Relevance as a Hermeneutical Imperative**

For the Bible to remain socially relevant, interpretation must bridge the gap between ancient contexts and present realities. Social relevance in hermeneutics involves interpreting Scripture in ways that speak to contemporary challenges, poverty, injustice, gender inequality, environmental crisis, and ethnic conflict (West, 2016). This task requires a contextual hermeneutic that reads the Bible with marginalized communities rather than merely about them. Liberation theology, feminist hermeneutics, and postcolonial readings exemplify interpretive models that seek to apply biblical truth to systemic injustices (Boesak, 2017).

Furthermore, in the globalized digital age, social relevance extends to how Scripture addresses issues of technology, globalization, and interfaith relations. The interpreter's role is to discern theological principles that can inform ethical decision-making without distorting the integrity of the biblical witness (Wright, 2010).

## **L. The Intersection of Literary Arts and Public Theology**

The literary artistry of the Bible, its narratives, parables, and prophetic poetry, provides a rich resource for social engagement. Postmodern audiences often resonate more deeply with stories than with abstract propositions (Brueggemann, 2002). For instance, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) continues to inspire social action across cultural boundaries because of its narrative power to transcend ethnic and religious divisions. Public theology can harness such narratives as vehicles for moral imagination, enabling the Church to address societal issues through creative, story-shaped proclamation (Hauerwas & Willimon, 2014).

## Challenges and Opportunities

A significant challenge is the risk of bringing together the biblical authority to accommodate contemporary sensibilities. Postmodern pluralism can encourage interpretive freedom at the expense of theological coherence. However, this challenge can be reframed as an opportunity for deeper dialogue between faith and culture. Hermeneutics that is both critically informed and socially conscious can help the Church remain a prophetic voice, speaking truth in love while embodying compassion and justice in practice (Noll, 2011).

In postmodern contexts, the Bible's enduring relevance depends on hermeneutics that is both faithful to the text and responsive to the needs of society. By engaging literary artistry, embracing contextual approaches, and prioritizing social relevance, interpreters can make Scripture a transformative force in public life. The task is not merely to apply the Bible to contemporary issues but to allow its narratives, ethics, and theology to shape communal identity and inspire action for justice and reconciliation in an increasingly fragmented world.

## Conclusion

A conclusion on the topic "Interpreting the Bible in Postmodern Contexts: Literary Arts, Hermeneutics and Social Relevance" must acknowledge that postmodernity fundamentally alters the interpretive landscape. Postmodern thought resists claims of universal, absolute meaning, instead privileging multiplicity, narrative plurality, and contextual readings. In this environment, the Bible is not merely a static repository of divine truths but a living text whose significance emerges through dialogue between its literary artistry, hermeneutical frameworks, and the lived realities of readers. The literary arts offer a fresh appreciation of biblical genres, metaphors, and narrative structures, inviting readers to encounter Scripture as a rich tapestry rather than a monolithic code. Postmodern hermeneutics emphasizes reader-response, inter-textuality, and cultural situatedness, challenging interpreters to balance fidelity to the text with responsiveness to contemporary questions.

Social relevance remains the decisive test of biblical interpretation in postmodern contexts. Interpretations that ignore pressing issues, such as justice, diversity, and ecological stewardship, risk relegating Scripture to irrelevance. Yet, uncritical accommodation to cultural trends can erode theological integrity. Therefore, a critical, dialogical approach is essential, one that affirms the Bible's transformative power while engaging postmodern sensibilities. Such interpretation requires humility, communal discernment, and creative imagination to ensure that the ancient Word continues to speak meaningfully in today's fragmented and pluralistic world.

## Summary

The topic "Interpreting the Bible in Postmodern Contexts: Literary Arts, Hermeneutics and Social Relevance" examines how contemporary interpretive frameworks, shaped by postmodern thought, influence biblical understanding and application. Postmodernism challenges the notion of a single, fixed meaning in texts, emphasizing instead multiple perspectives, reader engagement, and the social location of interpretation. In this context, the Bible is not merely an ancient record but a living narrative, open to diverse readings that reflect cultural, historical, and personal experiences.

The literary arts aspect draws attention to the Bible's genres, narrative structures, symbolism, and poetic elements, inviting creative and imaginative engagement beyond rigid doctrinal lenses. Postmodern hermeneutics shifts focus from authorial intent alone to the dynamic interaction between text, reader, and community, acknowledging that interpretation is shaped by power relations, traditions, and social realities.



In terms of social relevance, postmodern readings often seek to address contemporary issues such as justice, inclusivity, environmental stewardship, and human rights. This makes interpretation both context-specific and action-oriented. However, the approach faces criticism for potentially diluting theological authority or relativizing meaning. Ultimately, this perspective invites a balance, affirming the Bible's enduring witness while engaging critically with contemporary realities, fostering dialogue between tradition and the changing cultural landscape.

## Recommendations

**1. Contextual Hermeneutics for Pluralistic Societies:** Biblical interpretation in postmodern contexts should adopt a contextual hermeneutic that recognizes cultural plurality, ideological diversity, and the lived realities of various communities. In a world where absolute meta-narratives are often rejected, interpreters must situate the text within specific socio-cultural contexts while engaging in dialogue with multiple perspectives (West, 2016). This approach affirms that the Bible's authority remains relevant when its message addresses contemporary cultural struggles without surrendering theological integrity.

**2. Integration of Literary Arts in Interpretation:** Churches, seminaries, and scholars should incorporate literary arts, such as poetry, drama, and narrative storytelling, into biblical interpretation and teaching.

The postmodern appreciation for narrative and symbolism provides an opportunity to communicate biblical truths in aesthetically engaging forms (Ryken, 2015). This artistic lens allows Scripture to resonate not merely as a doctrinal statement but as a lived story, enhancing emotional and imaginative engagement while respecting literary genres within the biblical canon.

**3. Based Participatory Hermeneutics:** Promote participatory interpretation where diverse communities, including marginalized voices, contribute to meaning-making. Postmodern hermeneutics emphasizes the active role of the reader in constructing meaning (Thiselton, 2009). Encouraging communal Bible study where the experiences inform interpretation of women, ethnic minorities, the poor, and youth can expand the Church's prophetic voice and foster social justice grounded in Scripture.

**4. Critical Engagement with Digital and Media Platforms:** In the postmodern era shaped by media saturation, biblical interpretation should strategically engage digital storytelling, podcasts, and visual arts to communicate the message effectively. Digital media democratizes interpretation but also risks distortion through decontextualized soundbites (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Thus, interpreters should apply responsible media literacy to ensure that biblical narratives are shared with accuracy, creativity, and theological depth.

**5. Ethical Application and Social Transformation:** Interpretation must move beyond theoretical exegesis toward transformative praxis that addresses pressing social issues such as poverty, violence, and environmental stewardship. Postmodern scepticism toward institutional religion opens the door for faith communities to demonstrate the Bible's relevance through tangible action (Wright, 2010). Biblical interpretation should thus inspire moral responsibility and public witness, ensuring that Scripture remains both spiritually formative and socially transformative.

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