

Creating and Consolidating Empires

published in *The Journal of British Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 15.2 (2008): 104-112.

R.S. Sugirtharajah. *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005.

W. Anne Joh. *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology*. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006.

Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia, eds. *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections*. London: T&T Clark, 2005.

Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer. *Saving Christianity From Empire*. New York: Continuum, 2005.

As one can tell from the publication dates of these books, commentary on them is now well-ploughed ground. A collective consideration of them would be tricky because they cover such disparate fields. However, we are in luck, for we have had created for us a rubric for the evaluation of postcolonial biblical criticism, created by one of the authors above.

R. S. Sugirtharajah, in his entry on “Postcolonial Biblical Criticism” for *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918* offers one of the most concise introductions to the field to date. He presents three aims and three features that are manifest in the literary output of postcolonial biblical interpreters. His unparalleled insight demands that we utilize his groupings as a convenient umbrella for our analysis. The first aim of postcolonial biblical criticism, he claims, is to read the Bible as a *colonial* text, situated in various colonial contexts. As such, it can be gleaned for

. . . colonial assumptions, imperial impulses, power relations, hegemonic intentions, the treatment of subalterns, stigmatization of women and the marginalized, land appropriation, and the violation of minority cultures. In reading these texts, [postcolonial criticism] endeavors to revive and reclaim silenced voices, sidelined issues, and lost causes. (538)

The second aim is to look at the long tradition of biblical criticism itself and address the issues above, which are a part of both biblical narratives and biblical interpretations. The final aim is to “re-read the Bible in light of *postcolonial* concerns and conditions—plurality, hybridity, multiculturalism, nationalism, diaspora, refugees, and asylum seeking” (538).

Current texts that do postcolonial biblical criticism, according to Sugirtharajah, first investigate the colonial context of biblical narratives, which allows them to address such issues as imperial discourse, marginality, resistance, counter-hegemony, and submerged histories. Next, they make a metacritical move, an investigation of the colonial intentions hidden behind Western biblical interpretation. Issues of race, colonialism, nationality, Orientalism, and cultural constructions are all a part of this feature. Third, postcolonial biblical criticism addresses the heavy migration and great contemporary diasporas for reasons varying from political persecution

to economic advancement. Critics from former colonies address their own dislocation and displacement in the West, giving rise to such issues as alienation, ethnicity, and their own multiple identities.

If these aims and features, proposed by the *éminence grise* of postcolonial biblical studies, are truly the hallmarks of postcolonial work, it serves us, then, to read the texts at hand in light of them. Ideally, in any given text, the features would line up perfectly with the aims, and we would have texts which add insight to our body of knowledge.

Sugirtharajah's schema here offers a roadmap for addressing what many postcolonialists may consider to be an insular field. There are reasons for considering this a rich area of study for even the most secular of postcolonial scholars. The idea that the postcolonial optic is used to assess and comment upon one of the great tools and motivators of empire is significant. The focus on praxes, a hallmark of postcolonial studies, and a significant subfield in biblical studies, is also important. And finally, the alignment of one of the presuppositions of postcolonial studies, a concern for moral considerations, with one of the most important historical collections of moral guidelines, make this a compelling field for all postcolonialists.

As a newcomer to the ongoing biblical critical dialogue, postcolonial studies is still somewhat in the business of legitimizing its use of biblical theory—a fairly standard maneuver, usually consisting of defining the field and then planting flags on the map it has created. Moore and Segovia's work illustrates the former, while the other three texts participate in the latter. Segovia's introductory essay, "Mapping the Postcolonial Optic in Biblical Criticism: Meaning and Scope," offers a survey of scholarship which serves as a fine introduction to and delineation of the postcolonial studies in general. He notes a significant lacuna in terms of postcolonial considerations of religious discourse, claiming that most postcolonial scholarship does not mention religion as either a cultural production or a social matrix. While his collection is an attempt to fill this gap, I think he would also be pleased by the number of texts published in this area over the past three years.

