BABEL AND DERRIDA: Postmodernism, Language and Biblical Interpretation

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SUMMARY

This article assesses the challenge postmodernism constitutes for biblical interpretation via an analysis of Derrida's reading of the Tower of Babel narrative. Derrida's setting of the text in play is found to be an unhelpful model for biblical interpretation, but his foregrounding of language in the narrative and the implications of philosophy of language for interpretation are useful. The contours of Derrida's Babelian philosophy of language are explored and its insights noted. It is argued that the ultimate issues in philosophy of language are theological and that Christian scholars need to articulate a Christian view of language.

I. INTRODUCTION

From its height Babel at every instant supervises and surprises my reading: I translate, I translate the translation by Maurice de Gandillac of a text by Benjamin who, prefacing a translation, takes it as a pretext to say to what and in what way every translator is committed─and notes in passing, an essential part of his demonstration, that there could be no translation of translation. This will have to be remembered [Derrida].[1]

Long ago Tertullian asked, 'What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?' From a Christian perspective, sensitized as it is to idolatry, it is always tempting to reply, 'Nothing!' However, historically the Tertullian-type approach has often had

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devastating consequences for Christian scholarship. Tertullian rejects Athens as bankrupt philosophy and yet like a Trojan horse he cannot keep philosophy out of his discourse where it, undetected, exercises its influence. This danger is instructive for a Christian response to postmodernism. Before rejecting postmodernism out of hand because of its overt and real idolatry we ought to examine it closely lest we miss lessons and opportunities it provides for us.[2] Postmodernism, I suggest, is not without its insights.

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[1] J. Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', *Semeia* 54 (1991) 17.

[2] As T. Hart, '(Probably) the Greatest Story Ever Told? Reflections on Brueggemann's The Bible and Post-Modern Imagination', in A.N.S. Lane (ed.), *Interpreting the Bible* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997) 182 points out, postmodernism has its own 'now familiar grand narrative', however much it tries to conceal it or keep it on the move. And it is vital for Christians to note this idolatry. However, a crucial question for Christians, is how we respond to this as to all scholarly idolatry. A. Wolters, 'Facing the Perplexing History of Philosophy', *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap* 17 (1981) 1-17, seems to me to get it right when he says that having detected the idolatry, it is precisely in the area of idolatry that we should look for insights, because it is inevitably here that the hardest work has been done, and all scholarship will be picking up on some aspects of God's world, however much it distorts them.

I am cautious of the large-scale analyses of postmodernity that are found in some literature. Working with them is often like trying to do analysis with a club, where one requires a scalpel. The postmodern landscape is diverse and assessment of its significance for biblical interpretation will mean close examination of particular thinkers and their hermeneutic(s). Derrida is undoubtedly a major player in postmodernism, and in this paper we will assess the challenge postmodernism represents for biblical interpretation via Derrida's reading of the Tower of Babel narrative and his reflections in this context on translation/interpretation.

II. DERRIDA'S READING OF THE TOWER OF BABEL NARRATIVE

In trying to assess the implications of deconstruction[3] for biblical interpretation it is natural to see first whether Derrida

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himself has exegeted biblical texts. Derrida is of Jewish descent and the influence of Judaism on his work is widely acknowledged.[4] Although biblical motifs occur regularly in his writings, his scriptural references tend to be woven into the explication of his own views. When he deals with Revelation, for example, his interpretation is so eisegetical that for our purposes it can be ignored.[5] However, there are places where Derrida engages in lengthy discussion of biblical texts. In *The Gift of Death* Derrida deals with Genesis 22 and parts of Matthew's Gospel in relation to Kierkegaard's discussion of fear and trembling.[6] A text that Derrida gives sustained attention to and returns to repeatedly is the Tower of Babel narrative. The Tower of Babel narrative connects with Derrida's philosophy of language which is central to his work, in a way which his discussion of Genesis 22 does not, and this is where we will focus our attention.

Derrida's reflections on the Tower of Babel narrative occur particularly in his 'Des Tours de Babel' and to a lesser extent in *The Ear of the Other*.[7] Derrida's reading of the narrative is unlike anything most biblical scholars would produce today. However, we should not assume that Derrida does not take the text seriously. As he says of the Tower of Babel narrative: 'We think we know that story, but it is always in our interest, I believe, to reread it closely.'[8] So, as Norris never tires of

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[3] 'Deconstruction' has become the name for Derrida's reading of texts and it is in this broad sense that I use it here.

[4] See J. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) and S. Handelmann, *Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Tradition in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982), especially 163-78.

[5] J. Derrida, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy', in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds.), *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) 25-71. The more appropriate word might be 'performative', which is how Wolterstorff describes Derrida's reading of such texts. See below for a further discussion of performative readings.

[6] See J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 53-115. Derrida's reading of the Gn. 22 narrative and of Phil. 2:12-13 and parts of Matthew is straightforward but his reading is woven into his discussion of secrecy, death, fear and trembling.

[7] J. Derrida, *The Ear of the Other. Otobiography, Transference, Translation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985) 76-80, 100-104.

