

## CHAPTER ONE

# *Paul after Empire*

STEPHEN D. MOORE

### The Beginnings of Postcolonial Studies

Beginning his book *Beginnings*, Edward Said ponders the difference between an origin and a beginning. The former he pronounces “divine, mythical and privileged,” while the latter he styles “secular, humanly produced, and ceaselessly reexamined.”<sup>1</sup> According to the tale most often told about the beginnings of postcolonial studies—the academic analysis of colonialism, imperialism, and other related phenomena—the field had its inception in Said’s own book, *Orientalism*.<sup>2</sup> This tale is and is not true, in the way of such tales, and so this putative inception begs careful reexamination. Such reconsideration will not take us deeply into postcolonial studies, but it will at least take us around its perimeter, after which we will be better positioned to consider Paul’s relations to the imperial, the colonial, and the postcolonial.

*First beginning.* The term “postcolonial(ism)” appears to have been coined in the geopolitical aftermath of World War II and first employed in such expressions as “the post-colonial nation-state.” Whether or to what extent the term ever expressed an unequivocal conviction that colonialism was now securely relegated to the past (such pastness being the import of the “post-”) is debatable. What is certain is that any such conception of the postcolonial has long seemed naïve or utopian, old-style colonialism having mutated inexorably into neocolonialism, the latest and most insidious manifestation of which, many would argue, is globalization.<sup>3</sup>

*Second beginning.* It was only in the 1990s that postcolonial studies coalesced fully and finally as an academic field. The field is frequently condensed to the emblematic names of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. None of the three, however, played any significant role in the naming or institutionalization of the field. The primary catalysts in that regard were a less glamorous trio, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, who produced two of the textbooks that were key in constituting the field, namely, *The Empire Writes Back* and *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*.<sup>4</sup> But they were not alone. As the 1990s unfolded, field-constituting “postcolonial” titles began to proliferate at a remarkable rate. The disciplinary expansion took place primarily in the United States—and, not

coincidentally, in a context in which the United States had recently become the sole superpower, further consolidating its position as the most far-reaching and efficient empire the world had ever seen. And whereas postcolonial studies would ultimately make relatively deep inroads in a number of academic fields (including biblical studies), its heaviest concentration from the outset has been in the field of literary studies.

*Third beginning.* This nascent field of postcolonial studies, like any other such field, needed its myth of origins, however modest, and its intellectual heroes. Thus we return to the late Edward Said and his 1978 book *Orientalism*. Poststructuralist theory was the lingua franca of the literary studies field in which postcolonial studies began to proliferate in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Poststructuralist analysis of the literatures and other cultural artifacts of colonial and postcolonial societies thus became the hallmark of that burgeoning field. Said was the first to engage in this style of analysis; thus his *Orientalism* came to be seen retrospectively as the charter document of postcolonial studies, notwithstanding the fact that the book itself employed neither “postcolonial” nor “post-colonialism” in its terminological armature. *Orientalism* did, however, make strategic use of the analytic categories of Michel Foucault to excavate the West’s multi-discursive construction of the “Orient.” The book analyzes the emergent academic disciplines, political discourses, literary representations, and cultural stereotypes by which the East, especially the Middle East, became the West’s constitutive Other, particularly during the incremental expansion and consolidation of the modern European empires.

The second putative originator of “colonial discourse analysis” (later termed “post-colonial theory”) was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. As a deconstructive feminist preoccupied with the systemic omissions and blind spots that enable texts and entire societies to function, Spivak modeled a postcolonial reading strategy attuned to hyper-exploited individuals and populations, particularly women of the global South. Her 1985 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” was an immensely subtle and controversial meditation on the impossibility of “speaking for” those who subsist below the radar of official histories or political systems of representation. The essay helped to set the agenda for the emerging field of postcolonial studies, as did her 1987 collection, *In Other Worlds*. By contrast, her 1999 magnum opus, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, finds her deeply critical of the field with which her name had become nearly synonymous, and that critical stance has, if anything, subsequently sharpened.<sup>6</sup>

The third putative originator of postcolonial theory was Homi Bhabha, who also began in the mid-1980s to engage in poststructuralist analysis of modern colonialism and its multifarious aftermath. Bhabha’s major essays were collected in *The Location of Culture*, a book that may be said to epitomize postcolonial theory more than any other.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the field of biblical studies, postcolonial studies does not pivot on the concept of method. It has yielded little in the way of readily identifiable methodologies or easily repeatable strategies of reading. A partial exception to this rule can be seen in the analytic categories of colonial ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity as set forth (in thoroughly unsystematic fashion) in *The Location of Culture*.<sup>8</sup> These three interrelated concepts provide a suggestive reading grid that can readily, if not unproblematically, be superimposed on texts emerging from empire, including biblical texts. For Bhabha,

the relationship between colonizer and colonized is characterized by simultaneous attraction and repulsion, which is to say *ambivalence*. In consequence, resistance and complicity coexist in different measures in each and every colonial subject. Colonial *mimicry*, meanwhile, results when the colonized is seduced or coerced into internalizing and replicating the colonizer's culture—a process replete with opportunity for the colonized, according to Bhabha, as mimicry readily teeters over into mockery. *Hybridity*, finally, in Bhabha's deconstructive version of it, is never a simple synthesis or syncretic fusion of two originally discrete cultures, since a culture can never be pure, prior, original, unified, or self-contained but is always already infected by impurity, secondariness, mimicry, self-splitting, and alterity—in a word, by hybridity.<sup>9</sup>