The other essays in the collection seat themselves within the subtitle: "Interdisciplinary Intersections." Each one explores an interstice between postcolonial biblical criticism and another critical field. Moore's entry, "Questions of Biblical Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi; or, The Postcolonial and the Postmodern," reads Bhabha's essay, "Signs Taken for Wonders," from his important 1994 work, *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha's essay takes as its touchstone an anecdote concerning an Indian Christian catechist and a group of converts concerning several printed and hand-written translations of the Bible that were possessed by the converts. Moore also uses this incident, but instead addresses the connection between Bhabha's essentially deconstructive techniques and writings (genuflecting primarily to Derrida, but also nodding to Lacan, Freud, and Foucault, among others), and postcolonial biblical studies. He also explores the connections between postcolonial studies and contemporary capitalism and its culture, seeing irony in the positions of leading Western postcolonial academics who are supported in high style by institutions which are part of a system that exports and imposes its own brand of colonialism. But he also acknowledges the other side of the coin, citing especially Said's life beyond the academy and Bhabha's analytic tools, both of which created and continue to serve as empowering devices.

Laura E. Donaldson's "Gospel Haunting: The Postcolonial Demons of New Testament Criticism" is informed by another member of the postcolonial critical holy trinity, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Donaldson reads biblical passages of possession by demons through a generally feminist lens, although she also fruitfully incorporates disability studies and

indigeneity. Her work on Mark 7:24-30 and the “woman of Syro-Phoenician origin” is fascinating, and provides the only serious exegetical analysis in the volume. She also comments on the chained and howling Gerasene man (Mark 5:1-20; Matthew 18:18, 23-27; Luke 8:22-25) and the Medium at Endor (1 Samuel 28.3-25), binding all three tales together through the use of Spivak’s spectrality.

“Margins and (Cutting-)Edges: On the (Il)legitimacy and Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, and (Post)Colonialism,” by Tat-siong Benny Liew, addresses the weaving together of the idea and implementation of race and ethnicity with postcolonialism. Leaning heavily on Gilroy’s postracial humanism and criticism of the legitimacy of the concept of race, Liew presents various interpretations of the idea of ethnicity, and concludes that postcolonialism is at once dependent upon and necessarily distinct from race and ethnicity, both of which are problematic and, therefore, lend their own (il)legitimacy to postcolonial studies. His questioning of various national and ethnic entries in the 1999 *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* leads to the conclusion that these constructs are fruitful ground for biblical critics, especially if one may embrace a diasporic identity, which will prevent the dangers of essentialism or nativism. He concludes with a generous reading of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*, citing the text as an example of cutting-edge biblical scholarship, and using his interpretation of it as his own example of the race/ethnicity and postcolonialism optic in biblical studies.

The final two selections in the volume, Roland Boer’s “Marx, Postcolonialism, and the Bible,” and David Jobling’s “‘Very Limited Ideological Options’: Marxism and Biblical Studies in Postcolonial Scenes,” do exactly what their titles suggest. It is curious that Moore and Segovia include two articles addressing the intersection between postcolonialism and Marxism. However, Boer’s thesis, that the preeminence of Said, Bhabha, and Spivak in postcolonial studies has marginalized the thoughts of Lenin and Marx, and even later thinkers, such as Fanon and BuBois, is intriguing. The gestalt of the field, it seems to us, owes quite a bit to Marxist analysis, at least as an analogy. It is, in fact, difficult for us to conceptualize the field without Fanon. But Boer cites Sugirtharajah’s *The Bible and the Third World* and *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* as important works in the field which downplay Marxist analysis. Boer’s reading of Mark Brett’s *Genesis* also focuses on the lack of Marxist thought, a peculiar taking to task. His solution to this problem is, “disinterring Ernst Bloch.” Bloch’s inclusion of the category of class in his biblical criticism can provide a new methodology for reading biblical texts, one which pays its debt to Marxism and postcolonialism at the same time.