[8] Derrida, *Ear of the Other*, 100.

reminding us, deconstruction is committed to an exceptionally close reading of texts.[9] Derrida also stresses the importance of reading the narrative in Hebrew:

> the singularity of the story is that a performative takes place as a *récit* in a tongue that itself defies translation. What is being told in this biblical *récit* is not transportable into another tongue without an essential loss.[10]

For Derrida the Tower of Babel narrative is not just one narrative among others, but a sort of metanarrative, the narrative of narratives. This is why Derrida is so strongly attracted to it (see below). His discussion of it is so bound up with his own understanding of translation and language that it is difficult to extract his reading of it from that discussion, but let me at least outline the contours of his reading.

Derrida takes the narrative to be about the origin of the multiplicity of mother tongues. Prior to the 'deconstruction' of the tower, the Semitic family[11] was trying to establish its empire and in the process it wanted to enforce its universality by imposing its tongue upon the world. For what, Derrida asks, does God punish the Shemites? Perhaps it involves their desire to accede to God with their high tower, but ultimately divine punishment is meted out for another reason:

> [They] wanted ... to make a name for themselves, to give themselves the name, to construct for and by themselves their own name, to gather themselves there ('that we may no longer be scattered'), as in the unity of a place which is at once a tongue and a tower, the one as well as the other, the one as the other. He punishes them for having thus wanted

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> to assure themselves, by themselves, a unique and universal genealogy.[12]

Derrida invokes the support of the text in this respect by noting how Genesis holds together (as if all were part of the same design) building a tower, constructing a city, making a name and 'gathering a filiation'.

How does God punish the Shemites? Derrida follows Chouraqui's translation:[13]

> YHWH says:
> 'Yes! A single people, a single lip for all:
> that is what they begin to do!...
> Come let us descend! Let us confound their lips,
> man will no longer understand the lip of his neighbour.'
> YHWH disperses them from here over the face of the earth.
> They cease to build the city.
> Over which he proclaims his name Babel, Confusion,
> for there, YHWH confounds the lip of all the earth,

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[9] Norris has written extensively in defence of deconstruction. See, e.g., C. Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), *Derrida* (London: Fontana, 1987), *Reclaiming Truth: Contribution to a Critique of Cultural Relativism* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996).
[10] Derrida, *Ear of the Other*, 100.
[11] Derrida misreads the Tower of Babel narrative as a story about the sons of Shem.
[12] Derrida, 'Des Tours', 6.
[13] Derrida, 'Des Tours', 6.

and from there YHWH disperses them over the face of all the earth.

Derrida understands God's punishment in terms of the misunderstanding that results from a multiplicity of tongues. He sums this up in terms of translation: God imposes, as it were, the necessity and impossibility of translation. Out of God's jealously and resentment against that single and unique lip of men, says Derrida, Yahweh violently imposes his name. Derrida here follows Chouraqui's most unusual translation at this point in taking *Babel* to be God's name which God proclaims over the city![14] Generally Babel is taken to be the city's name, but according to Derrida, God punishes the people by proclaiming his name, Babel, because they have sought a

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name[15] for themselves 'as in the unity of a place which is at once a tongue and a tower, the one as well as the other, the one as the other'.[16] Derrida connects God's name 'Babel' with Yahweh, noting that the text says this YHWH, an unpronounceable name, descends towards the tower. And the war God thus declares (Derrida connects this with 'And the war' in *Finnegan's Wake*) has already raged in God's name, Babel.

> Babel is a proper noun and simultaneously, according to Derrida, functions as a common noun signifying confusion. And from then on, just as Babel is at once proper name and common noun, confusion also becomes proper name and common noun, the one as homonym of the other, the synonym as well, but not the equivalent, because there could be no question of confusing them in their value.[17]

In *The Ear of the Other* Derrida says that '[h]ad their enterprise succeeded, the universal tongue would have been imposed by violence, by force, by violent hegemony over the rest of the world'.[18] They sought a 'unique and universal genealogy'. God's response: 'he disseminates the Sem, and dissemination is here deconstruction.'[19] In *The Ear of the Other* Derrida speaks of 'disschemination'.[20] According to Derrida,

> [God] subjects them to the law of translation both necessary and impossible; in a stroke with his translatable-untranslatable name he delivers a universal reason... but he simultaneously limits its universality: forbidden transparency, impossible univocity. Translation becomes law, duty and debt, but the debt one can no longer discharge. Such insolvency is found marked in the very name of Babel: which at once translates and does not translate itself, belongs without belonging to a language and indebts itself

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> to itself for an insolvent debt, to itself as if another. Such would be the Babelian performance.[21]

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[14] *Cf.* NRSV: 'Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth: and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of the earth.'

[15] In *Ear of the Other*, 100, Derrida speaks of the Babel episode taking place among the tribe of the Shems.

[16] Derrida, 'Des Tours', 6.

[17] Derrida, 'Des Tours', 8.

[18] 101.

[19] Derrida, 'Des Tours', 6.