*Fourth beginning.* While postcolonial theory has been the most visible and influential variant of postcolonial studies, it is by no means the whole of it. An older, more diffuse tradition of postcolonial criticism has deep roots in Marxist theory and tends to frame (modern) colonialism squarely as an übercapitalist enterprise and to analyze it accordingly, with due attention to economic, military, political, and administrative matters, whereas postcolonial theory tends to focus on the subtler operations of colonial discourse and counter-discourse, as we have seen, such as Orientalizing, representing the subaltern, and colonial mimicry.<sup>10</sup>

Yet even if postcolonial studies did not begin with postcolonial theory, the question nonetheless arises: Is postcolonial studies, whatever its variants, to be viewed as a Western academic product, purely and simply? (One cannot help noting, for instance, that even Benita Parry's materialist critique of postcolonial studies was published by Routledge, the press that, more than any other, was responsible for the creation of postcolonial studies as a lucrative academic enterprise.) In answer, it is important to emphasize that the more remote beginnings of postcolonial studies do not lie in academia per se, whether Western or otherwise. Contemporary histories of the field customarily trace its roots to a disparate group of post–World War II intellectuals, artists, and revolutionaries, notably Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Chinua Achebe, C. L. R. James, Albert Memmi, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, each of whom lived through the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism in a specific cultural context and engaged in sustained reflection on the insidious effects of colonialism and/or the daunting challenges of decolonization.<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, Said, Spivak, and Bhabha were born and raised in the global South. They elected, however, to work and reside in the West. Although they have written from positions external to the West, they have also written from the pinnacle of the Western academic profession—specifically, from prestigious chairs at U.S. Ivy League institutions. In consequence, their work is viewed by some as compromised, a criticism that, however, relies on certain oversimplifications, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>12</sup>

Postcolonial biblical criticism, meanwhile, is less haunted by the specter of institutional success. Endowed chairs in Bible and Postcolonialism at Harvard or Yale, Oxford or Cambridge, Heidelberg or Tübingen do not seem to be an immediate threat to this fledgling subfield. This is not to say, however, that postcolonial biblical criticism is not itself a curiously convoluted phenomenon. To these complex twists we now turn.

## ————— The Beginnings of Postcolonial Biblical Criticism —————

According to the tale now routinely told about the inception of postcolonial biblical criticism, it began with Laura Donaldson's *Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading*, a special issue of the journal *Semeia*, which appeared in 1996.<sup>13</sup> Richard Horsley's *Paul and Empire* followed soon thereafter, appearing in 1997.<sup>14</sup> To style this story a myth of origins would be excessive. All the more reason, then, to reexamine it.

This tale, too, is and is not true. Because of the notorious *Semeia* backlog, which eventually led to the discontinuation of the journal, it is unlikely that any reader, however eager, clutched *Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading* in his or her hands prior to 1997. More importantly, it is clear from Horsley's introduction to *Paul and Empire* that he has not seen the *Semeia* issue.<sup>15</sup> In real terms, then, postcolonial biblical criticism does not have a single beginning, much less a single origin.<sup>16</sup> In the beginning—or a beginning, at any rate—was a full-length work on Paul (or three; for all intents and purposes, *Paul and Empire*, *Paul and Politics*, and *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* may be regarded as a trilogy).<sup>17</sup> How does that programmatic work begin? How does its editor frame it?

Whatever reservations some biblical scholars might have about some of Horsley's scholarship, there is no question that he is capable at times of reframing the field in electrifyingly original ways. Nowhere is this more evident than in his introduction to *Paul and Empire*. Central to the rhetorical strategy of the introduction is Horsley's thoroughly counterintuitive argument that the "New Perspective" on Paul does not constitute a major paradigm shift in Pauline studies.<sup>18</sup> Why not? Because "[t]he issues of the law, sin, righteousness, and faith in their 'Christian' versus their 'Jewish' configuration remain at the center of discussion," eliciting a "corresponding focus" on Galatians and Romans "where those issues are prominent."<sup>19</sup> While the New Perspective has added considerable nuance to the traditional Augustinian-Lutheran construal of Paul as standing over against Judaism, it has not succeeded in displacing this construal. For that a still newer perspective is required. "Recent recognition that . . . prominent Pauline terms such as 'gospel,' 'the cross/crucified,' 'salvation,' and perhaps even 'faith' were borrowed from and stand over against Roman imperial ideology suggests a reexamination of what it is that Paul is against primarily."<sup>20</sup> Horsley then proceeds to argue (with a particular nod to the work of Dieter Georgi, to be discussed further below) that it is the Roman imperial order that Paul's gospel is primarily designed to counter. This is especially evident in 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, and Philippians, but it can be seen also in Romans and Galatians.<sup>21</sup> In 1 Thessalonians, for instance, destruction is promised to those "who trust in the Roman imperial 'peace and security'"; in 1 Corinthians, "Christ crucified on a Roman cross" stands over against "the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish"; while in Philippians, "real citizenship" is said to be in heaven, from which one should "expect the true 'Savior.'"<sup>22</sup>

