

Dr. David Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 16, Deconstructive Approaches Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 16, Deconstructive Approaches, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt from Dr. Dave Mathewson's hermeneutics course explores post-structuralist and postmodern approaches to biblical interpretation. **Deconstruction**, championed by Jacques Derrida, argues that texts lack stable meaning, instead generating conflicting interpretations through inherent contradictions. The lecture uses Stephen Moore's work on Mark's Gospel as an example of deconstructive biblical analysis. **Postmodern approaches**, while sharing similarities with deconstruction, emphasize the influence of reader's biases and the absence of a singular, correct interpretation. Finally, the lecture examines **ideological criticism**, which analyzes texts through the lens of authorial biases and societal power structures, illustrated by feminist critiques of the Bible's portrayal of women.

2. 23 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 16 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Introduction & Languages → Introductory Series → Hermeneutics).



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3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture transcript on deconstruction and related approaches to biblical interpretation:

Briefing Document: Deconstruction and Post-Structuralist Approaches to Biblical Interpretation

Introduction:

This document summarizes a lecture on deconstruction and related post-structuralist approaches to biblical interpretation, focusing on key concepts, figures, and examples. The lecture traces the shift from author-centered to reader-centered hermeneutics and culminates in a discussion of deconstruction and ideological criticism.

Main Themes:

1. The Shift from Author to Reader:

- The lecture begins by acknowledging the move from traditional approaches centered on the author's intention or a text's objective meaning to reader-response approaches, where the reader plays an active role in the creation of meaning.
- Conservative reader-response approaches still acknowledge the text's influence on the reader and posit an "implied reader" that the author expects to identify with.
- Radical reader-response approaches, exemplified by Stanley Fish, deny inherent meaning in the text, viewing it as a mirror reflecting the reader's own perspectives.
- This move towards the reader as a determiner of meaning paves the way for deconstruction.

1. Deconstruction:

- **Core Principle:** Deconstruction posits that texts ultimately undermine themselves and are inherently unstable. "Deconstructionism suggests that all texts ultimately undermine themselves and they deconstruct themselves. That is, texts are not stable, there is no stable meaning in the text." Texts fail to communicate stable meaning.

- **Key Idea:** Meaning is not fixed but is endlessly deferred, as words only refer to other words without ever capturing stable meaning. According to Derrida, "words endlessly defer meaning. Words simply refer to other words and they never catch up, they can never capture meaning."
- **Conflict and Contradiction:** The approach highlights conflicting and contradictory meanings within a text. "Deconstructionism is generating conflicting meanings from a text and playing those meanings off of each other."
- **Authoritarianism:** Deconstruction challenges the idea of a single, correct interpretation, viewing it as authoritarian. "Part of the issue for Derrida was the issue of power, that no one could claim a correct meaning, to do so was authoritarian."

1. Jacques Derrida:

- Derrida, a French philosopher, is identified as the key figure in deconstructionism.
- He argued that there is no connection between a sign and what it signifies. "Basically, what he said, there was no connection between a sign and what it referred to."
- Derrida believed meaning is always provisional and incomplete. "Meaning was always something that was unstable, meaning was endlessly deferred, it was only provisional, it was incomplete."
- Derrida's approach is linked to a rejection of transcendent truth and atheism: "Basically, at its heart, deconstructionism is usually bound up with atheism. There is no God. There is no transcendent."

1. Deconstruction and Biblical Interpretation:

- Deconstruction has influenced biblical studies, challenging traditional interpretive methods.
- **Stephen Moore:** A New Testament scholar who applies deconstruction to biblical texts. His approach involves "playing with the text" and drawing free associations between words, often using puns and linguistic connections rather than seeking historical context or authorial intent.
- Example: Moore's analysis of Mark involves wordplay, drawing connections between "cross," "chiasmus," "ego," and "I am" to destabilize the text. "In Mark,

the signature of the disciple can only ever be that of a crisscross or a Christ cross... A cross is also a chiasmus..."

- **David D.J. Clines:** An Old Testament scholar who argues that the book of Job deconstructs itself because God's vindication of Job contradicts Job's claims of unjust treatment. "God vindicates Job in the book of Job... But if God vindicates and supports Job, That must mean that God himself is unjust..."
- **John Dominic Crossan:** Applies deconstruction to parables, arguing that the parable of the treasure in the field should be abandoned, ultimately advocating for abandoning abandonment itself. "If one should abandon everything, one then must also abandon this parable. And ultimately one should abandon abandonment."
- **Revelation:** Deconstruction finds resonance in the book of Revelation due to its conflicting meanings and self-undermining structure. John condemns violence in Rome, but God punishes Rome with violence. "While John condemns Rome for its violence and its use of force. The book of John's message undermines itself...God punishes Rome by the same violence and force that John condemns."

