

**The Authority of Scripture in a Postmodern World:  
God's Word Breaks Open the Prison House of Language**

**Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary  
Senior Dogmatics  
John P. Mattek  
11/15/04**

***“Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.” Genesis 2:19***

God gave man great power with the ability to create words. The prison house theory of language attests to this power. It compares language to a prison house, which locks the individual in a cell of subjectivity where reality and truth are formed by linguistic symbols. However, the prison house theory fails to mention God’s power over language, namely, that his communication transcends language. Therefore it threatens the objectivity of the Word of God because it denies objective truth in language.

The broad purpose of this paper is to show the authority of Scripture in a postmodern world. The prison house theory of language is a small cog in the postmodern analytical engine, but it plays a key role. Language is vital to postmodernists because they believe society develops and communicates truth with words. This paper will focus on the prison house theory because to refute the postmodern perspective in this area, is to refute much of what they believe as truth. <sup>1</sup>

The prison house theory of language is somewhat ambiguous as an element of postmodernism, which, as a whole rejects the logic and reason needed to define it. As a result this paper may use the terms, “prison house theory of language” and “postmodern theory of language,” interchangeably. The prison house theory is also hard to track because - like postmodernism in general - it developed over many years. The expression, “prison-house of language,” is already found in the nineteenth-century writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. “We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison-house of language; for we cannot reach further than the doubt which asks whether the limit we see is really a limit,” he wrote. <sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> McCallum, p. 37

<sup>2</sup> Jameson, preface

The postmodern theory of language can be linked to the general semantics movement initiated by Alfred Korzybski with his publication of *Science and Sanity* in 1933.<sup>3</sup> Korzybski believed that language could only be effective if it was translated back into the objectivity of the “unspeakable level.” “Whatever we say will not be the objective level, which remains fundamentally unspeakable,” he asserted. For example he pointed out that one could sit on the object of a chair, but not on the noise made or the name applied to it. Korzybski related the shortcomings of language to the uncritical copying methods of pre-human stages of evolution. “Even the primitive man and the child are ‘intelligent’ enough to observe and copy, but not informed enough . . . to discriminate between the reactions on the psychological levels of animals and the typical responses which man with his more complex nervous system should have,” he wrote.<sup>4</sup>

Korzybski’s language theory reflected that of the ancient Greeks because it deferred to an unknown source of knowledge. Benjamin Whorf challenged this view - which had persisted for 2500 years - and significantly influenced the postmodern theory of language with his 1956 publication of *Language, Thought, and Reality*.<sup>5</sup>

Whorf understood that humankind was limited by language. He wrote, “They are as unaware of the beautiful and inexorable systems that control them as a cowherd is of cosmic rays.” Yet he seemed to believe that the study of language could lead to an understanding of what Korzybski perceived as the “unspeakable level,” namely, the universal source of knowledge behind all language. Whorf stated, “Science has not yet freed itself from the illusory necessities of common logic which are only at bottom necessities of grammatical pattern in Western Aryan grammar . . . Science, if it survives the impending darkness, will next take up the consideration of

---

<sup>3</sup> McCallum, p.43

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 34-37

<sup>5</sup> Stewart Chase in the preface to Whorf’s *Language, Thought, and Reality*

linguistic principles and divest itself of these illusory linguistic necessities, too long held to be the substance of Reason itself.” He admitted this would be a time-consuming process to consider the complexities of grammar, such as plurality, gender, tenses, voices, parts of speech, etc . . . He also acknowledged the difficulty of standing aside one’s own language to evaluate such things.