In his critique of the New Perspective, Horsley twice characterizes it as a "deconstruction" of the Augustinian-Lutheran construction of Paul.<sup>23</sup> Yet Horsley is arguing

in effect that the New Perspective is *insufficiently* deconstructive, that it is still enclosed within a constricting dualism (Judaism/Christianity) or a “closed field of oppositions,” as Jacques Derrida himself might have phrased it.<sup>24</sup> A second phase is therefore necessary in the deconstructive operation, a shift of attention to a third object of analysis, one that intersects with both terms of the binary opposition so as to propel us onto fresh terrain not delimited or determined in advance by the opposition,<sup>25</sup> that terrain being the Roman imperial order. Consciously or not, Horsley is dancing the classic deconstructive two-step in his critique of the New Perspective, employing a strategy that enables him to stake out a “beyond the New Perspective” position that cannot be reduced to finely calibrated cautions about throwing out the Pauline baby with the Lutheran bathwater.

Of course, it is a strategy not without risks. Amy-Jill Levine has argued passionately and compellingly that postcolonial criticism of the New Testament cannot afford to set aside as of secondary importance the task of attending thoroughly to issues of anti-Judaism in New Testament interpretation.<sup>26</sup> Joseph Marchal, meanwhile, warns of the dangers of replacing a view of Paul’s letters as resistant to Jewish “legalism” with a view of them as “represent[ing] resistance against the Roman imperial cult or more generally, ‘paganism,’” given the insidious ways in which the category “pagan” has been deployed to legitimize colonizing, “civilizing,” and missionary enterprises directed toward the non-Christian natives of Africa, Asia, and the Americas.<sup>27</sup>

How did Horsley hit on this strategy in the first place? Where did *Paul and Empire* come from? Horsley’s own implicit answer is that it arose from influences both external and internal to the field of biblical studies. Here it is instructive to compare Horsley’s introduction to *Paul and Empire* with Laura Donaldson’s introduction to *Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading*. Donaldson, then an associate professor in the Department of English, Women’s Studies, and American Indian/Native Studies at the *University of Iowa*, writes of the previous decade having “witnessed a veritable explosion of publications and conferences about ‘postcolonialism’ and its importance as an analytical and political tool.”<sup>28</sup> Although she is apparently too modest to say so, she herself participated fully in that development throughout the decade, publishing articles with a postcolonial focus in literary studies and cultural studies journals, along with an important monograph entitled *Decolonizing Feminisms*.<sup>29</sup> Without in any way diminishing its significance, then, one might accurately describe *Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading* as a spillover phenomenon. It exists primarily because of the fact that postcolonial studies had, by the mid-1990s, reached a boiling point in the field(s) of literary studies, as we noted earlier, and had begun to spill over into contiguous fields.

Horsley, too, adduces the postcolonial studies irruption in his introduction to *Paul and Empire*. In contrast, however, to Donaldson, who methodically discusses certain of the key, field-constituting works of postcolonial theory and criticism,<sup>30</sup> Horsley gestures in passing to a thoroughly random handful of examples from the field.<sup>31</sup> This hardly matters in the context, because Horsley is presenting the empire-attuned version of Pauline studies showcased in *Paul and Empire* not as spilling over from literary studies but rather as bubbling up from within biblical studies itself. The ultimate

antecedents of *Paul and Empire*, he implies, are the “few recent studies of the historical Jesus [that] have made a point of beginning with the Roman imperial context,” the first of which was his own *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*.<sup>32</sup> More recently, however, “[a] few . . . studies of Paul have finally drawn attention to his opposition to the Roman empire.”<sup>33</sup> The studies that he lists are Dieter Georgi’s *Theocracy in Paul’s Praxis and Theology* and Neil Elliott’s *Liberating Paul*.<sup>34</sup> They are excerpted in what appears to be the central section of *Paul and Empire*, “Paul’s Counter-Imperial Gospel,” where they are joined by Helmut Koester’s “Imperial Ideology and Paul’s Eschatology in 1 Thessalonians.” Instead of the “Holy Trinity” of postcolonial theory, then—Said, Spivak, Bhabha<sup>35</sup>—*Paul and Empire* presents us with a rather different trinity—Georgi, Elliott, Koester.

Does the tale of origins that Horsley spins in his introduction to *Paul and Empire* remain undisturbed in *Paul and Politics*? It does not. It is not extrabiblical postcolonial studies but intrabiblical feminist studies that forces a retelling of the tale. The latter field is represented in *Paul and Empire* only by an excerpt from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s *In Memory of Her*.<sup>36</sup> In *Paul and Politics*, which contains contributions by Schüssler Fiorenza, Antoinette Clark Wire, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Sheila Briggs, and Pamela Eisenbaum, feminism moves from the wings to center stage, and so does attention to issues of race and ethnicity, most of all in Sze-kar Wan’s contribution. In his introduction to the collection, Horsley rises gamely to the challenge of describing the multipronged political hermeneutic that ensues. He rightly notes, however, that such a hermeneutic was anticipated by Schüssler Fiorenza, whose 1987 SBL presidential address he quotes as calling for attention to “the complex multiplicative interstructuring of gender, race, class, and colonial dominations and their imbrications with each other.”<sup>37</sup> Already in the mid-1980s, then, Schüssler Fiorenza had expanded feminist biblical criticism so that it extended into terrain that would later be termed “postcolonial” (yet a further “beginning” to which we shall later return). Simultaneously, as we saw earlier, and independently, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was expanding postcolonial theory so that it extended into feminist terrain. More precisely, Spivak was exploring the complex, multiplicative interstructuring of colonialism, gender, race, and class. These two parallel developments are not brought into dialogue, however, anywhere in the Horsley “trilogy.” There are, indeed, no further references in *Paul and Empire* to the extrabiblical field of postcolonial studies after the introduction, and even in the remaining two volumes of the trilogy such references are few and far between.<sup>38</sup>

