

SOLOMON
AMONG THE
POSTMODERNS

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Peter J. Leithart



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To John Arthur,
my first grandson

“Go then eat your bread in happiness,
and drink wine with a cheerful heart;
for God has already approved your works.”
Ecclesiastes 9:7

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Acknowledgments

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For several months during 2006, I was part of a postmodernism reading group that included Joshua Appel, Douglas Wilson, Nate Wilson, and occasional others. Doug and Nate were always far more suspicious of and hostile to postmodern thinkers than I, but I learned a great deal from their bracing challenges. I am sure Doug will still find things to disagree with in this little book, but it would have been a poorer book without him.

For a number of years, I have been dedicating books to my children. I've covered them all, and have considered beginning to dedicate books to my grandchildren. At the moment, this is easy enough, since I have only one, but I've been warned that, with ten children, I may well have to keep writing into the next millennium to cover the next generation. In the teeth of this sober wisdom, I have initiated a reckless trend by dedicating this book to John Arthur Leithart, my first grandchild, in hopes that he will live to see a world that is truly and thoroughly postmodern.

Peter J. Leithart
Peniel Hall
Moscow, Idaho
Second week of Lent, 2007



Introduction

Before the Beginning

When I started *Solomon among the Postmoderns*, I was aiming it mainly at anti-postmodern Christians (let's call them APCs). By presenting central postmodern themes in a way that postmodernists would recognize, I hoped to isolate the specific places where Christians must challenge postmodern theory. Many of the most vocal APCs highlight epistemological issues, challenging what they perceive as postmodern "relativism." Epistemology is not, however, as central as many APCs suggest, and at least the most sophisticated postmodern writers rarely mean to say the outlandish things APCs attribute to them (e.g., "texts can mean whatever we want them to mean"). Simon Blackburn has wisely commented that there is no "recent philosophical movement that could have been stopped in its tracks by pointing out that it is easier to find your way about in daylight than in the dark, or that if someone tells you that a bottle contains gin and you act accordingly, you have a beef against him if it contains kerosene." While admitting that some postmoderns "might have carelessly let loose remarks that seem to imply the opposite," he suggests that "they probably misspoke themselves

as they tried to say something more interesting.”¹ I’ve wanted to discover those more interesting things that postmodernists are trying to say, and as I pursued those more interesting things I increasingly found that eschatology is far more central to postmodernism, and to the Christian response to postmodernism, than epistemology.

I hoped also to show APCs that postmodernity is, in the sense that sociologists generally use the term, simply a fact. Whether we want to call it “postmodernity” or something else, and whatever we still share with the modernities of the past few centuries, we need *some* term to describe the remarkable set of interrelated cultural and political changes that marked the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first: the collapse of the bipolar political world of the cold war; the globalization of trade, finance, and business; the establishment of an American cultural and, increasingly, political empire; the renewed vigor of fundamentalist Islam in world politics, the belated discovery of the dominance of Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere, and the dissolution of denominational boundaries among post-Reformation churches; the rapid spread of new information and communication technologies; the rise of advertising, entertainment, and popular culture as *the* shared culture of the United States; new trends in immigration and urbanization; the related shifts in how theorists talk about knowledge and language, the self, and power.

One is tempted to exaggerate or to minimize the magnitude of these kinds of cultural and political shifts. We minimize these changes because change is the rule at every moment of history, and it’s almost always possible to find some precedent

1. “Up from Bullshit,” *New Republic*, October 23, 2006. Blackburn is reviewing Harry Frankfurt’s *On Truth*, a sequel to his 2005 essay *On Bullshit*.

for the present in the past. We exaggerate changes because it's our life we're talking about, and we want it to be important. We need some historical balance here: though we are always living in "times of transition," some times *are* more transitional than others. We seem to be in one of those times. Some of the trends I've listed above are, I think, symptoms of an epochal shift in world history, of the kind that occurs only every few centuries. The realignment of Christian denominations, along with the southern tilt of contemporary Christianity, is among these symptoms, as is the erosion of the modern nation-state's monopoly on geopolitical clout. Other trends are pendulum swings within the modern paradigm. To respond wisely, however, Christians will have to examine more carefully what's actually taking place around us. We will want to resist some of these trends, but to resist "postmodernity" without qualification is like resisting the end of the second millennium. It's too late now, and it was going to happen anyway.

