
Review of Fernando F. Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah, eds., *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings. The Bible and Postcolonialism 13*. New York/London: T & T Clark, 2007.

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This is the 13th volume in the The Bible and Postcolonialism series and quite an impressive collection of essays. The 20 articles on the various New Testament writings (with Luke-Acts analysed in one article, as is the case with 1-2 Corinthians; 1-2 Thessalonians; 1-2 Timothy and Titus and 1-3 John) are framed by contributions of the editors. Thus Fernando Segovia has written a comprehensive introduction, which covers the configurations, approaches, findings, and stances taken in the various essays, while Sugirtharajah has written a wrapping up of sorts: "Postcolonial and Biblical Interpretation: The Next Phase". I shall return to this final essay later. I especially enjoyed many of the articles on the smaller texts, perhaps because the texts themselves seem more manageable in 10 pages. Another reason could be that they are not texts which have already been through extensive postcolonial interpretation, and so present themselves from a different angle. In this category I would definitely recommend Burrus on Luke-Acts, Bird on Ephesians, Zerbe/Orevillo-Montenegro on Colossians, Callahan on Philemon, Punt on Hebrews, Ringe on James, and Kittredge on 2 Peter. This is not to say the other articles are less enjoyable, they are just well ploughed fields, and are written by their usual farmers, and hence do not present themselves as startling readings. In this group we have Segovia on John, Carter on Matthew, Liew on Mark, Elliott on Romans, Schüssler Fiorenza on 1 Peter (what is with that G*d thing?) and Moore on Revelation.

Segovia's introduction canvasses the methodologies of the different articles, as well as their approaches to postcolonial theory. Instead of just repeating what he has written, I have therefore chosen to discuss a couple of articles' use of postcolonialism and its consequences for feminist and queer concerns.

Neil Elliott's article on Romans is an 18 page article (pp. 194-219 – where 8 pages are references), which seeks to argue for the legitimacy of a political reading of Romans by referring to the theological foci of previous interpretations, reconstructing the historical situation of Romans, and moving on from there to his own interpretation. Within Elliott's "justice of God" reading, he produces a particularly grievous interpretation of Romans 1.24-27. In dealing with the troubling passages on degrading sex and passions, we are assured that Paul is not attempting to "convince his readers that human corruption and immorality *in some general or stereotypical sense* had suddenly become 'revelatory'" and "[n]either can the sexual perversity [!] described in 1.24-27 bear the weight of a 'paradigmatic' or 'extreme' expression of human sinfulness" as Dale Martin argues. No, what Paul is doing with this language of "sexual perversity" is alluding to the corruption of the imperial household (p. 205). We are invited to compare this with Suetonius' report on Nero and his practice of "every kind of obscenity ... defiling almost every part of his body" (p. 206). Thus 1.24-27 are seen as Paul's calling attention to "unmistakable, public evidence of divine intervention in the breathtaking immorality and perversion of the imperial house" (ibid.). So, not only are obscene, depraved, defiling, and perversity the key words in analysing 1.24-27, but the connection between empire, which is unequivocally evil in Elliott's interpretation, and same sex relations is carried out with breathtaking ease, in complete negligence of the highly conservative theological assumptions which are reinforced by such an interpretation.

The second article is Richard Horsley's on 1-2 Corinthians. The passage in question is 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, and what Horsley calls the "chain of ontological subordination, God—Christ—man—woman" (p. 234). This passage rubs against the grain of Horsley's somewhat wholesome image of Paul and his gender politics, and is dismissed as a later addition, of the kind which "reverted toward the kyriarchal patterns of the Roman imperial order" (p. 235). While Schüssler Fiorenza also sees the kyriarchal patterns of 1 Peter as Roman, she nevertheless offers a more complex argument and does not for a moment take her eyes off the effectual history of the text and its rhetoric of subordination. Horsley does not discuss this aspect of his interpretation, but is focused on presenting Paul as anti-imperial, at all costs.

Interestingly, both texts in question deal with the prickly issue of "nature" and "natural". While I can sympathise with the desire to avoid tackling such complex issues head on in essays, which have to cover whole texts as well as focus on empire/postcolonialism, I nevertheless find the chosen approach highly problematic and also disappointing, in the work of two influential and inspiring biblical scholars. Elsewhere Musa Dube has argued that biblical studies becomes a colonising body of knowledge when scholars only focus on the ancient world, without regard for the role the biblical texts play in contemporary power structures and politics. Extending this observation to the two readings above, we see that Elliott's reading can serve to fuel anti-gay sentiments, by relating same-sex relations to empire and depraved emperors without explicitly addressing the consequences of such a reading, and its significance for same sex relations today. Likewise, Horsley's failure to deal adequately with the history of texts that advocate gender subordination and questions of "natural" behaviour and appearance according to gender is also highly problematic. Such negligence does not take their effectual history seriously, but deletes it and the text which led to this history in one and the same movement. It is just too simplistic to file all contemporary unpalatable texts under IDEOLOGY OF ROMAN EMPIRE.

Finally, now that I have gotten myself all worked up, I want to return to Sugirtharajah's final essay: "Postcolonial and Biblical Interpretation: The Next Phase". Let me begin with Cynthia Briggs Kittredge's comment in her introduction to James, where the interpreter, "enters into the ironic situation of making an authoritative commentary upon a text while using a perspective that critiques the idea of disembodied 'authority'" (p. 404). This observation relates to my own slight unease with the commentary as a whole, which had lifted in reading through the essays, until that is, I reached the last one, where the unease returned full force. In this end-piece, Sugirtharajah wishes to "draw attention to some of the issues with which postcolonial criticism now needs to engage" (p. 455). As the title of his essay implies, Sugirtharajah feels that we need to move on to the next phase, which means that we need to focus on the non-canonical scriptures (has he forgotten all about the Hebrew Bible?), in order to gain a greater appreciation of the historical formation of the early church (p. 456). I find it highly problematic, no, wait – I feel stronger than problematic. I find it an offensive presumption that this essay envisions the volume as the last and authoritative word on postcolonial interpretations of the New Testament writings, enforcing closure, as it were, on a theoretical approach, which precisely – as I see it – works against closure. I still think that there is a lot of work to be done, which this volume indicates in some of the really exciting articles (e.g. on Ephesians and James) and I am fairly certain that most contributors to this volume do not have the audacity to presume that theirs is the last word on a given text.