This is not to say, however, that the Horsleyan brand of empire-attuned Pauline studies has no real interdisciplinary dimension. It is simply that the crucial discipline is not postcolonial studies but rather classical studies, the oldest interdisciplinary of all for New Testament studies. Parts I and II of *Paul and Empire* (“The Gospel of Imperial Salvation” and “Patronage, Priesthoods, and Power”) feature essay-length excerpts from the work of no fewer than six classicists.<sup>39</sup> The most significant of these classicists for Horsley, it would seem, is S. R. F. Price, author of *Rituals and Power*, the standard study of the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor.<sup>40</sup> Price shows up once again in the

third volume in *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, where he is given the last word as general respondent.<sup>41</sup> All of this makes for a version of postcolonial biblical criticism (if that is indeed the proper term for it; more on this below) that barely stretches the traditional New Testament scholar, absorbed as he or she is already with the ancient Mediterranean world in all its dimensions and hence accustomed to grazing in the field of classics.

This brings us to yet another significant “beginning” for postcolonial biblical criticism. In 2007, the first ever article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* (*JBL*) with the term “postcolonial” in its title made its appearance, David A. deSilva’s “Using the Master’s Tools to Shore Up Another’s House: A Postcolonial Analysis of 4 Maccabees.”<sup>42</sup> The Society of Biblical Literature Web site modestly dubs the *Journal* “[t]he flagship journal of the field,”<sup>43</sup> and certainly one would be hard-pressed to name a more representative icon of mainstream biblical scholarship than this hugely oversubmitted periodical. What does it take for postcolonial biblical criticism to move from the margins to the mainstream—from the *Asia Journal of Theology*, say, site of the first postcolonial biblical critical article,<sup>44</sup> to the *Journal of Biblical Literature*? Mainly it appears to take a strategic bracketing of all contexts but the ancient one. In fairness to deSilva, it should at once be said that his article is superb on many levels. His analysis of 4 Maccabees is incisive and original and will likely open up productive new paths of research on the book. But it is not on the details of his analysis that I wish to comment here so much as his framing of it, together with his choice of subject matter. DeSilva observes in his introduction that the postcolonial lens “has most frequently been employed to examine the use of the Bible and its interpretation as a means of advancing Eurocentric agendas and legitimating the hegemony of Western Europe and its partners, both in situations of formal imperialism and in the lingering aftermath of ‘empire.’”<sup>45</sup> How striking, then, not to say symptomatic, that postcolonial criticism’s arrival, announced by name,<sup>46</sup> in the most closely guarded sanctum of mainstream biblical scholarship should find it coupled with a text that is not part of any biblical canon,<sup>47</sup> and hence not a text laden with any of the soiled colonialist baggage to which deSilva gestures. Fourth Maccabees is a text that stands entirely outside the history of modern Western colonialism and its neocolonial aftermath, and few contemporary Jews or non-Orthodox Christians even know that it exists, apart from the elite cadre of specialist scholars.<sup>48</sup> Is contemporary relevance the first casualty of postcolonial criticism’s assimilation to the ethos of mainstream biblical scholarship?

Consideration of that question brings us back once again to *Paul and Empire*. Not all of the influences flowing into that volume are so reassuringly mainstream. Neil Elliott’s *Liberating Paul*, the only work to be represented by two selections in Horsley’s anthology, has its ultimate sources elsewhere than in historical criticism.<sup>49</sup> Essentially, *Liberating Paul* is an exercise in liberation hermeneutics. In the preface to the second edition, Elliott notes how certain reviewers of the book were “scandalized” that so much of it went “beyond historical reconstruction to draw theological and political connections regarding the imperial order in our own day.”<sup>50</sup> He proceeds to explain how the book “had its origin in a very specific historical moment.” The first President

Bush “had launched a catastrophic and virtually unilateral war in Iraq; his administration had supported a bloody coup d’état that had removed the democratically elected president of Haiti . . . ; his tax breaks for the richest Americans fueled budget deficits and accelerated the growing divide between rich and poor.”<sup>51</sup> Against this troubling geopolitical and domestic backdrop, Elliott takes on the task of liberating Paul from his long-standing role as “the voice of the sanctified status quo.”<sup>52</sup> He notes how “[f]or centuries the apostle’s legacy has been systematically manipulated by human structures of domination and oppression, from the conservative interpreters of Paul who found their way into the New Testament itself, down to the legitimation of the ‘New World Order’ or the sonorous waves of antifeminism backlash in our own time.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, Elliott is in no hurry in *Liberating Paul* to slip back into the ancient world and join the hordes of other Pauline specialists happily scurrying about their arcane business. The book’s first chapter, “Paul in the Service of Death,” takes the reader on a dismal but enlightening tour from colonial South Carolina to the Massachusetts Bay colony, and on to the Nazi death camp at Chelmno and the Reagan-backed civil war in Guatemala. For Elliott, Paul must be liberated so that Paul can liberate. A liberatory Paul is the goal of *Liberating Paul*.