As I researched, however, it became clear that I also needed to respond to pro-postmodern Christians (let's call these PPCs), many of whom have adopted the inflated rhetoric of secular postmodernists. Convinced that postmodernism is an entirely new thing in history, without father or mother or genealogy, wholly different from the demon modernity that preceded it, PPCs encourage other Christians to shed their old-fashioned commitments to "truth" and their so-yesterday binary opposition of right and wrong and get in step with the spirit of the times. Increasingly, I have wanted not only to clarify what postmodernity is and what postmodernists are saying but also to bump some PPCs off their bandwagon.

Though each chapter includes some biblical-theological response to the issues raised, most of this book is expositional. I have aimed to make postmodern theory as plausible as possible,

both by showing connections with postmodern cultural and political realities and by attempting (with what success I don't know) to describe postmodern theory at something like street level. I don't propose an "agenda" for the church in postmodern times, partly because "agendas" have a tendency to perpetuate the worst features of modern Christianity. Of course Christians must act, and act in ways that thoughtfully take account of the world in which we are acting. If "agenda" means no more than that, then I am all in favor of agendas. In that sense, St. Benedict had an "agenda" for Europe. Agendas, however, have a tendency to shortcut a thoughtful taking-account of the world and a tendency to treat Christianity as a spiritual machine. That is what I want to avoid. At times the Christian agenda may be to wait and do nothing, which, come to think of it, was a large part of Benedict's "agenda." Instead of an agenda, I propose a *stance*, a stance of faith, joy, and celebration in the midst of postmodern mist.

Beginnings

Where shall we begin? That's not an easy question. Every beginning assumes something prior. Every beginning is the beginning *of* something, and a beginning is recognizable as a beginning only because of the something that it begins.

Is a cause the beginning of an effect? We usually think so, but things are more complicated than they appear to be. Without the effect, would we recognize the cause as a cause? Does a flying baseball become the cause of a broken window before it breaks the window? It seems not. A baseball that narrowly misses a window is not a cause of breaking windows, though it may cause fear and relief in the boy who hit the ball. If the baseball becomes a cause only when it achieves an effect, which,

if either, comes first? Is the cause the beginning of the effect, or the effect the beginning of the cause?

Have you ever found a pure spring, a spring with no water coming from it? Or is a spring a spring only because a stream flows from it? In itself, the beginning of a road is nothing. It is not the beginning of a road unless the beginning continues as a road.

When did your life begin? Biologically, when a sperm united with an egg. But your life would not have begun without a father to provide sperm and a mother to provide the egg. Even if your life began in a petri dish, the sperm and egg came from someone, and even if we someday figure out how to confect sperm and egg in a laboratory, there would still be scientists and scientific research before the beginning of any life. Even the beginning of a human life is not an absolute beginning.

There is always something on the far side of every beginning, beyond the beginning, which may be the real beginning. But then there is another beginning on the far side of that, and so on and on. There is also something on the near side of every beginning, and only by this is a beginning identifiable, knowable, definable as a beginning. As Solomon said, "That which is has been already, and that which will be has already been" (Eccles. 3:15). The search for beginnings is vapor and shepherding wind.

Searching for a beginning, we might soon be facing an infinite regress, or, worse, an infinite book, a Borgesian nightmare. Yet we must begin, so let's begin with my title. The title of this book is *Solomon among the Postmoderns*. Solomon I shall return to by and by. Let's begin with the postmoderns.

Immediately we are faced with questions that occur before the beginning. Before we begin, we have to consider how we are going to use the words we are going to use. *Solomon* is

specific enough, but *postmodern* is used so often and so variably that it has suffered the devaluation that always follows inflation. Does it actually refer to *anything*, or is it useful only for faddish intellectuals to assert their intellectual superiority to the darkened masses? To what kind of reality, if any, does the word refer?

Clearly, *postmodern* is a generalization, and any generalization must stretch out to cover a large set of particular phenomena. Every name expresses a judgment that is a generalization. If I say a man is a “scoundrel,” I mean he engages in a particular set of behaviors and displays in those behaviors a certain recurring character, the character of scoundrelhood. *Scoundrel* is a generalization, a judgment, based on my observation that he cheats at cards, flirts with women while ignoring his wife, betrays friends in matters of deepest consequence. If all those observations are accurate, the label is accurate, even if the same man takes good care of his aging mother, occasionally gives a dime to a beggar, or rubs the ears of his chocolate lab.

