

BOOK REVIEW

Coker, K. Jason, *James in Postcolonial Perspective: The Letter as Nativist Discourse* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015). ix + 326 pp. Pbk. \$44.00.

Jason Coker's *James in Postcolonial Perspective* offers a comprehensive postcolonial analysis of the Epistle of James using theoretical insights from Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha and, more peripherally, Edward Said. In so doing, Coker argues that the letter presents a nativist message to diaspora Jews in response to both the Roman imperial project and those Jewish compatriots who might choose to assimilate to Roman culture. Whereas previous scholarship has tended to interpret James' emphasis on purity and perfection in exclusively religious terms, Coker frames the Epistle in a feasible sociopolitical context in order to suggest that these topics of interest function to consolidate a Judean identity that exists within but stands unequivocally against Roman social customs. James' Epistle negotiates a concrete and uncompromising Judean sense of self that opposes Roman imperialism and hybridized Jews (like Paul) who appropriate Roman qualities at the expense of their 'Judeanness'. The result of Coker's effort is a compelling illustration of first-century identity formation within and against the imperial conditions of Roman domination.

The book is split into two major sections. Part 1, 'Constructing the Native', sets up the theoretical foundation upon which Coker builds his argument. The most notable methodological assumptions undergirding this section include the date of the Epistle, the theoretical principle of nativism and the bifurcation of Judean and Roman identities by language of purity, perfection and worldliness. Coker, drawing heavily on the work of Luke Timothy Johnson, locates the authorship of the Epistle in pre-62 CE Jerusalem, and he also ascribes an authentic attribution to James the brother of Jesus. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that the production of this letter as anti-Roman propaganda may have been what eventually led to James' execution, reflected in the

literature of Josephus. By dating the Epistle early, Coker makes clear that the letter should not be read as a distinctly Christian text, but rather as something that exists within a Judean culture and is therefore beholden to Judean emphases. The material presented here assumes prior knowledge of research by figures such as Boyarin and perhaps could have benefited from a deeper engagement with the scholarly discussions surrounding categories such as Judean, Judaism and Christianity in the ancient world.

Moving forward, Coker develops his methodological approach by presenting nativism in light of the postcolonial thinkers Fanon, Bhabha and Said. In this purview, nativism represents the subaltern construction of a national identity that elevates the status of the oppressed over and against the oppressor. From a postcolonial perspective, consolidating such an identity is a prerequisite for activating the potential for resistance and rebellion. According to Coker, James' epistle works toward establishing such a consolidated identity as it negotiates the borders between Judeanness and Roman 'otherness'. Important to this Judean identity is the language of purity and perfection, which is leveraged to create a contrast with 'the world', that is, the Roman Empire and those who assimilate to and conspire with it. Coker thus argues, on the one hand, that the letter represents an early and authentic attestation and, on the other hand, that it bifurcates Judean and Roman identities along strict ideological boundary lines. This takes us directly into Coker's third major argument of the book's first part, which states that the letter is a directive to diaspora Jews on how to reconnect with their natural identity and their homeland of Jerusalem. In the process, James crafts a quixotic Judean identity that is unstained by the worldliness of colonialism and relegates all who oppose it to the status of Roman oppressors. As Coker writes, in the eyes of James, '[t]he Diaspora must choose: friendship with God or friendship with the world' (p. 98).

In Part 2, 'Confronting Colonialism and Hating Hybridity', Coker analyzes the Epistle of James and how it resists both the Roman Empire and hybridized Jews. He posits a seven-part structure to the Epistle in which James oscillates between condemning empire and reproaching hybridity. In terms of his disdain for Roman imperialism, James accentuates aspects of Roman thought concerning wealth and wisdom. The letter presents these principles as strict binaries held in opposition to the previously mentioned values of purity and perfection.