[20] 103.

[21] Derrida, 'Des Tours', 10.

Such is the Derridean performance!

III. EVALUATION OF THE EXEGESIS

At the end of Derrida's essay 'Structure, Sign, and Play', there is a much quoted reflection on interpretation, in which Derrida distinguishes between deciphering a text to discern its true meaning and setting the text in play, which he regards as true to anti-metaphysics.

> There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, throughout his entire history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play. The second interpretation of interpretation, to which Nietzsche pointed the way, does not seek in ethnography, as Lévi-Strauss does, the 'inspiration of a new humanism'... There are more than enough indications today to suggest that these two interpretations of interpretation—which are absolutely irreconcilable even if we live them simultaneously and reconcile them in an obscure economy—together share the field we call, in such a problematic fashion, the social sciences.[22]

Derrida's reading of the Tower of Babel narrative is clearly a case of the second interpretation of interpretation, *i.e.*, of setting

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the text in play rather than deciphering its meaning. In *Divine Discourse* Wolterstorff suggests that this second type of interpretation which Derrida considers true to anti-metaphysics is a special case of performance interpretation of the same sort as Kant's reading of the prologue to John's Gospel in Section one of Book two of Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Reason*. As Wolterstorff says:

> It's that special case in which the interpreter doesn't have any special sort of person in mind when imagining what someone might have said with these words but rather finds it fascinating to run through a number of different possibilities. The great desideratum is originality and creativity in interpretative imagination.[23]

This is the sort of reading that Derrida is engaged in with the Tower of Babel narrative. The danger with such a reading is that of eisegesis which ignores the way in which the narrative fits in its canonical context. Wolterstorff carefully distinguishes authorial discourse interpretation from performance interpretation, noting that whereas in performance interpretation the goal is a creative, exciting reading, in authorial discourse interpretation the goal is a true reading. Wolterstorff points out that performance interpretation ignores the speech acts involved in discourse, an approach which is problematic when it comes to a text

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[22] Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) 292-93.

[23] N. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) 181.

like the Bible. When a discourse embodies a promise, for example, it is very important to know what is and what is not promised. In terms of Scripture, Wolterstorff writes:

> If God said or is saying something by way of this text, it is presumably important for some or all of us to find out what that was or is; it's hard to imagine God engaging in small-talk. But if we confine ourselves to performance interpretation, we will miss that.[24]

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And it is clear that Derrida makes no attempt to read the Tower of Babel narrative closely within its context in Genesis or within the Hebrew Bible as a whole. He fails, firstly, to note that the narrative deals with the descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth and treats the story as though it is dealing just with the Shemites. Secondly, he assumes that God's judgement is the multiplicity of languages. This is a common way of understanding the Tower of Babel narrative but in context this reading is questionable.[25] In Genesis 11 God judges by confusing the lip (שָׂפָה) of all the earth (11:9). שָׂפָה is not used in the plural in 11:1-9, and the word for the tongues/languages of the descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth is לָשׁוֹן. Placed where it is in Genesis 10 the diversity of tribes and languages spreading abroad on the earth implies a positive fulfilment of the primal imperative to be fruitful and multiply. Clearly the confusion of the lip of all the earth is a linguistic judgement from God, but how the two relate is intriguing and makes one cautious of simply equating lingual diversity with judgement. Wolters notes that לָשׁוֹן is the normal Hebrew word for language while שָׂפָה refers more generally to speech or communication.[26] Thus Wolters argues that Genesis 11 has in view the breakdown of communication and not the development of different languages. Wolters suggests that historically this may relate to the break-up of the Old Babylonian Empire.

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Thirdly, Derrida's reading of God proclaiming his name as Babel is virtually indefensible. The word city at the end of 11:8 is feminine in gender and the pronominal suffix on name in verse 9a is feminine, thus 'her name'. As is well known Yahweh is almost always referred to as masculine in the OT and I can see no reason for translating 'his name'. 'He proclaims' is possible but then it would have to be 'he proclaims her name' and not 'his name'. More likely is Wenham's translation: 'Therefore its name was called Babel.'[27] It is true that in a small

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[24] *Ibid.*,182.

[25] V.P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 350, suggests that the 'one language and one speech' of Gn. 11:1 refers to a common *lingua franca* which made communication possible among members of the nations with their local languages. A. Wolters, in an unpublished paper ('Creation, Worldview and Foundations', 1997), suggests that a breakdown in communication and not the development of different languages is in view in Gn.11.

[26] A. Wolters, 'Creation, Worldview and Foundations', unpublished paper, 1997. Wolters seems to me to be thinking in the right direction. As the gateway of speech the lips are the 'gates of honesty or deception, righteousness or wickedness, wisdom or folly' (G.G. Cohen, 'שָׂפָה', in R.L. Harris, *et al.* [eds.], *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2 [Chicago: Moody Press, 1980] 882). Thus there is an ethical or directional dimension to שָׂפָה that is missing in לָשׁוֹן.

