

BOOK REVIEW

Fernando F. Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah, eds., *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (The Bible and Postcolonialism, 13; London/New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007). x + 466 pp. Hdbk. US\$160.00.

The editors of this volume have chosen an apt title: their book is postcolonial first, a commentary second, and addresses the New Testament writings third. This should not be taken as a complaint; the contributed scholarship is superb, the ramifications challenging. The apparent order of editorial priorities in offering these perspectives is such that even the collective whole constitutes only 'a' postcolonial commentary, not the final or definitive view. The presentation's unity is an obvious concern: with many opinions culled from a field still emerging, defining postcolonialism and delimiting its interaction with biblical texts and contexts does not come easily—nor should it.

Segovia's lengthy introduction is a moderately successful attempt to weave the essays together, repeatedly circling back through the New Testament canon to consider each entry again, although prefacing each just once might have made for greater discrete coherence. Instead, Segovia implies cohesion by first examining *configurations* (postcolonial meaning and scope, according to each commentator), then modal *approaches*, the *findings* of interaction between the arena of the Christian texts and Rome's socio-political realm, and finally the hermeneutical *stances* of each critic relative to the findings. These categories seem forced at certain points, as though applied after the essays were collected; but as a diverse whole, the book practices what it preaches, offering faithfully postmodern self-assessments that encompass text, reader, and modern and ancient contexts.

Given the imperial nature of the ancient contexts in question, it was an astute choice to assign several New Testament books to their most prolific imperial analysts. Warren Carter is able to expand his combined approach of audience-response and imperial criticism into postcolonial

territory in his treatment of Matthew. Carter is also the first to comment on ‘postcolonial’ as chronologically problematic: the ‘post’ prefix connotes an end to the colonial situation, but Rome’s control remained omnipresent in the New Testament world. The modes of resistance Carter has detailed elsewhere are highlighted here for their ambiguity, and he nuances his previous phrasing of ‘competing sovereignties’ with ‘power over’, an experiential, inter-group dynamic. His observations are incisive as always, though I would have liked to see him flesh out his own call to ‘re-language’ Matthew’s troubling description of God’s reign as imperial.

Tat-siong Benny Liew and Virginia Burrus discuss Mark and Luke–Acts. Liew combines temporality and politics, adapting Norman Cohn’s work to posit a ‘politics of apocalyptic time’ in Mark: questions of authority, agency (also a favourite term of Carter’s) and gender are foregrounded. In effecting divine change, Jesus used his endorsement as beloved/singular son as an ideological weapon; in furthering his initiatives, human participation often entails suffering, with dangerous potential for reinscribing violence in contemporary postcolonial situations. Burrus follows the preoccupation of Luke–Acts with channels of power, as the Evangelist’s narrative begins to mimic Rome’s geopolitical reach; the narrative, designed to be taken up by the reader, is then continuously (perhaps even synchronically?) rewritten ‘for our own projects’ of imperial resistance (p. 152). Burrus treats two ambiguous pericopes cleverly, but her dialogue with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri lacks post-9/11 examples of their imperial criticism: their comments on decentralized and globalizing power in *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2000) are modified, with a normative tone, in *Multitude* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

Segovia’s entry on John conforms to the categories set forth in his introduction, though with some conflation of his terms of *reach* and *scope*. He conceptualizes John as a writing of conflict, claiming and exercising both religious and political power. Repeating and expanding Carter’s chronological difficulty with the ‘post’ prefix, he offers a literary reading through postcolonial lenses. John’s story, prologue, and plot exhibit escalating conflict, visible especially between power-centre and periphery and between the tiers of the heavenly world above and the earthly world below. These tactical analyses complement the literary approach nicely, revealing crucial differences between ‘surface’ and ‘depth’ resolutions, as at the crucifixion: the event first appears to

be the termination of Jesus' mission and thus the confrontation's end, only to prove a definitive divine triumph. If the tactical language is occasionally overstated, it does convey the subversion inherent in pledging allegiance to a god of the colonial margins.