Unless we are going to accept the radical nominalism of Nietzsche and assign each individual leaf a proper name, we can't make do without generalizations. Even proper names, as I discuss in chapter 3, have been described as generalizations, stretching out to cover what some conceive as a sequence of quite different persons. To be *perfectly* precise, we would need to assign a new proper name to each particular thing at each passing moment. That is the way of insanity. If, as Nietzsche argues, every noun generalizes and so does violence to the unique individuality of the thing it names, it's a violence we cannot live without.² Generalizations simplify complex realities, but simplification is not necessarily falsehood.

2. For the record, I don't believe “violence” is a good description of what happens when we generalize or name.

When we employ generalizations about events, cultures, societies, or epochs (all themselves generalizations), the complexity of the reality covered is far greater, and the generalization threatens to stretch until it tears. That could be embarrassing, yet again we cannot help risking the embarrassment. What we call the “Battle of Actium” is a highly complex set of specific actions and reactions by many hundreds of individuals, yet no one would want to toss out the phrase as useless. And of course to speak of the “Roman Empire” is to speak of something infinitely more complex than a single battle. Generalizations are inevitable when we are dealing with historical phenomena as much as when we are dealing with individual human beings. Given sufficient evidence, we may speak of a “society of scoundrels” as well as of *a* scoundrel. We may speak of a Parliament of Fools as well as of a fool. We may speak of an epoch of incredulity as well as of an unbeliever.

One of the complexities here is that our generalizations are among the phenomena we are attempting to generalize about. One of the features of postmodern culture, for example, is that many people today call our culture “postmodern.” Every time we talk about postmodernism, we contribute to the formation and development of the reality of postmodernism, because postmodernism is partly made up of the public discourse about postmodernism. This is a circle, but not, I hope, a vicious one. Like generalization, this circularity cannot be avoided.

Despite the complications, I will work on the assumption that the terms *modernity* and *postmodernity*, *modernism* and *postmodernism*, are useful generalizations about reality.³ To what sorts

3. Writers commonly distinguish “postmodernity,” as an objectively factual social and political condition, from “postmodernism,” which usually denotes trends in theory, philosophy, and culture. Though this distinction gets at some important factors, Mike Featherstone has rightly noted that one of the key features of “postmodernity” as a set of social and political facts is the intrusion of culture in economic, political, and social life. Thus postmodernism cannot really be separated from postmodernity. When I use

of realities do they refer? *Modernity* and *postmodernity*, *modernism* and *postmodernism* refer to “cultural formations,” more or less coherent sets of assumptions and beliefs, practices, institutions and structures, symbols and stories, styles of thought and behavior, leading metaphors and moods. Of course not everyone who is identifiably modern holds to exactly the same beliefs and responds to the same symbols as everyone else who is identifiably modern; not all the features of modernity are unique to modernity; and not everyone who lives in an age that is identifiably modern partakes of the mood and ethos of modernity. *Modern* and *postmodern* are, as I’ve said, generalizations, and do not pretend to cover every specific case. To call an age “modern” or “postmodern” is to say that certain identifiable assumptions, beliefs, practices, institutions, and styles are dominant in that age, though assessing the dominant ethos of an age incurs all the kinds of complications I have been discussing, and more. To claim, as many do, that we have moved from a “modern” to a “postmodern” culture is to say that the assumptions, beliefs, practices, institutions and styles have recently changed in significant ways.

Both components of the term *postmodern* alert us to the fact that postmodernity has a father, identified as “modernity.” And that father too had a father, and that father a father, and so the genealogy stretches back to Adam. We are again faced with the challenge of beginnings, but let’s bite the bullet and start with the Renaissance.⁴ Let us begin, in postmodern fashion, not with a definition but with a story. Let us say, In the beginning was the Renaissance . . .

postmodernity, the term is meant to include the theoretical reflection usually referred to as *postmodernism*, and throughout this book I emphasize the objective social and political conditions of which postmodern theory is a part. When I talk about the theoretical side of postmodernity, I use clumsy phrases like “postmodern theory.”

4. It’s an ironic starting point, since the term *Renaissance*, like the term *postmodern*, includes a reference to an earlier age, but it is an irony I will embrace.