[27] See G. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Texas: Word, 1987) 233-34. Wenham notes that קָרָא is literally 'one called', 'he called' being used for the indefinite subject. *Cf.* GKC,144d.

number of cases the third person singular pronominal suffix ה has a male referent,[28] and in this respect Derrida's reading is marginally possible. However, not only is it grammatically unlikely but, as Babylon in the OT כבל stands for the pride of man and his fall, it would be quite extraordinary in the Old Testament context. All this counts strongly against Derrida's reading.

Fourthly, Derrida makes much of Babel being at the same time a proper noun and a common noun, and exploits the confusion that results:

> Now, a proper name as such remains forever untranslatable... And yet 'Babel', an event in a single tongue, the one in which it appears so as to form a 'text', also has a common meaning, a conceptual generality. That it be by way of a pun or a confused association matters little: 'Babel' could be understood in one language as meaning 'confusion'.[29]

The meaning of Babel certainly resonates in different ways but not so as to promote confusion or to be unclear. Etymologically Babel has been taken to mean 'gate of God'[30] but this narrative

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prefers to relate it to כבל, meaning 'mixed up, confused'. For the author

> [t]he name 'Babel/Babylon' does not mean 'gate of the god', as the Babylonians held, but 'confusion', and it evokes the similar sounding words 'folly' and 'flood'. Far from being the last word in human culture, it is the ultimate symbol of man's failure when he attempts to go it alone in defiance of his creator.[31]

In this carefully constructed narrative there is considerable word play but not so as to confuse, but so as to parody understandings of this sort of tower as the gateway to the heavens.

Fifthly, the larger implications of taking the story out of its canonical context must be noted.[32] In the context of Genesis 1-11 the Babel episode is a sign of humankind's catastrophic fall from grace and the judgement that results is to be distinguished clearly from God's original plan for his world. The confusion of the שׂפה of all the earth, whatever exactly this involves, should not be seen as the norm for God's world. Rather it constitutes his judgement and is immediately followed in Genesis by God's calling of Abraham through whom God's purposes of blessing for all the earth will be recovered. Derrida is reluctant to allow questions of origin or telos to govern our perspectives on the world but this is precisely what Scripture insists on. However, it is the Tower of Babel narrative, extracted from its context, that Derrida finds so congenial and to which he returns again and again. Outside of its storied context,

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[28] See for example Gn. 49:11, צידה and סותה. However it is more common for a male suffix to refer to a female referent and the ה with a male referent is more likely in archaic poetic texts. See GK 7c, 135o.

[29] Derrida, 'Des Tours', 8.

[30] See D.J. Wiseman, 'Babel,' in I.H. Marshall et al. (eds.), *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester: NP, 1996) 109-110.

[31] Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 245.

[32] In this respect see B.W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 165-78. Anderson notes that the Babel story is a carefully constructed literary unit and is in this sense quasi-independent from its context. However, he too stresses the importance of reading it in context and especially next to Gn.10.

however, Babel does indeed conjure up a labyrinth of language from which humans have no escape, and, as we will see below this does have overtones of nihilism.

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Thus, in terms of reading texts to hear what the author is saying by them, Derrida's reading of the Tower of Babel narrative has little to offer in terms of example and it is hard to imagine this way of reading texts becoming the norm in the academy. This does not mean, however, that there is no value in Derrida's reading of the Tower of Babel narrative. As with Kant's reading of the prologue to John, what needs attention and may be of worth is not so much the overall accuracy of his reading of the Tower of Babel narrative as his own philosophy and the way it connects with the text. Derrida is setting the Tower of Babel narrative at play in the context of his own discourse. From some of the points above one can see that his discourse jars with Genesis 11 at several places, but it is still possible that the connection of his discourse with that of Genesis 11 may alert us to neglected aspects of Genesis 11. And Derrida is true to Genesis 11 in so far as he alerts us to its concern with *language*.

We live on the other side of the linguistic turn[33] in philosophy, and the question of language and translation is central to postmodernism *and* to the Tower of Babel narrative. Indeed Babel has become a symbol of fragmentation and pluralism in our day demonstrated inter alia by the revival of covers bearing Bruegel's 1563 *The Tower of Babel*. George Steiner's magnificent *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*[34] and Dan Stiver's *The Philosophy of Religious Language. Sign, Symbol and Story*[35] both have Bruegel's *Tower* on their covers. Futhermore, Jeffrey Stout in his masterful *Ethics After Babel*[36] alerts us to just how common Babel is as an image today. Kafka returns to the theme of Babel continually, Maurice Blanchot relates his view of textuality to Babel,[37] Walter

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Benjamin invokes Babel in his reflections on language,[38] Gillian Rose takes the Tower of Babel narrative as her reference point in her assessment of postmodernism and its conflation of architecture and theory,[39] Julia Kristeva discusses Babel,[40] and George Steiner discusses the history of the interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative at length in *After Babel*.

Babel is clearly a symbol which resonates deeply with contemporary culture and its concern with pluralism, but most recent commentaries on Genesis do not pick up on this, despite the centrality of 'language' in the Bible. One could argue that the Christian Bible is enclosed in a 'language *inclusio*' with Babel in the Old Testament and Pentecost in the New Testament.