Elliott’s book thus suggests another beginning for empire-attuned Pauline studies, a beginning in liberation theology and hermeneutics,<sup>54</sup> though only a beginning, since empire is not yet his unrelenting central focus. For that one must turn to Elliott’s recent *The Arrogance of Nations*, a reading of Romans “in the shadow of empire,” as the subtitle has it, or rather in the shadow of two empires, the ancient Roman Empire and the contemporary American Empire.<sup>55</sup> Explicit reflection on the far-flung operations of the latter empire frames Elliott’s engagement with the former empire. The book’s five exegetical chapters are devoted to demonstrating a productively counterintuitive proposition that perfectly encapsulates the Elliott-Horsley brand of empire-attuned Pauline studies, namely, that it is “anachronistic to read Romans as an early specimen of Christian theology. The letter is rather one expression of the range of Judean responses to the Roman Empire.”<sup>56</sup> Apart from an occasional reference to the work of Edward Said, however, the extrabiblical field of postcolonial studies is as absent from *The Arrogance of Nations* as it was from *Liberating Paul*. Elliott’s principal “secular” resource in *The Arrogance of Nations* is not postcolonial theory but rather the neo-Marxist cultural theory of Fredric Jameson, supplemented by the neo-Marxist power analytic of James C. Scott—more fitting influences, apparently, for a liberationist.<sup>57</sup>

But if Pauline studies as empire studies might be said to have its (other) beginning in Neil Elliott’s extension of liberation hermeneutics to Paul in 1994, biblical studies in general as empire studies might also be said to have begun that year, and also in a liberationist register. For 1994 also saw the publication of R. S. Sugirtharajah’s “From Orientalist to Post-Colonial,” making Sugirtharajah, in his own estimate, “the first to introduce postcolonial criticism to biblical studies.”<sup>58</sup> As the title of his article suggests, Sugirtharajah begins that task in dialogue with postcolonial theory, and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* remains a significant point of orientation for him in his 1998 monograph, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism*.<sup>59</sup> Yet extrabiblical postcolonial studies

is not the primary impetus for postcolonial biblical criticism in the Sugirtharajah mold. That impetus would seem to issue instead from Sugirtharajah's complex relations with liberation theology and hermeneutics, relations characterized by obvious debt and partial estrangement. A defining feature of his work is his extensive internal critique of the liberationist tradition from a postcolonial perspective. Liberation hermeneutics, for Sugirtharajah, is largely prevented by its Christian presuppositions and investments from seeing the Bible as at once a source of emancipation and a source of oppression, and from respecting the truth claims of other religious traditions, even when those traditions are the characteristic religious expressions of the poor. It also conceives of oppression in turn in terms that are too exclusively economic, neglecting other forms based on gender, sexuality, or race/ethnicity.<sup>60</sup> Sugirtharajah's highly influential version of postcolonial biblical hermeneutics, then, is largely a critical reworking of liberation hermeneutics.

Is it possible to construe the biblical texts as at once emancipatory and oppressive and to read them in ways intimately attuned to issues of gender, sexuality, or race/ethnicity—as well as to issues of colonialism, imperialism, and neocolonialism—and still see oneself as situated comfortably within the liberationist tradition? Musa Dube's *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* would seem to suggest that it is.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the very combination of the qualifier “postcolonial” with the qualifier “feminist” in its title has the effect of framing Dube's postcolonial project as a project of liberation, as is evident from her own definition of feminist practice: “What distinguishes feminist biblical practice from its male counterpart is its insistence on reading for social liberation.”<sup>62</sup> And it is no accident that Dube's analysis of the pericope about the Matthean Canaanite woman in the book, as both a postcolonial *and* a feminist analysis, has her plunging elbow-deep into the oppressive gender ideology of the text. Even without trying, then, Dube avoids being tarred by Sugirtharajah's brush: she does not shrink “from seeing the Bible as at once a source of emancipation and a source of oppression,” nor “from respecting the truth claims of other religious traditions,” since among the reading strategies of the women of the African Independent Churches celebrated by Dube in her book is “the wisdom of a creative integration of different religious traditions.”<sup>63</sup> Yet she seems to feel no estrangement from the liberationist tradition: “The quest of this book owes its birth to some of [the] major liberation currents of the twentieth century, particularly the Two-Thirds World postcolonial and feminist liberation movements.”<sup>64</sup>

What of the “first-world” feminist liberation movement? In one of the most arresting chapters of her book, Dube takes a series of white Western New Testament scholars—even (or especially) feminist scholars—severely to task for alleged blindness to issues of colonialism and imperialism in their Matthean scholarship.<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere in the book, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's feminist reconstruction of Christian origins is singled out for special censure. Schüssler Fiorenza's reconstructive efforts, notwithstanding her ethical commitments, “have bracketed imperial prescriptions and constructions of the biblical texts; hence, they have maintained the violence of imperial oppression against non-Western and non-Christian biblical feminists.”<sup>66</sup>