Nonetheless, Whorf saw linguistics as a vehicle to the “Cosmos” or “Reason.”<sup>6</sup>

Fredric Jameson, on the other hand, saw the study of language as a journey that ended at the *individual* as the arbiter of truth. Jameson wrote one of the defining works of postmodern language theory with his 1972 publication *The Prison House of Language*.<sup>7</sup> In it he described the prison house theory, writing, “It [language] is nowhere all present at once, nowhere taking the form of an object or a substance, and yet making its existence felt at every moment of our thought.” Jameson related the prison house effect to a lack of natural language. “Where in a given language ‘ng’ may be a distinctive feature, in another it will have no functional value whatsoever even if it does happen to occur, so that in this sense no generalizations are possible about the individual components of the linguistic process,” he wrote.<sup>8</sup> Therefore he emphasized the speaker, because language was arbitrary and nothing but an analytical operation in time. To this point he concluded his book, with a hint of despair: “There is no immutable fatality at work in the history of philosophy to bring such a new methodological development to pass. Yet it is only, it seems to me, at the price of such a development, that . . . language and history can be reconciled,” he wrote.<sup>9</sup>

Jameson related his views to the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Derrida originated the school of “deconstruction,” a postmodern strategy of analysis that has greatly influenced the study of language. Deconstruction is defined as a discipline where “the critic claims there is no meaning to be found in the actual text, but only in the various, often mutually irreconcilable, ‘virtual texts’

---

<sup>6</sup> Whorf, p. 137-270

<sup>7</sup> McCallum, p. 43

<sup>8</sup> Jameson, p. 17-24

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216

constructed by readers in their search for meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Deconstruction theory corresponds to the prison house theory because it operates on the premise that linguistic symbols are subjective and therefore cannot accurately portray truth.

What does all this mean for religion? More specifically, how does the prison house theory affect the objective truth of God’s Word? First of all, it must be stated that there were very few references to religion or God in the above-mentioned literature. Korzybski, Whorf, and Jameson were content to stay within the realm of language and philosophy. Therefore one could agree with Pastor Dennis McCallum, who in his book *The Death of Truth* wrote, “Most postmodernists are not against religion. They are only against religious teaching that holds to objective truth.”<sup>11</sup> Postmodern language theory may not explicitly deny the objectivity of God’s Word. However, if people are led to believe that it is dangerous to objectify language, then it is a small thing to think there is no objective truth in Scripture.

The prison house theory can also lead to the postmodern view that most religions are valid. This is because they believe that cultures cannot objectively critique each other since they are bound to the subjectivity of their own language. There is some truth to this logic. For example, Hebrew thinking is different from Greco-Roman, which is different from the thinking of today. However, sometimes worldviews are culturally accepted and fundamentally false, such as belief in a flat earth for example.<sup>12</sup> Therefore it is possible for cultures to objectively critique each other.

Postmodern language theory can lead to actions that harm society. For example, the National Institutes of Health recommended federal funding for producing, harvesting, and destroying human fetuses for laboratory experimentation. Their reason was that “personhood” is a social construct; human beings are defined, not born. McCallum provided another example by

---

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Goldstein at [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

<sup>11</sup> McCallum, p. 203

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 40

asking what would happen if culture designated a certain race as non-human, and then tried to get rid of it. “If reality is culture-bound, it would be an act of imperialism for another culture to intervene. Without an absolute standard, there is no basis for judging a Nazi or a misogynist any more than there is for defining a human life,” he wrote.<sup>13</sup>

The prison house theory can lead to a rejection of the moral standards by which things are judged. Therefore it can also lead to despair, such as Jameson displayed at the conclusion of his book. Benjamin Whorf also seemed troubled by the power of language. He believed that science would be lost in the “impending darkness” unless it took up the consideration of linguistic principles.

Postmodern linguistic despair is completely unnecessary because God’s love is objectively true, and transcends the boundaries of language. The apostle Paul gave us this comfort in Romans 3:23-24. *“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus,”* he wrote. God speaks the objective truth of law and gospel in his Word. This message of salvation through Christ is for every language, tribe, and nation. *“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,”* Paul wrote in Galatians 3:26-28.