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[33] See for example, J.R. Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[34] Note that the second edition of Steiner's *After Babel* (Oxford: OUP, 1992) bears Bruegel's picture. The third edition (1998) changes the cover to a picture of the reconstruction of Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*.

[35] Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell,1996.

[36] Cambridge: James Clarke, 1988.

[37] See L. Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 54.

[38] Derrida, 'Des Tours, 10.

[39] See G. Rose, 'Architecture to Philosophy—the Post-Modern Complicity', in *Judaism and Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) 225-40.

[40] See J. Kristeva, Langatage: *The Unknown: An Initiation into Linguistics* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989) 98-103.

And yet the commentaries at both ends generally fail to take up this theme when they exegete these passages.[41] If you want discussions on the connection between language and Babel then, surprisingly, it is to thinkers like Julia Kristeva, Walter Benjamin, George Steiner and Jacques Derrida that one must go. It is intriguing that while biblical exegetes and theologians have little to say about Babel and Pentecost and language, Derrida cannot stay away from the Tower of Babel narrative in his reflections on language. In this respect, Derrida's reading of the Tower of Babel narrative requires careful attention.

I will proceed firstly to unpack Derrida's philosophy of language and translation as it congregates around Babel, and secondly to ask what biblical scholars have to learn from this.

IV. DERRIDA AND TRANSLATION/INTERPRETATION

For Derrida the Tower of Babel narrative is an epigraph for all discussions of translation. *Chambers English Dictionary* defines

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an epigraph as 'an inscription... a citation or motto at the beginning of a book or its part'.[42] One is tempted to digress on the connection between an epigraph and the Greek γράγειν ('to write'), thereby setting my text in play in true Derridean style. However, the Tower of Babel narrative is correctly construed as a motto for Derrida's view of language (speech and writing) as 'writing'. The theme of 'writing' does not play a major role in 'Des Tours de Babel', but related concepts are present and the idea of language as writing is central to deconstruction, and its view of interpretation. It is often noted that in the Derridean thesaurus there are a variety of terms (*e.g.*, archi-writing, *différence*, supplement, dissemination, *etc.*) which are used repeatedly to get at similar issues. From this angle Derrida's playful reading of the Tower of Babel narrative is another way of alerting us to the challenge of 'writing' or grammatology for interpretation.

Generally we work with an idea of speech and writing as types of communication. For Derrida such an approach is logocentric and in need of deconstruction. He argues that it is not communication that is the fundamental category but 'writing', with speech and linguistic communication subject to the *différence* of 'writing'. Derrida uses *writing* to refer to writing as opposed to speech *and* to that which underlies all cultural activity. This foundational sense of writing is what Derrida calls *archi-writing*. Writing, in this latter sense, is not one among other objects of inquiry but the condition of knowledge. It is the transcendental possibility of knowledge: 'Before being its object, writing is the condition of the epistemè.'[43] In this foundational sense of writing Derrida is not concerned to replace the idea of writing within the metaphysics of presence with another idea which can then become the object of further metaphysical inquiry; rather he wishes to think the origins of speech. 'Thought is deluded if it thinks to comprehend the nature of writing from a standpoint securely outside or above the field that writing so completely

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[41] A notable exception is W. Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982).

[42] Edinburgh and New York: Chambers, 1990, 480.

[43] J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 27.

commands.'[44] In *Of Grammatology* Derrida reflects at length on what he understands by writing in this foundational sense:

> Now we tend to say 'writing' for all that and more: to designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible; and also, beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself. And thus we say 'writing' for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural 'writing'. One might also speak of athletic writing, and with even greater certainty of military or political writing in view of the techniques that govern those domains today. All this to describe not only the system of notation secondarily connected with these activities but the essence and content of these activities themselves... Even before being determined as human... or nonhuman, the grammè—or the grapheme—would thus name the element.[45]

Norris explains Derrida's notion of writing as follows:

> [T]he term is closely related to that element of signifying *difference* which Saussure thought essential to the workings of language. Writing for Derrida is the 'free play' or element of undecidability within every system of communication. Its operations are precisely those which escape the self-consciousness of speech and its deluded sense of the mastery of concept over language. Writing is the endless displacement of meaning which both governs language and places it for ever beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge.[46]

Language as writing is fundamental to deconstruction, and it is Derrida's sensitivity to the difficulties that this presents to translation and interpretation that attracts him to narratives like

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the Tower of Babel narrative. For Derrida the Tower of Babel narrative captures the challenge that language presents to interpretation and translation.

Biblical scholars are aware of the different languages involved in translation and interpretation. However, they tend to assume philosophies of language at this point. For example, biblical scholars will know that in the post-Barr era one must be cautious of word studies. However, far less common will be the knowledge that James Barr mediated into biblical studies the linguistic philosophy of Saussure[47] *Of Grammatology* involves a deconstruction *inter alia* of Saussure, and Derrida, in his writings, consciously brings his view of language as writing to bear on the nest of problems involved in translation and interpretation, provoking us at the very least into consciousness at this point.