1. **Evaluation of Deconstruction:**

- **Criticisms:** Deconstruction is viewed as being fundamentally incompatible with traditional understandings of scripture as God's inspired word and a source of stable meaning. "Deconstructive approaches in my opinion are ultimately at odds again. With understanding the text of scripture as inspired by God."
- **Self-Deconstruction:** Deconstruction is self-undermining because, in order to communicate its points, authors have to assume they can communicate meaningfully. "Deconstructive approaches should ultimately deconstruct themselves."
- **Subjectivity and Relativism:** The approach lacks criteria for evaluating readings, leading to subjectivity. "With deconstructive approaches obviously. Their subjectivity and relativism reigns in what one finds in the text."
- **Insights:** Deconstruction does highlight the messiness of interpretation, the tensions within texts, and the influence of the reader's assumptions and background. It encourages humility in interpretation. "Deconstructionism does remind us of kind of the messiness of interpretation...Deconstructionism can help us approach the text with humility."

1. Post-Modern Interpretation:

- **Characteristics:** It shares with post-structuralism and deconstruction: the rejection of a single correct interpretation, the acknowledgment that interpretations are influenced by the reader's background, and the rejection of meta-narratives. "There is no one correct interpretation...our interpretations are colored by our previous assumptions...there is no meta-narrative."
- **Benefits:** Post-modern approaches promote humility, help recognize what readers bring to the text, and encourage listening to other perspectives. Post-modern approaches "can function for Christian readers and interpreters. To engender humility...can help us to recognize what we bring to the text...can cause us to listen to other voices."

1. Ideological Criticism:

- **Core Idea:** Texts are ideological, reflecting the author's values and assumptions within a specific cultural context. "Biblical texts are ideological. In that they reflect the beliefs and values. And assumptions of an author in a certain culture and location."
- **Process:** Ideological criticism involves uncovering the ideological perspectives within a text, identifying perspectives that are silenced, and critiquing the text's use of power. It "attempts to uncover the ideological perspectives of the text...and calls on the reader to engage in and undergo an ideological critique of the text."
- **Feminist Criticism:** A key example; it reads texts to expose patriarchal structures and oppressive attitudes towards women, seeking to liberate female readers from these ideologies. "Feminist approaches or feminist criticism of biblical text...exposes its oppressive attitudes towards females...reads the text in a way that is liberating towards women."
- **Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza:** A feminist scholar who critiques the patriarchal nature of the Bible, using liberation and the experience of oppression as criteria for interpretation. "Fiorenza reads the text appealing to criteria. Self-consciously appealing to a canon or criteria. Outside of the Bible itself. That is the need for the experience of oppression. And the need for liberation."

- **Tina Pippin:** A radical feminist interpreter of Revelation who views the book as unsafe for women due to its negative portrayal of females. "Tina Pippin has written quite a bit on the book of Revelation. Advocating in most of her writings that the book of Revelation is an unsafe space for women."

1. **Examples of Feminist Readings:**

- **Revelation:** Pippin sees women as prostitutes, victims, and objects of male sexuality. "The book of Revelation. Is not a safe space for women. And in fact she rejects it all together. And sees it as something that is hostile towards women."
- **John 4:** A more moderate feminist reading of the encounter at the well suggests the woman might be a victim of societal forces rather than simply immoral. "What if this woman is a victim. What if the husbands have left her...And so the fact that she's had five marriages. Isn't only her fault."
- **Caution:** The lecture warns that some ideological readings can prioritize critiquing a text's ideology rather than letting the text's ideology critique the reader's perspectives. "One must be aware of the stance of ideological approaches. That merely critiques the ideology of the biblical text. Without letting the ideology of the text. Or the theology of the text. Critique our ideological standpoints."

Conclusion:

The lecture outlines a trajectory from author-centered to reader-centered approaches to interpretation, culminating in the radical challenges of deconstruction and ideological criticism. While deconstruction is viewed as problematic for evangelical interpretations that rely on stable meaning, the lecture also recognizes potential benefits from all of these methods, specifically including humility and a consideration of other perspectives, as well as a recognition that interpretation is not always a straightforward and objective endeavor. It sets the stage for exploring other interpretive methods in subsequent sessions.

4. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 16, Deconstructive Approaches

Deconstruction and Post-Modern Biblical Interpretation: A Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. How does deconstructionism view the stability of meaning in texts?
2. According to deconstructionism, what is the relationship between a sign and what it refers to?
3. What role does the concept of power play in deconstructionist thought?
4. What is meant by the term “free play” in the context of deconstructionist interpretation?
5. How does Stephen Moore apply deconstruction to the Gospel of Mark?
6. In what way does David Clines see the Book of Job as deconstructing itself?
7. How does John Dominic Crossan interpret the parable of the treasure in the field through a deconstructive lens?
8. How does a deconstructive reading of Revelation view the violence of God?
9. What are some of the core tenets of post-modern biblical interpretation?
10. How can post-modern approaches, despite their challenges, contribute to biblical interpretation for Christians?

Quiz Answer Key

1. Deconstructionism asserts that texts are not stable; they undermine themselves, meaning there is no stable meaning within a text. This approach suggests that texts fail to communicate definitively.
2. Deconstructionism posits that there is no connection between a sign and its referent; words simply refer to other words, endlessly deferring meaning, and never truly capturing it.

3. Deconstructionism views the claim of a single correct meaning as an authoritarian power move, thus texts are viewed as overturning these authoritarian interpretations by demonstrating conflicting meanings.
4. "Free play" in deconstruction refers to the idea that interpretation is an endless process where readers make connections and associations with the text without concern for stable or authorial intent.
5. Stephen Moore applies deconstruction by engaging in wordplay and associations in the text, such as with the symbol of the cross, drawing connections across languages and concepts without seeking a stable, intended meaning.
6. David Clines sees the Book of Job as deconstructing itself because the vindication of Job by God contradicts the earlier assertion that God had unfairly treated him. This turns the text against itself.
7. Crossan interprets the parable of the treasure by asserting that while one should abandon all for the Kingdom of God, one should also abandon the parable itself and the notion of abandoning, which leads to an endless interpretative loop.
8. Deconstructive approaches to Revelation emphasize that John condemns Rome for violence and force, but the book undermines itself by portraying God using the same violence and force to punish Rome, creating a contradiction.
9. Post-modern biblical interpretation asserts that there is no single correct interpretation, interpretations are influenced by one's background, and there is no universal meta-narrative to explain everything.
10. Despite their challenges, post-modern approaches can encourage humility, raise awareness of one's biases, and encourage openness to diverse perspectives in biblical interpretation for Christians.

Essay Questions

1. Compare and contrast reader-response criticism with deconstructionism, highlighting their similarities and differences in how they approach the meaning of a text.
2. Discuss the implications of deconstructionism for traditional Christian understandings of biblical authority and the nature of revelation, and what a response might look like.

3. Explore how post-modern approaches to biblical interpretation challenge the idea of objectivity, and discuss the impact on biblical studies and theology.
4. Analyze the concept of "ideological criticism" in biblical interpretation, particularly examining how feminist critics approach the text, using examples like Tina Pippin's reading of Revelation.
5. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of deconstructionism as a hermeneutical method, considering both its contributions to interpretation and its potential limitations for engaging with scripture.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Deconstructionism:** A philosophical and interpretive approach that suggests texts are inherently unstable, undermining themselves by generating conflicting meanings. It emphasizes the absence of stable meaning and the endless deferral of meaning.
- **Post-Structuralism:** A movement that challenges the structuralist idea of fixed meanings and emphasizes the role of power, language, and context in shaping interpretations of a text.
- **Post-Modernism:** A philosophical and cultural movement that questions grand narratives, universal truths, and objectivity, emphasizing pluralism, subjectivity, and the role of the observer in shaping knowledge.
- **Sign:** In semiotics, a sign is anything that signifies something else, often a word or symbol that represents a concept or referent. Deconstructionism emphasizes the instability between signs and their referents.
- **Deferral of Meaning:** The idea, central to deconstructionism, that words do not directly capture meaning but instead refer to other words, endlessly postponing the ultimate meaning.
- **Free Play:** In deconstruction, free play refers to the idea that texts can be interpreted and connected in diverse and open ways without adhering to authorial intent or stable meaning, allowing readers to create meaning through these associations.
- **Metanarrative:** A large-scale, overarching story or framework that attempts to explain reality, often questioned or rejected by post-modern thinkers.