Jobling’s contribution is far less theoretical, far more grounded in praxis. He takes his title from a passage in Takatso Mofokeng’s *The Academy of the Poor* which illustrates the narrow ideological options available to young Blacks in South Africa. Christianity cannot be dismissed there, because both African tribal religions and Marxism are not viable alternatives for liberation. Jobling’s reading of Mofokeng positions Mofokeng as a proto-postcolonialist who incorporates Marxism into his analysis. Jobling himself then moves from this local situation and Mofokeng’s reading of it to a more global view. On a theoretical level, then, his observation is that, in hiding its Marxist roots (as demonstrated in Boer’s article), postcolonialism diminishes the ideological options of people in struggle. Biblical Studies, too, owes a debt to Marxism, especially in the consideration and understanding of historical modes of production. When both of these are recognized and explored, the interstices between these three will become not just intellectually fruitful, but will offer hope for local communities.

Moore and Segovia and their contributors do a fine job of both mapping the landscape and claiming territory on it. As a whole, this volume is significant as yet another step in the process

of empire-building for postcolonial biblical studies. It is the sixth in a series edited and authored by the leading lights in the field, who seek to explore, define, and expand their realm. If we apply postcolonial terminology to this collection, then what we have is an exploration of the interplay between core and periphery, and the hybridity which develops, or will develop, from these intersections. We could have wished for more exegetical analysis throughout the entries, which would have particularized many of them at the biblical studies level, but as primarily postcolonial scholars, we felt at home with its privileged position here.

If we look at our given aims and features, we see a fine spread of interpretive work here. Some may quibble that the focus is far more interdisciplinary than biblical, but that does not mean that this is not a significant contribution to the scholarship. While the collection could have been strengthened by the inclusion of more “core” issues in biblical studies, such as exegesis, we see this collection as a scout team, sent out to probe the perimeters of other fields, to see where the connections and overlappings might lie. While the discipline of postcolonial biblical criticism is certainly not planning on an attack, or even a hegemonic relationship with other intellectual structures, critical optics, or ways of reading, it is in fact building its own empire, and must know where the boundaries are, and if they are permeable.

R.S. Sugirtharajah’s collection, *The Bible And Empire: Postcolonial Explorations*, continues in the vein of his earlier work, such as *Postcolonial Reconfigurations* (2003), *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (2002), and *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (2001). This volume contains five rather disparate articles surrounding the title theme. The connecting thread here is an exploration of how the Bible was used by the colonizing powers, whether through dissemination, interpretation, or imposition. The first article, “Textually Conjoined Twins: Rammohun Roy and Thomas Jefferson and Their Bibles,” looks at what is commonly known as the Jefferson Bible, and compares it to Roy’s *The Precepts of Jesus*. Both men sought to remove the miraculous from the historical, and present Jesus as a moral teacher. Both were members of the elite class, and both more or less ignore the marginalized classes in the biblical texts they cull and conglomerate. However, both perform what is essentially a subversive act, appropriating the Bible for personal and political ends. They produce their own culturally-conditioned versions of the gospels. They both seek to remove dissension from religion by removing the divisive texts and tropes while pitching their work as moral instruction, something believers of all stripes can agree on. They are, in effect, attempting to wrest power from the priestly and interpretive hierarchies of their times.

“Salvos from the Victorian Pulpit: Conscriptio of Texts by Victorian Preachers During the Indian Rebellion of 1857,” the second article here, is an example of just what those priestly and interpretive castes did with the Bible when they utilized it. The Bible, as interpreted by these preachers, identified the British as the Chosen People, and those who opposed them were the enemies of God. Salvation history for the Hebrews was the type for British history, so the Bible was read as both ancient history and a commentary on the current political situation. Sugirtharajah looks at over 100 sermons preached on the national “day of humiliation,” October 7, 1857, and their use of Old Testament texts and rhetoric to support these ideas and justify the implication that, if Britain was the new Israel, then India was the new Canaan, and these new Canaanites could be exterminated at will. This is a powerful indictment of the dangers of narrow interpretive blinders.