I cannot do justice to all the Derridean terms that crop up in 'Des Tours de Babel' or his difficult reflections on Benjamin's view of translation. Here I can only take up some of the key terms in Derridean discourse that are central to 'Des Tours de Babel'.

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[44] C. Norris, *Derrida* (London: Fontana, 1987) 95.

[45] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 9.

[46] C. Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) 28.

[47] C. Bartholomew, 'Three Horizons: Hermeneutics from the Other End—An Evaluation of Anthony Thiselton's Hermeneutic Proposals', *European Journal of Theology* VI/2 (1996) 124 [now on-line at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ejt/horizons_bartholomew.pdf].

The first issue to assess is the proper name. The proper name 'Babel' should, according to Derrida, remain untranslatable, but by means of an 'associative confusion' that Hebrew makes possible, it is also a common noun signifying confusion. According to Derrida, because we generally read this narrative in translation, we tend not to notice the different levels at which 'Babel' functions, for in translation 'Babel', is translated as a proper noun and not as also a common noun.

> That it be by way of a pun or a confused association matters little: 'Babel' could be understood in one language as meaning 'confusion', And from then on, just as Babel is at once proper name and common noun, confusion also becomes proper name and common noun, the one as the homonym of the other, the synonym as well, but not the equivalent, because there could be no question of confusing

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> them in their value. It has for the translator no satisfactory solution.[48]

The common noun refers to both the confusion of languages and the state of confusion into which the builders were thrown. 'The signification of "confused" is confused, at least double.'[49] Derrida writes:

> But Voltaire suggests something else again: Babel means not only confusion in the double sense of the word, but also the name of the father, more precisely and more commonly, the name of God as name of father. The city would bear the name of God the father and of the father of the city that is called confusion. God, the God, would have marked with his patronym a communal space, that city where understanding is no longer possible. And understanding is no longer possible when there are only proper names, and understanding is no longer possible when there are no longer proper names.[50]

Derrida's meditation here on the proper name is connected with his treatments of the proper name elsewhere.[51] The proper name is a way in which people try to argue that the meaning of language can be pinned down. One would anticipate that a proper name would ensure a stable connection between language and the world, and some philosophers of language have seen this as paradigm of how language relates to the world. Frege, for example, thinks of sentences as proper names of propositions which refer to 'the true' or 'the false'.[52] As Bennington notes, '[e]ven if we had to accept what Derrida says about language, here is a moment that escapes his famous textuality, and which gives that textuality a grounding which limits the excessive importance he attempts to give to *différance'*.

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The proper name, remarks Bennington, is the keystone of logocentrism.[53]

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[48] Derrida, 'Des Tours', 8.
[49] Ibid., 4.
[50] Ibid., 4.
[51] For references and a helpful discussion of the proper name in Derrida's philosophy see G. Bennington and J. Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 104-114.
[52] For an introductory discussion of Frege on proper names see A. Miller, *Philosophy of Language* (London: UCL Press, 1998) 10-13.
[53] Bennington and Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, 105.

But, for Derrida, no proper name, including that most proper name 'God', escapes writing. Proper names too must operate in the system of differences that constitute language, and are therefore subject to the same slippage and play. From this perspective one can see how well Derrida's reading of Tower of Babel narrative fits with this understanding of the world. 'Babel', name of God, is inescapably both proper noun and common name, so that '[w]e are already in writing with proper names'.[54]

The second issue to assess is the problem of understanding language and translation/ interpretation as communication. This emerges most clearly in Derrida's essay 'Signature, Event, Context'[55] and in Derrida's subsequent response to Searle.[56] In the second half of 'Signature, Event, Context' Derrida deconstructs the speech act approach to language of Austin.[57] Speech act theory is innovative in its approach to language as performative-language is understood as a means by which humans act: we warn, we call, we assert, and so on with language. However, as Derrida notes it is still a philosophy of language as a vehicle of communication, and language as writing makes this deeply problematic. In 'Signature, Event, Context' Derrida opposes polysemia and dissemination (see below) to a communicative approach to language and texts. The non-saturation of context and the iterability of writing ruptures the notion of communication as transport of meaning.

Communication is problematic in one language, according to Derrida, but think of the challenge in translation from one language to another. And for Derrida this is precisely what the Tower of Babel narrative is all about:

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> Telling at least of the inadequation of one tongue to another; of one place in the encyclopaedia to another, of language to itself and to meaning, and so forth, it also tells of the need for figuration, for myth, for tropes, for twists and turns, for translation inadequate to compensate for that which multiplicity denies us. In this sense it would be the myth of the origin of myth, the metaphor of metaphor, the narrative of narrative, the translation of translation, and so on.[58]

It is very difficult in practice to know what approach to language one is left with after the communicative approach is deconstructed. This difficulty manifests itself in Derrida's convoluted discussion of Benjamin's view of translation in which 'Translation does not have as essential mission any *communication*'.[59] Derrida immediately goes on to say that the recognition that communication is not the essential for poetic or sacred texts 'does not concern the communicative structure of language but rather the hypothesis of a communicable content that could be strictly distinguished from the linguistic act of communication'.[60] If this means that a text communicates via its entirety that is surely true, but Derrida appears caught between denying and affirming the communicative nature of texts, and not least biblical ones. Indeed .Derrida concludes in this way:

[54] *Ibid.*,105.