God’s Word cannot be contained by the prison house of language because its mode of operation is both psychological and supernatural. Just like any language, God’s Word addresses the heart, intellect, and will. *“I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.”* (Psalm 119:32) *“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”* (2 Corinthians 4:6) Yet it also transcends the boundaries of language because it is filled with the

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 41

power of God. *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”* (Romans 1:16) *“The Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”* (Hebrews 4:12) *“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”* (James 1:21)<sup>14</sup>

The Holy Spirit empowers Scripture to affect the transformation of souls; something no human word could ever do. *“The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”* (1 Corinthians 2:14) *“Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”* (1 Corinthians 12:3) *“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of a human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”* (John 1:12-13)<sup>15</sup>

Yet God graciously communicates to the sinner in ways that conform to reality. *“The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”* (John 6:63) *“Sanctify them by the truth, your word is truth.”* (John 17:17) *“Jesus answered, ‘You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this reason I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.’”* (John 18:37)<sup>16</sup>

Therefore God speaks through human languages, which intrinsically are not the Word of God. Sounds, syllables, and grammar (*materia Scripturae*) are merely vehicles for the divine truth (*forma Scripturae*), which endures apart from language. *“After the king burned the scroll*

---

<sup>14</sup> Meyer, p. 32-33

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 33

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 39

*containing the words that Baruch had written at Jeremiah's dictation, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah.*" (Jeremiah 36:27) *"Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens."*

(Psalm 119:89) *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."* (Matthew 24:35)<sup>17</sup>

God's Word also transcends language because it inspires believers to respond in ways that cross the boundaries of culture. This happens because Spirit-led praise and thanks originate in the heart as a joyful emotion. *"Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything."* (Ephesians 5:19-20) For thousands of years the joy of the gospel has led believers from many different cultures to respond in ways that transcend language: from Solomon's temple to the gothic cathedrals of Europe, from Greek orthodox icons to the stained-glass windows in many Lutheran churches, from King David's psalms to Handel's *The Messiah*. In this way, the Christian Church – past, present, and future – is united in one voice of thanks and praise to God. Whether it is music, poetry, service orders, art, or architecture – forms may differ, but Spirit-led love is the same.<sup>18</sup>

When God gave man the ability to create words, he gave him power over creation. Postmodern linguists recognize this power perhaps better than anyone. They understand that human behavior is largely guided by language because individuals think and communicate in words. They recognize the arbitrary nature of words because there is no natural language. There is truth in their proposal that individuals communicate in a prison house of language dominated by large scale patterning of grammatical categories like plurality, gender, tense, voice and other parts of speech.

However, they fail to mention God's power over language, namely, that his communication transcends language. Therefore the prison house theory of language threatens the objectivity of the Word of God because it denies objective truth in language. It can also lead to a rejection of the

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 19

<sup>18</sup> Kremer, p. 30

divine standards by which all things are judged, and consequently can damage society. Finally, postmodern language theory can lead to doubt, despair, and even unbelief.

God's Word breaks open the prison house of language because it transcends human language. Its law is a burden to every heart, but its gospel in Christ is salvation for all who believe. Christians all around the world are united in faith by the Spirit, who supernaturally transforms souls through the message of this Word – a Word that remains universally perfect and true despite the shortcomings of human language. May God grant everyone the comfort and joy of the authority of his Word in a postmodern world. And may the Spirit lead all believers to give thanks and praise in ways that go beyond the boundaries of language.

***“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:19-20***

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Degner, Steven C. *Not Ashamed of the Gospel in a Postmodern Age*. WLS, Essay File, 1999.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Prison House of Language*. Princeton University Press, 1972.

Korzybski, Alfred. *Science and Sanity*. The International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Company, 1933.

Kremer, Kenneth. *For One Another: Touching Hearts in a Changing World*. NPH, 2001.

McCallum, Dennis. *The Death of Truth: Responding to Multiculturalism, the Rejection of Reason, and the New Postmodern Diversity*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996.

Meyer, John P. *Dogmatics Notes Vol. II*. Revised, WLS, 1985.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee. *Language, Thought, and Reality*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1956.

[www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)