Coker postulates that critiques of the rich are in fact critiques of the wider Roman Empire and, more broadly, practitioners of Roman social customs. In issuing these critiques James depicts divine favouritism of the poor, thus subverting Roman social standards. 'By systematically and emphatically choosing the poor as inheritors of the kingdom', Coker argues, 'James reaches into the Jesus tradition to show the utter reversal motif of the wealthy and poor. Without quoting Jesus, James clearly shows that "the last shall be first" and the "poor shall inherit the kingdom"' (p. 125). Coker continues to elucidate such subversive trends throughout the letter. He contends that 'the wealthy' and the 'wisdom of the world' stand for a Roman culture of patronage, favouritism and banality. In opposition, James offers a pure, native Judean disposition that avoids and actively rejects these principles in favour of Judean propositions grounded in antiquity and the divine.

Coker's interpretation of James' polemic against hybridity takes up two chapters and may represent the highlight of his study. As mentioned above, Coker argues that the Letter of James opposes not only Rome but also Jews who have assimilated. Elaborating on this aspect of his reading, Coker compares the responses to empire offered by James and by Paul. In his letters Paul appears to present himself not as a dissident of gentile culture, but rather as one who flourishes within and co-opts it as a way of enhancing his own authority. Paul's Judeanness, in other words, is not threatened by assimilation to Roman qualities or gentile corruption. This is not to say that Paul is complicit in Roman imperialism. On the contrary, Coker argues that Paul resists Roman dominance, but does so through a strategy based principally on fostering hybridity. Paul appropriates Roman strategies and cultural emphases but uses them to his own benefit. Coker places this in juxtaposition with James, who, he argues, is responding negatively to people such as Paul. James' letter establishes a fixed Judean identity that unequivocally refuses the influence of any Roman axioms. As such, James' absolute binary and militant disavowal of empire pits him against Paul and James' own Jewish audience. Coker's engagement with work from both James and Paul as they relate to empire shows a commendable grasp of postcolonial theory and a keen sensitivity to nuance, at times even bringing into question the underlying hybridity of James' own rhetoric.

Coker's book is a salutary combination of biblical criticism and postcolonial interpretation. On a number of occasions he references the

bifurcation of colonial actors and subjects using Fanon and Said, thinkers whose work purports to detail the ways in which oppressed groups appropriate and subvert imperial power systems. Coker's theoretical framework built on Fanon and Said postulates that oppressed groups actively produce discourses meant to cultivate a cohesive and valuable identity as a mechanism for resistance to imperial and dehumanizing conditions. This works particularly well when Coker relates it to the dichotomy between the rich and poor and to the ways in which the Epistle functions to reify these categories while devaluing the rich in favor of the poor. However, the question of how the practice of 'othering' in ancient Roman discourse relates to or differs from modern colonial practices is left largely unexplored. This could be developed, for example, by using Josephus's recapitulation of Apion's indictment of the Jewish people in *Contra Apionem*. The only mention in Coker's work of such Orientalizing language occurs when he states that Romans adopt the term 'barbarian' to describe all non-Roman colonials (p. 113), and here his discussion should be expanded to draw on the relevant literature and demonstrate how the term functions as a pejorative. A more granular analysis of Roman discourses of the Other would fill out the colonial picture that exists in first-century Roman rule over Judea, and in the context of this fuller picture the posited nativist inclination of the Epistle of James could be buttressed by further postcolonial motivation.

In sum, *James in Postcolonial Perspective* offers a rich postcolonial approach to the study of James. It is particularly refreshing to read a theoretical study that is not lost in the abstract. Coker's postcolonialism is rather mapped onto a clear and worldly economic, social and political landscape. As such, his work submits a convincing and stimulating view of postcolonial forms of identity negotiation among early Judean authors under the umbrella of Roman imperialism. Though perhaps not friendly to an undergraduate audience, as it assumes considerable experience with theoretical perspectives and contextual information, Coker's monograph will be useful to many readers with an interest in postcolonial interpretation and first-century Roman Palestine.

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