[55] In J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982) 307-330.

[56] J. Derrida; 'Limited Inc abc', *Glyph* 2 (1977) 162-254.

[57] J. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: OUP, 1962/1975).

[58] Derrida,'Des Tours', 3.

[59] *Ibid.*,14.

[60] *Ibid.*, 14.

> A translation would not seek to say this or that, to transport this or that content, to communicate such a charge of meaning, but to re-mark the affinity among languages, to exhibit its own possibilities.[61]

The third issue to assess is dissemination. Derrida makes much of polysemia and dissemination in texts. Polysemia indicates that words have more than one meaning or what we might call a semantic field. Dissemination indicates that the polysemia cannot be controlled. Norris refers in this respect to Derrida's contribution to *Deconstraction and Criticism*

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in which the topic is *The Triumph of Life*, a poem by Shelley. Norris writes:

> [Derrida] makes no pretence of 'interpreting' the poem but uses its title and random associative hints as a springboard into regions of giddying uncertainty where details merge and cross in a joyful breakdown of all proprietory limits. Any talk of meaning or structure is ineluctably 'caught up in a process which it does not control', which for Derrida signals the total dissolution of those boundaries that mark off one text from another, or that try to interpose between poem and commentary... This gambit is pushed to the limit by a footnote, addressed to the translator, which runs the full length of Derrida's text and constantly adverts to the impossible nature of the whole undertaking—the way in which translation exemplifies the 'abysmal' slippages and detours of all understanding.[62]

In his reading of the Tower of Babel narrative Derrida makes much of dissemination in his play on the link between שֵׁם ('name') and dissemination (see Section II above).

V. BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND DERRIDA

Exploration of the contours of Derrida's philosophy of language via the concepts we have analysed above enables one to see how Derrida would come to affirm setting a text in play as a/the legitimate way of handling texts. Pursued consistently the logic of writing, the proper name, language as (non)communication and dissemination make determinate textual interpretation impossible.[63] In a negative way this is the great strength of Derrida; he challenges us to be consistent about our philosophy of language in translation and

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interpretation. Biblical scholars often uncritically assume philosophies of language in their biblical exegesis, but in the light of the postmodern turn and the emergence of diverse philosophies of language like that of Derrida, it is harder and harder to remain uncritical in this area. Derrida foregrounds the complexities of language and interpretation, and, in my opinion, compels one to face the theological issues at stake in language and interpretation.

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[61] *Ibid.*,19.

[62] Norris, *Deconstruction*, 114, 115.

[63] There is considerable disagreement about the implications of deconstruction for interpretation. For different views see and compare J. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), C. Norris, *Resources of Realism* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1997), and G. Steiner, *Real Presences* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1989).

For example, biblical scholars tend to think of translation as what one does before interpretation begins. In this sense translation is regarded as relatively unproblematic. Derrida's approach suggests that all the challenges of hermeneutics /writing are already present in translation. No one has alerted me more strongly to the potential truth of this than George Steiner in his majestic *After Babel*. Steiner maintains the following: 'Any thorough reading of a text out of the preset of one's own language and literature is a manifold act of interpretation.'[64] How much more then is this the case with biblical translation of ancient texts out of distant cultures? Bear in mind the number of languages in the world[65] and the flux of language, and one begins to get a feel for the challenge of translation. Steiner writes:

Language is in perpetual change... Language... is the most salient model of Heraclitean flux. It alters at every moment in perceived time. The sum of linguistic events is not only increased but qualified by each new event... When we think about language, the object of our reflection alters in the process... [O]rdinary language is, literally at every moment, subject to mutation.[66]

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This largely coincides with recent arguments for the fundamental metaphoricity of language. Aristotle long ago and Austin and Searle more recently make literal language basic, carefully distinguishing it from the 'parasite' of metaphor. Such a distinction is a bulwark against the flux of language embodied in metaphorical models. Mary Hesse, a strong advocate of the metaphoricity of language, articulates the view that metaphor is a fundamental form of language, and prior historically and logically to literal language. Hesse also articulates the implication of this: ordinary language is constantly changing.[67]

Although the debate about metaphor and language is complex,[68] suffice it to say that the sort of arguments for the fundamental metaphoricity of language (as clearly articulated in Lakoff and Johnson's work *Metaphors We Live By*) are, in my view, compelling. The implications for hermeneutics and biblical interpretation are immense. This type of reflection confronts us with the historicity of translation/interpretation and the lingual challenge it presents. At a practical level, this means that biblical scholars should take translation more seriously. It is rare to find a biblical scholar engaged in a project like Robert Alter's new translation of Genesis.[69] A conscious philosophy of language would, I suggest, make this type of project more common.