The next entries are assigned, unsurprisingly, to Neil Elliott and Richard Horsley. Elliott cautions against the traditional reading of Romans as a summary of systematic theology, since dogmatic theology can predetermine the reading of biblical narrative, obscuring Paul's engagement with Rome. Elliott's frequent emphases resurface here, tweaked toward postcolonial reading: God's *dikaiosunē*, over against the Empire's justice claims; indictment of empire for its treatment of a despised minority population; the promise of liberation from bondage for a tortured slave society (as in the slyly worded Rom. 8.20-21); and ambiguous conformity in Rom. 13.1-7. Horsley's patterns are equally familiar, as he places Paul and his Corinthian churches within God's master-narrative and Rome's society. The *ekklēsiai*, alternative societies like cells of labour-union or anti-colonial movements, are politically and salvation-historically loaded, while Paul's teaching points castigate the Empire for its ethics and his congregants for following them too often. Power and suffering are played to rhetorical effect, from Paul's alliance between Death and the imperial 'rulers of this age', to the (crucifixion) 'marks of Jesus'.

Sze-kar Wan, Jennifer Bird, and Efraín Agosto treat Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians, respectively. *Christ* and *the law* are Paul's shorthand for competing views, says Wan, positions at once cultural and imperial. Paul and his opponents had to (re)construct Jewish and Christian identity amid frequent ethnic/traditional 'border crossings', resulting in a situation steeped in hybridity and dislocation and complicated by varying 'colonial' relationships with both Jerusalem and Rome. Bird addresses Ephesian resonance with imperial propaganda, the imagery there that counters (yet often reinscribes) the imperial order, the construction of gender roles that perpetuate subordination, and optimistic possibilities for subversive re-reading. When the very *household* is political, and propaganda intentionally engenders devotion, resulting paradigms are often unhealthy ones, Bird argues; while she may have found more evidence of submission than the Pauline author intended, Bird's hope for a 'power-with' (modifying Carter's 'power-over') dynamic is as welcome as her attention to the context of the Spirit's 'seal', a pneumatological note rare in postcolonial biblical

criticism. Agosto's Latino interpretation of Philippians is an example of reading colonized texts with colonized eyes: harsh imprisonment, the practice of advancing model leaders, and the ambivalence of heavenly and political citizenship (the last informed by the sovereign extension of US citizenship to include Puerto Rico) are his chosen foci. This essay is one of several signifying a turning point in the volume, moving increasingly toward voices with considerable personal experience in neo- and postcolonial surroundings.

Colossians, by Gordon Zerbe and Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, presents an opportunity for emancipatory—though deconstructive—readings, avoiding further promotion of colonial ideologies. Unmasking and contesting dominant power claims are thus central to the contributors' argument, as they join Paul in renegotiating the Christ-following identity. Given this aim, it is puzzling that they do not employ Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat's work more thoroughly, as Paul attempts to show how the Empire's imagination-captivating images deconstruct. In 1–2 Thessalonians, Abraham Smith sees resistance to and mimicry of imperial language, especially prominent in military imagery. Authorship issues, while key to the power agendas developed here, remain secondary to the letters' shared contextual commonalities (addressing apocalyptic enthusiasm; the saturation of Roman propaganda; various domination strategies). Smith clearly finds frustrating the adoption of the Thessalonian apocalyptic imagery in service to modern American empire.

With 1–2 Timothy and Titus, brevity becomes an issue: Ralph Broadbent has less space to discuss these three than Allan Dwight Callahan receives for Philemon alone. Both essays deal skillfully with complexities of oppression, accommodation, and exploitation, but neither can be terribly thorough in so few pages. They do function well in illustrating Segovia's introductory categories: for Broadbent, the scope of postcolonialism is so broad that biblical texts are automatically considered 'contested texts'; for Callahan, the colonial reach is felt temporally, as generations of interpreters have read Philemon as a warrant for exploitation. Only a solidarity based in love, with filial relationships supplanting the patriarchal, can hope to partially reverse this damage.