The third chapter, “Thorns in the Crown: The Subversive and Complicit Hermeneutics of John Colenso of Natal and James Long of Bengal,” demonstrates the use of the bible in a different manner. Colenso and Long, both Anglican missionaries, used biblical texts to condemn

the empire-building they saw going on around them. The irony of their situation is obvious: they play a part in the construction of the empire they would condemn. However, their use of modern criticism, their siding with the oppressed and marginalized, and their recognition and implementation of truly Christian ideals makes them interesting object lessons for contemporary missionaries and critics alike.

“Texts and Testament: The Hebrew Scriptures in Colonial Context,” addresses how the Old Testament was utilized and interpreted by both colonizers and the colonized in India. British scholars utilized Indian texts to support their claim to historical accuracy within the Bible, while British missionaries positioned Christianity as the New Dispensation to which Indian idolaters were called, as were the original Israelites. In the meantime, Indian intellectuals and religious reformers were using the Hebrew Scriptures against the imperialist maneuvering they saw around them, and to support their indigenous religious beliefs. It’s an interesting study in interpretation and hybridity.

The final chapter, “Imperial Fictions and Biblical Narratives: Entertainment and Exegesis in Colonial Novels,” reads two colonial novels: *The Missionary: An Indian Tale*, written by Sydney Owenson in 1811, and *Africa Answers Back*, written by Akiki K. Nyabongo in 1936. Both are seen as critiques of the colonial project. Owenson writes about the ultimate failure of a missionary’s attempt to convert the woman he loves. His activity fails to bring her into his fold or into his arms, so it is doubly damning. Nyabongo, writing more than a century later, gives us a protagonist who uses his colonial education to strive to free his people from their colonial situation.

Sugirtharajah’s collection as a whole does far more consolidation than discovery. His critical tools are well-established, but the texts he presents are new. His work here reminds us of the uncovering work of the feminist scholars like Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Bonnie Kime Scott, whose goal was not to create new theoretical apparatuses, but to allow new voices to be heard. Sugirtharajah’s comparative studies do this admirably, as he unearths and unpacks voices which are new to many in both postcolonial studies and biblical studies. He is not interested in redefining the field, but in adding depth to existing definitions.

Wohnee Anne Joh’s *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* is in many ways a theoretical extension of the type of work found in Moore and Segovia’s collection. She is interested in a particularly Korean/American experience of the Cross, and appeals to Bhabha’s notions of mimicry, hybridity, and the inevitable “third space” which develops from the first two. She blends this framework (and the space from which she writes) with Moltmann’s Trinitarian Christology and a Kristevan analysis of the connection between abjection and love. All of this serves to support her overarching categorization, the Asian ideas of *han*, suffering so profound it is beyond grief, and *jeong*, meaning relational stickiness, human connectedness, fellow-feeling, sympathy, or heart. *Han* is an important consideration in Asian Christian theology of liberation, while *jeong* comes from the small things we do daily to strengthen our relationships. In her formulation of *han*, Joh owes a great deal to Andrew Sung Park’s *The Wounded Heart of God*, but it is her appeal to the local, to the personal, to this giving voice to the considerations which offer both critical structures and new praxes, that is most assuredly postcolonial.

Joh reads the cross through Bhabha, for he addresses what is in essence a contradictory understanding: the cross signifies both a patriarchal tool which imposes the will of the established tradition and the very thing which can destroy that tradition of oppression. In this third space, then, she is able to articulate a feminist theology of the cross. Her final connective project is found, however, in her conclusion, where she makes a significant connection between

Jesus, the cross, and *anatta*, or no-self, perhaps the essence of Buddhist teaching. This ecumenical understanding is facilitated, finally, through *jeong*, for it is this sympathy of love which moves Jesus to *anatta*.