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[64] G. Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (3rd ed.; Oxford: OUP, 1998) 18.

[65] Steiner, *Ibid*., 53ff. notes that four to five thousand languages are thought to be in use now, but that '[a] genuine philosophy of language and socio-psychology of verbal acts must grapple with the phenomenon and rationale of the human 'invention and retention of anywhere between five and ten thousand distinct tongues'.

[66] Steiner, *Ibid*., 18.

[67] See, *e.g*., M. Hesse, 'The Cognitive Claims of Metaphor', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 11/1 (1998) 1-16.

[68] On metaphor and language see for example P. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning* (London and New York: Routledge, 1975), M.E. Botha, 'Metaphor and Analogy Revisited', unpublished paper, 'Framework for a Taxonomy of Scientific Metaphor', *Philosophia Reformata* 53/2 (1988) 143-70, M. Johnson and G. Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[69] R. Alter, *Genesis. Translation and Commentary* (London and New York: Norton, 1996).

But we must ask: Is faithful translation possible? The logical implication of deconstruction is, I think, a 'no'. Steiner and Alter think it is.[70] At its deepest level philosophy of language confronts us, I suspect, with our philosophy of history and our worldview. A Derridean or metaphorical view of

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language combined with modern historicism is a nihilistic cocktail. And, although it needs detailed exposition which cannot be done here, I think Steiner is right to say:

> It is Derrida's strength to have seen so plainly that the issue is neither linguistic-aesthetic nor philosophical in any traditional, debatable sense... The issue is, quite simply, that of the meaning of meaning as it is re-insured by the postulate of the existence of God. 'In the beginning was the Word.' There was no such beginning, says deconstruction; only the play of sounds and markers amid the mutations of time.[71]

Steiner points out more clearly the implication of one's worldview for interpretation when he says:

> [D]econstruction teaches us that where there is no 'face of God' for the semantic marker to turn to, there can be no transcendent or decidable intelligibility. The break with the postulate of the sacred is the break with any stable, potentially ascertainable meaning of meaning... the seductive force of the deconstructive semiotics of the 'after-Word' is that of a rigorously consequent nihilism or nullity.[72]

If Steiner is right, as I think he is, then the ultimate challenge that Derrida presents to biblical interpretation is to refuse to let Babel be the first and last word, and to insist on contextualising Babel within creation, fall and redemption. Babel must be balanced by Pentecost. Derrida, as I read him, hands us over to the flux, ultimately; we are left with Babel without Pentecost. Caputo rightly argues that Derrida yields a cold hermeneutic at the mercy of the flux of history. This should be resisted, but not with a return to Athens or Vienna, but *via* Pentecost with a humble trust in the challenges facing us in our quest for knowledge in the now/ not yet.

A Christian response to Derrida must not only discern the idolatry but recognise the insights and formulate a better

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philosophy of language. Derrida himself invokes the notion of Messianic promise in his philosophy of translation. As Seerveld exhorts us:

> [W]e Western Christians have a thesaurus of traditions whose encumbered words of life, often taken to be stigmata by current secularists, need reforming transmission, or we caretakers and philosophical chefs will have defaulted on being faithful to Christ's historical sacrifice under Pontius Pilate.[73]

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[70] See Alter, *Ibid.*, ix-xlvii and Steiner, *After Babel*, 312ff.
[71] Steiner, *Real Presences*,132.
[72] Steiner, *Ibid.*, 132-33.
[73] C. Seerveld, 'Footprints in the Snow', *Philosophia Reformata* 56/1 (1991) 33-34.

Within such a perspective one of the great challenges facing Christians is to sketch out the contours of a Christian philosophy of language.

Scripture gives us some indications of the direction such a quest might take. The Bible opens with God speaking and the resulting creation corresponds perfectly to his creative word. Adam is called upon to imaginatively name all the animals.[74] Babel constitutes a (second) fall in which the God-given diversity of languages[75] becomes a problem and opportunity for idolatry and antagonism. But the Old Testament holds out the hope of a new purification of the lip of the world (Zp. 3:9). Pentecost signifies the reverse of Babel, to be consummated in the new heavens and new earth in which linguistic pluralism celebrates the Messiah. Not one of these elements is easy to understand. But they alerts us to the fact that a Christian view of language will need to take creation and history seriously and the problem of the 'fall' of language, as well as Pentecostal presence in language.[76]

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[74] Steiner, *After Babel*, 61 seems to me to overstate the case when he likens Adam's language to that of God: 'the Ur-Sprache had a congruence with reality such as no tongue has had after Babel... Words and objects dovetailed perfectly... The tongue of Eden was like a flawless glass; a light of total understanding streamed through it.'

[75] Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation*, 177, speaks helpfully of the 'extravagant generosity of the Creator'.

[76] This is a revised version of the 1998 Tyndale Philosophy of Religion lecture. I am grateful for the helpful responses from the audience, all of which I have taken into account in this revision.