Jeremy Punt takes up Hebrews in South Africa, and Sharon Ringe, James, texts whose implied audiences are at least metaphorically if not physically a part of the Diaspora (treated here as a colonial category). Punt's own background alerts him to the dangers of co-option, of

readings that spawn additional totalizing discourses; even the ‘pilgrim’ mindset of Hebrews can have unintended colonial impact, as pilgrims can quickly become settlers and colonizers. In Ringe’s view, the author of James wants to prevent his audiences from wandering theologically, as they may have done geographically—and his pastoral points, such as the power of speech as a response to empire, remain effective unless we allow our own colonial interests to reject them. Though Punt is more explicit on the point, both commentators anchor postcolonialism in cultural studies, with reader-location in the diaspora as a primary consideration.

Although Corinthians, Thessalonians, Timothy and the Johannine letters are reviewed as sets, the Petrines are divided between Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Cynthia Briggs Kittredge. First Peter permits Schüssler Fiorenza to boost her previous analysis of ‘kyriarchal’ networks of power, identifying feminist criticism closely (and not altogether convincingly!) with the postcolonial. She underscores the whispers of political differences in the epistle, beginning with the other/outsider status of the *paroikoi*; this and other titles denote inscribed rhetoric, a springboard for her response to *contemporary* kyriarchal criticism from John Elliott. Briggs Kittredge’s reading, while acknowledging the honour-shame dynamic that Schüssler Fiorenza finds so distasteful, focuses less on elitism and more on authority, following 2 Peter’s built-in ambiguity: the letter allows anti-authoritarian readings even as it claims the standing reserved for an authoritative witness. Canonicity (accounting for Paul’s investment of authority into the epistolary form and genre) and polemical language are thus logical paths to follow. The division of comments on the Petrine letters between two commentators, however, makes me wish that allowances had been made for intra-corpus dialogue between the commentators and their texts.

The commentaries on 1–3 John, Jude, and Revelation share richly interwoven themes of cultic titles and practice; I will leave Sugirtharajah’s essay on the Johannine letters aside momentarily, in order to assess it along with his closing statements below. Ritual presence and practice inform Rohun Park’s interpretation of Jude, with the divine appointment of rulers shaping and intruding upon civil religion. Park aligns Japanese and Korean ruler cults with what was practiced by first-century Rome; for rhetorical punch, he adds the cultic power commanded by George W. Bush as a means to imposing presidential will, citing Bush’s use of John 1 in the 9/11 first anniversary speech

(previously critiqued by Stephen Chapman). Ambivalence arises from the ruler's protective but coercive authority, while the margins, whether in ancient Rome or the modern US, are defined in terms of ritual space. Emperor worship rears its head again in Revelation, where Stephen Moore finds Homi Bhaba's markers of ambivalence, mimicry and hybridity at work in the Revelator's manipulation of monster-labels and conquest language. The writer's 'imperial counter-cult' shows significantly imitative empire-envy; Christ's reign too is marked by violence. 'Only fatal casualties of empire, then, could be deemed innocent of its systemic injustices' (p. 450).

Sugirtharajah, like Park, locates parallels for ancient rhetorical findings, tying the denunciation effect carried by the label 'antichrist' in 1–3 John to Bush's 'axis of evil' deployment. Reconstructing the epistles' original social situation, Sugirtharajah seeks an author close to John the Evangelist, possibly one and the same writer. Intertextual readings compose a narrative of an imperial Christ, the Saviour of the world in a sense different from, yet modeled on, Caesar; authority and election frame the discourse. Concluding, Sugirtharajah asks colleagues to address the hermeneutics of canonization and noncanonical works; the postcolonial roles of polytheism and ritual; and contemporary issues such as the suicidal martyrdom of terrorists and the danger of assimilation faced by asylum-seekers. Political accents continue, as Sugirtharajah names current 'territorial occupations in the name of democracy, humanitarianism and liberation' as 'signs of a new form of imperialism' (p. 455). This statement and others noted above complicate the balance this volume strives to maintain: postcolonial critics must be politically relevant, yet detached in their comparisons between the ancient and modern worlds, saving their most scathing remarks for volumes where explicitly imperial criticism constitutes the primary goal.

Matthew Forrest Lowe
McMaster Divinity College