In many ways, this is the most exciting text in the lot, for it discovers new territory, and pushes the permeability of boundaries between many different fields. It is fascinating in its anthropology, especially in its globalization of the local. It mines many traditions, and instead of feeling like a mere pastiche, there is something palpable and significant here, a wholeness that signifies as if all these pieces just clicked into place to create something greater than the sum of its disparate parts.

While Joh's may be the most inspiring work, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer's *Saving Christianity from Empire* may be the most timely. His premise is a reversal of the centuries-old idea that Christianity, and especially its missionary activity, is a tool of empire. He looks at the economic, cultural, and military imperialism of America, and finds American Christians complicit in it. While he addresses the neoconservative call for the increased use of American military might throughout the globe, he also addresses the neoliberal idea of economic globalization, and is equally critical of both.

Against a cogent historical background, Nelson-Pallmeyer asks one significant question, and then answers it. His question is the choice which confronts the U.S. currently: do we choose to be an empire, or a republic? His answer lies in a commitment to nonviolence, as manifested in Jesus. His call to Christians is to reject those parts of their own tradition which advocate violence (even the just-war theory), for the gospels themselves offer nothing but a vision of peace. If Christians do not do so, he claims, they will continue to see their faith co-opted, because the idea of empire itself changes Christianity into something it is not. Christians cannot be complicit with either militarism or empire-building.

Nelson-Pallmeyer evaluates the ways in which the Bible and other monotheistic holy books advocate violent and often imperialistic agendas. He asserts, "Religiously justified violence is the fruit of 'sacred' texts that overwhelmingly privilege coercive understanding of power and images of a violent, punishing God" (106). He contends that, "The Bible is a useful book for U.S. leaders committed to empire and eager to construct religious justifications for their ambitions" because of its "apocalyptic fantasies, wrathful views of God, suspicion and fear of others, literal interpretations, preoccupations with heaven and hell, myths of Armageddon, and expectations of the rapture" (120).

Despite its violence, Nelson-Pallmeyer finds the Bible and Christianity in general a "bizarre candidate" for the service of empire because "it was born in the context of an anti-imperial people with a long tradition of hostility to empire" (126). Jews longed for freedom from the Roman Empire and Jesus himself was "a founder of an anti-Roman Jewish reform movement" (126). Jesus taught "love of enemies, advocated and practiced nonviolence, and warned that using violence led to more violence" (126), so he resisted the Roman Empire through non-violence. The non-violent anti-imperial stream of Christianity eventually ended when the Roman Emperor Constantine accepted Christianity as the official religion of the Empire. However, it took hundreds of years for Christianity to transition into a violent religion that serviced the state.

Ultimately, Nelson-Pallmeyer concludes that both Christians and secular Americans must choose to continue conceptualizing America as an ever expanding empire or to re-envision America as a democratic republic that is non-violent. He finds the latter choice imperative, "not because it is more biblical or more faithful to the Gospel writers, but because it is faithful to Jesus and is a legitimate expression of Christianity" (160).

While Nelson-Pallmeyer may not utilize the standard postcolonial vocabulary or bow to the usual postcolonial theorists, in terms of the application of postcolonial theory, he is spot on. His historical and theological analysis is certainly grounded well in those fields, and he is part of a long tradition in American which envisions a peaceable kingdom through the implementation of gospel values.

As the above texts show, the field itself is vibrant and growing, addressing a goodly number of issues, cultures, and specific biblical or theological concerns. It has found permeable boundaries with many other disciplines, and has struck out to claim intellectual turf of its own. As three of these four texts demonstrate, we are in a transitional period, moving away from the claiming of territory and beginning to mine what has already been claimed. What has been brought to the surface is a varied lot, some fully completed, some inchoate, but all supportive of the creation of another academic empire.

Work Cited

Sugirtharajah, R. S. "Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation." *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*. Eds. David F. Ford and Rachel Muer. 3rd edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 535-52.

Joe Pellegrino
Georgia Southern University
Leah DiNatale
Georgia Southern University