Schüssler Fiorenza responds briefly to Dube in her own recent “empire” book, *The Power of the Word*, arguing that Dube has failed to recognize certain fundamental features of her work.<sup>67</sup> This occurs in the context of Schüssler Fiorenza’s own critique of what she perceives as a tendency in postcolonial feminist biblical scholarship generally “to construct a Manichean dualism between wo/men in the Third World and wo/men in the First World, which homogenizes and essentializes wo/men in either world.”<sup>68</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza presents herself, quite compellingly, as having been engaged for decades in postcolonial—or to use her preferred term, “decolonizing”—biblical criticism *avant la lettre*<sup>69</sup>—a claim that gives us another, still earlier, “beginning” for postcolonial biblical criticism, as I noted above. Schüssler Fiorenza’s key concept of *kyriarchy*<sup>70</sup> does merit more attention from postcolonial biblical critics than it has received, since it equips her to intervene effectively in certain of the debates around empire currently under way in New Testament studies, not least Pauline studies. In “Empire and Ekkēsia,” the Pauline chapter of her book, she succeeds in running rings around certain of the prominent (male) contributors to the Paul and empire debate, showing how an empire-critical approach to Paul that is not also a feminist approach limps on one leg. Casting off the “apologetic” approach to Paul that she associates with the empire-critical approach, she navigates deftly “between a rejectionist and an apologetic reading.”<sup>71</sup> And yet it might be argued that she also hobbles herself unnecessarily, as her long-standing antipathy to poststructuralist modes of thought delimits in advance her capacity to engage with the extrabiblical field of postcolonial studies (so much of which is infused with a generic poststructuralism, as we saw earlier) and employ it as a catalyst to extend her familiar lines of approach to early Christian literature.<sup>72</sup>

If feminist criticism poses one kind of threat to the “anti-imperial Paul”—the Paul whose fundamental stance vis à vis imperial hegemony in all its manifestations is one of unequivocal opposition—postcolonial theory poses another kind of threat to him. This is particularly evident when the brand of postcolonial theory being employed is that of Homi Bhabha, with its trademark emphases on colonial ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity.<sup>73</sup> In his book *Competing Identities*, Robert Seesengood recasts Paul as a radically hybrid figure.<sup>74</sup> Extrapolating from Bhabha’s deconstructive concept of hybridity, Seesengood argues that there were no “isolated, discrete, cultural (or subcultural) identities within the Roman Empire,” while the notion “of a host of potentially describable cultural streams (religious groups, philosophical schools, ethnicities, etc.) converging into a single, ‘Hellenized’ whole” is equally untenable.<sup>75</sup> Relocating Paul in this hybrid cultural matrix entails recognizing and analyzing a complex coexistence of compliance and resistance in his relations to imperial culture. The most notable facet of Seesengood’s analysis is the positive value that he ascribes to such coexistence (although his reliance on Bhabha would lead us to expect no less).

[P]erhaps the most fruitful (and least attended?) implication of hybridity is not merely *resistance* to power, but the positive *construction* of the “in-between” identity and its potential alteration of alterity itself. . . . Colonial encroachment and hegemony are ambivalent; they bring both oppression and opportunity. Readings that cast the subaltern only

as deviant (and not simultaneously compliant and transformative) become a two-dimensional liberationist (or Marxist) campaign that sees only categories of suppression and revolt and neglects hybridity's possibility for mutual alteration and mutual coproduction of colonizer and colonized . . . "Jews" may be forced to become more "Greek," yet they also alter, via mimicry and hybridity, "Greekness" and coproduce in the process the resulting culture of the colonial exchange.<sup>76</sup>

Paul, on this reading, does not leave the empire as he found it. Of course, neither does this Bhabha-retooled empire leave Paul as *it* found *him*, least of all the anti-imperial Paul.

When postcolonial theory combines with feminist theory, as it does in Joseph Marchal's *The Politics of Heaven*, the anti-imperial Paul finds himself in a perfect storm. Even Bhabha does not survive the encounter unscathed. If Seesengood is primarily interested in Pauline hybridity, Marchal is primarily interested in Pauline mimicry—that is, Paul's exhortations to his *ekklesiai* to imitate him as he himself imitates Christ. Marchal is not content, however, simply to reframe these exhortations with Bhabha's theory of colonial mimicry. Instead, Marchal draws on alternative theories of mimicry and critiques of Bhabha's theory that have been advanced by feminist postcolonial critics such as Rey Chow, Meyda Yeğenoğlu and Anne McClintock.<sup>77</sup> More important even than feminist postcolonial theory for Marchal, however, is feminist liberation hermeneutics, exemplified for him by the diverse decolonizing projects of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Kwok Pui-lan and (above all, it would seem) Musa Dube. This cumulative critique makes for the severest challenge yet to the anti-imperial Paul. For example, Marchal concludes his analysis of the two Philippians passages that have most often been harnessed for anti-imperial readings of the letter—2:9-11 and 3:20-21—by arguing that they both "collude with a comprehensive order of subjection (every knee bowing, every tongue confessing, all things subject)."<sup>78</sup> Thus,

Paul is not just repeating imperial images in his letters; he is also mimicking imperial-style power arrangements in an effort to consolidate this own authority . . . Though he might be competing with the Roman Empire, or qualifying some of the particulars (such as whose rule it is and his place within it), ultimately his arguments mark his attempts to reinscribe imperial relations. The arrangements are neither leveling nor inclusive, but hierarchical and exclusive . . . In the end, even if one can manage to argue that all this time Paul is working to overthrow the exploitative Roman Empire, it becomes hard to deny how easily adaptable Paul's rhetorical methods are to an imperial agenda. Unfortunately, this kind of accommodation or collusion will be a significant part of the history for those who claim Paul's texts as their own.<sup>79</sup>

AQ: should this be "his"?