- **Ideological Criticism:** A form of criticism that seeks to uncover and critique the underlying power structures and values within a text, often looking at perspectives silenced or marginalized in the text.
- **Feminist Criticism:** A specific form of ideological criticism that examines texts from the perspective of women, analyzing how gender roles and power dynamics shape the text and how it can oppress females.
- **Hermeneutical Myopia:** A kind of shortsightedness in interpretation that results from reading a text with one's own biases and assumptions without taking other perspectives into consideration.
- **Chiasmus:** A literary device in which words, grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order, creating a crossing pattern (A-B-B-A).
- **Ego Eimi:** Greek phrase meaning "I am" often used in the Gospels to refer to Jesus' self-identification.
- **Meta-narrative:** A grand, overarching story or framework that attempts to explain reality, often questioned or rejected by post-modern thinkers.

5. FAQs on Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 16, Deconstructive Approaches, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions About Deconstruction and Post-Structuralism

1. **What is deconstructionism, and how does it relate to post-structuralism?**

Deconstructionism is an approach to literary and philosophical analysis that emerged from post-structuralism. It suggests that texts do not have stable, inherent meanings. Instead, they undermine themselves through internal contradictions and conflicting interpretations. Post-structuralism, more broadly, is a movement that critiques the idea of stable structures and meanings, viewing them as socially constructed rather than naturally occurring. Deconstruction takes the post-structuralist critique further by denying the possibility of texts containing any fixed or objective meanings.

2. **How does deconstructionism challenge traditional interpretations of texts, including the Bible?** Deconstructionism challenges traditional interpretations by asserting that texts do not possess a single, correct meaning intended by the author or inherent in the text. It argues that texts generate conflicting meanings, making any claim of a definitive interpretation authoritarian. In biblical studies, this means denying that the Bible has a stable, divinely inspired meaning; instead, it sees the text as a collection of unstable signs generating multiple and contradictory readings.

3. **Who are some key figures associated with deconstructionism?** The most famous advocate of deconstructionism is the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In biblical studies, figures like Stephen Moore, David Clines, and (at times) John Dominic Crossan, have applied deconstructive approaches to biblical texts.

4. **What are the main claims of deconstructionism regarding meaning and language?** Deconstructionism claims that: * Texts are inherently unstable and lack fixed meaning. * Meaning is not inherent but is always deferred, as words refer to other words endlessly. * Texts undermine their own message by generating conflicting interpretations. * There is no direct connection between a sign (word) and what it signifies (concept). Essentially, it rejects the idea of a stable, objective meaning conveyed through language.

5. **How does Stephen Moore apply deconstruction to the Gospel of Mark?** Stephen Moore applies deconstruction by engaging in free play with the text of Mark, making word associations and drawing on multiple languages to find connections without focusing on any intended meaning of the author. For example, he plays with the word "cross" to connect it to "chiasmus" and then to the Greek letter "chi," which he ties to concepts like "ego" and "je suis," all to demonstrate that the text contains various unstable and contradictory meanings that ultimately undermine any "stable" reading of Mark.
6. **What are some examples of how deconstructive approaches have been applied to other biblical books, like Job, Revelation, or parables?**
 - **Job:** The book of Job supposedly shows God vindicating Job. But Job claims God is unjust, so deconstructive readings see the text betraying itself. It highlights how a vindicating God implies an unjust action against Job.
 - **Revelation:** John condemns Rome's violence but uses violence to punish Rome. Deconstructive readings see this as the text undermining itself.
 - **Parables:** The parable of the treasure in the field has been interpreted to mean one must abandon everything for the kingdom, but then it's also argued that one must abandon the parable itself, ultimately ending in "free play" interpretation.
1. **According to a deconstructive perspective, what are the implications for claiming a "correct" interpretation of a text?** Deconstructionism rejects the idea of a single "correct" interpretation. Any claim to a correct interpretation is seen as an exercise of power, or authoritarian. Deconstructionist approach implies that all interpretations are equally valid or invalid. Meaning becomes fluid, subjective, and contextual.

2. **What are some potential benefits of deconstructionism, and what are its criticisms and limitations?**
- **Potential Benefits:** It can highlight the messiness of interpretation and the subjectivity of human understanding. It encourages humility by revealing the limitations and presuppositions of the reader.
 - **Criticisms and Limitations:** It is seen as contradictory since it undermines its own claims for meaning, is ultimately incompatible with a belief in a God who communicates his message via scripture, leads to relativism, where all readings are equal, and fails to acknowledge the authority and stability of the Bible as the Word of God. The instability of meaning that deconstructionism highlights runs in direct opposition to the view of evangelicals.