All of this brings us back to the opening scene in *Liberating Paul*. Elliott vividly describes the event that gave rise to the book—a gathering of peace activists against the backdrop of the first Gulf War. He recalls being struck by one insistently reiterated question, posed "with real anguish, by [these] Christians committed to peacemaking in a violent society: 'But what do we do with the Bible?'"—a question that was

regularly reduced to another question: “But what do we do with Paul?”<sup>80</sup> “For it was Paul’s voice that we heard most often when our churches debated war, or when they discussed domestic violence, or economic injustice, or a number of other ‘peace and justice’ concerns.”<sup>81</sup> *Liberating Paul* emerged as “an attempt to answer the question.”<sup>82</sup> But Elliott’s (re)construction of an anti-imperial Paul eventually, if indirectly, gives rise to Marchal’s (counter-)construction of an imperial Paul,<sup>83</sup> one whose writings all too easily enable us to make sense of a history in which (to employ Elliott’s terms) “the apostle’s voice has again and again rung out like iron to enforce the will of slaveholders or to legitimate violence against women, Jews, homosexuals, or pacifists.”<sup>84</sup> Imperial Paul summons forth anti-imperial Paul, who in turn summons forth imperial Paul in a reciprocal dance of utopian (re)construction and corrective deconstruction.

Anti-imperial Paul does not, however, remain unchanged in the process (a far more complex process than my simple sketch would suggest, needless to say, and involving far more players than Elliott and Marchal).<sup>85</sup> There are now signs that the anti-imperial Paul, at least as a pure type, will become an increasingly rare species. Elliott himself modifies his earlier claims for Paul’s anti-imperial credentials in his recent *The Arrogance of Nations*:

Though I intend to show that some aspects of Paul’s rhetoric in Romans were subversive of some of the claims of imperial propaganda, I recognize that Paul never provides a systematic or comprehensive critique of the emperor (whom he never names) or of the empire as such. The empire as such is never his direct target: his goal is to lay a claim on the allegiance of his listeners with which the rival claims of empire inevitably interfered. It is not just that his argumentation is occasionally oblique. Paul’s own thinking and rhetoric also was shaped by the ideological constraints of his age. . . . To borrow an apt phrase from Schüssler Fiorenza, Paul’s thought was as fully *kyriarchal*, in its own way, as that of any imperial propagandist.<sup>86</sup>

Elliott’s softening of his earlier claims for Paul’s anti-imperialism is part of a wider tendency now evident in New Testament scholarship that is attuned to empire. When I first surveyed this subfield in 2000,<sup>87</sup> I drew a sharp distinction between work such as that of Richard Horsley, on the one hand, who read the Gospel of Mark (and, of course, the letters of Paul) as unequivocal anti-imperial resistance literature, and work such as that of Tat-siong Benny Liew, on the other hand, who read Mark as insidiously reinscribing imperial ideology even while appearing to resist it.<sup>88</sup> On surveying the field again in 2006,<sup>89</sup> I still did not feel any need to qualify that distinction. By now, however, that sharply drawn line would no longer map onto the shifting contours of the field. If, for example, Warren Carter’s 2001 study *Matthew and Empire* read Matthew as consistently, unequivocally, and exemplarily anti-imperial,<sup>90</sup> his 2007 essay on Matthew for the *Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* does not—now Matthew “mirrors imperial realities, even while it contests them,” and “protests imperial power, even while it imitates imperial structures.”<sup>91</sup> And by 2008 we find even Horsley himself conceding in his introduction to *In the Shadow of Empire*: “Biblical

books are not unanimously and unambiguously anti-imperial or pro-imperial. They speak with different and sometimes ambivalent voices.”<sup>92</sup>

---

### Interrogating the “Postcolonial” in Postcolonial Biblical Criticism

---

How much of the work surveyed thus far warrants the label “postcolonial”? This question, too, has been present from the beginning. In the response essay that she contributed to *Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading*, literature professor Susan VanZanten Gallagher noted that “[f]or some postcolonial literary theorists, several of the essays in this volume would have little, if any, critical validity.” For such theorists, the term “postcolonial” acquires its meaning only in relation to the specificity of European colonialism and its post–World War II aftermath, and “[w]ithin this definition, applying postcolonial theory to the Babylonian, Persian, or Roman conquests, the Johannine community’s expansionist vision, or any biblical pericope is anachronistic and ahistorical.”<sup>93</sup> South African biblical scholar Gerald West has more recently raised similar questions while taking issue with Fernando Segovia’s articulation of a three-dimensional “postcolonial optic” for biblical criticism, the first dimension of which would entail analyzing the biblical texts in their ancient imperial contexts.<sup>94</sup> This project has received the lion’s share of attention from New Testament scholars attuned to empire, as we have seen, and is also the project that is taking root in the mainstream of the discipline.<sup>95</sup> It is all the more important, then, to take note of West’s reaction to the project from an African context:

[I]t is clear that Segovia is here focusing on the ancient context of production, not current postcolonial readings and actual postcolonial readers (the other two aspects of postcolonial biblical criticism he delineates). . . . But it is precisely, I would argue, these other two aspects that constitute “postcolonialism proper”! Postcolonial studies emerges from *the reality of the actual lived experiences of particular forms of colonialism*.<sup>96</sup>

West worries that “extending postcolonialism backwards into biblical history . . . smooths and ‘flattens out’ . . . the particulars of different colonial experiences and the specifics that gave rise to postcolonialism in our era.”<sup>97</sup>

A similar challenge has been sounded from within Pauline studies. “As a politically engaged African American, I cannot ignore the contemporary empire,” Brad Braxton states in a recent essay outlining a postcolonial approach to 2 Cor 3:12-18.<sup>98</sup> He notes that the focus of much recent political reading of the Pauline letters “has been upon the ancient world,” yet postcolonial studies, as he understands it, is ultimately an invitation to acknowledge “current manifestations of imperialism.”<sup>99</sup> He continues: “To read Paul against the backdrop of ancient Rome is intellectually profitable, but the Roman Empire crumbled centuries ago. . . . What happens if postcolonial critics begin to

engage Pauline texts more fully with respect to the neo-imperialism of the twenty-first century?"<sup>100</sup>

Paradoxically, one thing that happens is that the term *postcolonialism* itself is stretched to its breaking point.<sup>101</sup> Whatever chance the term had of capturing the geopolitical complexities of the post–World War II era, it has far less chance of capturing those of the early twenty-first century. The term now in use all over the planet to name the new geopolitical reality is, of course, *globalization*. The field of postcolonial studies is at present visibly engaged in catching up and coming to grips with globalization<sup>102</sup>—and in the process, arguably, is transmuting into something other than “postcolonial studies.”

Postcolonial biblical criticism, in the interests of continued relevance, cannot afford to lag too far behind these developments. Yet nothing in the professional training of the average biblical scholar equips him or her to lock analytic horns with the Behemoth and Leviathan of neocolonialism and globalization.<sup>103</sup> (Braxton’s own iconoclastic essay sits rather forlornly in a Festschrift dedicated to his Doktorvater Carl Holladay that is otherwise composed almost entirely of ultratraditional historical criticism.) That is not the least important reason why the “X and Empire” brand of postcolonial biblical criticism (“Paul and Empire,” “1 Peter and Empire,” “4 Maccabees and Empire”), in which the empire in question is reassuringly ancient and remote, is the brand currently poised for the widest circulation, as it represents the smoothest, least taxing, and least threatening extension of historical criticism.

Yet we should beware of dismissing empire studies too lightly, for it is not without teeth. What makes the current preoccupation with ancient empires in biblical studies genuinely significant is its concern with the question of whether or to what extent biblical texts can be said to *resist* empire. All of the texts that would eventually make up the biblical canons were produced in the margins of empire, but with the Christianization of Rome and the Romanization of Christianity the margins moved to the center. Locked in the crushing embrace of the Vulgate, the first official Bible of imperial Christianity, the primary function of the biblical texts became that of legitimizing the imperial status quo, a function that, covertly when not overtly, continued into the modern period. Even the invention of critical biblical scholarship coincided with—and in ways yet to be adequately analyzed was intertwined with—the inexorable expansion of the modern European empires to their outermost limits. Empire studies is united with other forms of postcolonial biblical criticism in the task of disengaging the biblical texts from an imperial embrace that spans the centuries, and to that extent stands in solidarity with an exceedingly long tradition of anti-colonial biblical reading issuing from the margins or the underside of empire.

Meanwhile, the liberationist variant of postcolonial biblical criticism will continue to ride in the slipstream of contextual hermeneutics and continue to counter the inherent inclination of the “X and Empire” variant, as a quintessential academic enterprise, to coagulate into an esoteric discourse herme(neu)tically sealed off from the extra-academic world.<sup>104</sup> In principle, university or seminary classrooms are not sealed off from the larger society or wider world but are linked to them by multiple arteries.

These arteries, however, can become clogged. While the locus of lived Christianity has moved decisively to the global South, the North continues to be the sanctioned training ground for academic biblical scholars, but students from the South in European or North American universities all too often experience their training in terms of arid irrelevance and even continued colonization.<sup>105</sup> Making biblical scholarship more relevant to a large portion of the planet's population is not the least significant benefit of postcolonial biblical criticism, whatever it is destined to become.

Paul Gilroy's *After Empire* - in many ways a sequel to his classic study of race and nation, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* - explores Britain's failure to come to terms with the loss of its empire and pre-eminent global standing. Drawing on texts from the writings of Fanon and Orwell to Ali G. and *The Office*, *After Empire* shows that what we make of the country's postcolonial o Paul Gilroy's *After*