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The Postcolonial Biblical Reader is a timely collection of (mostly) previously published work on postcolonial biblical criticism, the discipline that tackles the interface Bible–colonization in the broadest historical and geographical senses of the word. The volume consists of a general introduction by the editor (1–2), a veteran of the volume’s subject matter, introducing the book in terms of its relevance for today’s political world and in terms of its structure, and four sections of unequal length, each with an introduction by the editor, on “theoretical practices,” “empires old and new,” “empire and exegesis,” and “post-colonial concerns.” Indexes of biblical references and of names and subjects as well as lists of contributors and acknowledgments complete the volume.

As already noted, Sugirtharajah states the purpose of the volume—which is a successor to his earlier Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World (1991)—in his introduction. Here he introduces the work of scholars/theologians in this field, and he relates the contents of this volume to the contemporary “return of the Bible as the textual motor behind the empire” (1).

The first section of essays concentrates on the theoretical framework that makes up postcolonial criticism (5–63) and contains, after a short introduction by Sugirtharajah (5–6), an essay entitled “Charting the Aftermath: A Review of Postcolonial Criticism” (7–32)
by Sugirtharajah that charts the development and current state of postcolonial criticism. It begins with a succinct definition, worth quoting in full:

Postcolonial studies emerged as a way of engaging with the textual, historical, and cultural articulations of societies disturbed and transformed by the historical reality of colonial presence. In this respect, in its earlier incarnation, postcolonialism was never conceived as a grand theory, but as creative literature and as a resistance discourse emerging in the former colonies of the Western empires. Postcolonialism as a methodological category and as a critical practice only followed later. There were two aspects: first, to analyze the diverse strategies by which the colonizers constructed images of the colonized; and second, to study how the colonized themselves made use of and went beyond many of those strategies in order to articulate their identity, self-worth, and empowerment. Postcolonialism has been taking a long historical look at both old and new forms of domination. Its insight lies in understanding how the past informs the present. (7)

Sugirtharajah then notes the wide diversity of postcolonial criticism, in order to describe it as a form of criticism in the Saidian sense of the word (“life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination and abuse, its social goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom” [9, quoted from Edward Said, The World, the Text and the Critic (London: Vintage, 1991), 28]) rather than as a theory in the Foucaultian sense of the word (“the deduction, on the basis of a number of axioms, of an abstract model applicable to an indefinite number of empirical descriptions” [9, quoted from Robert J. C. Young, Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 64]). The next part of Sugirtharajah’s contribution is dedicated to unpacking these initial descriptions and definitions (9–16). After this he turns to a short terminological discussion of “imperialism” (theory) and “colonialism” and “neo-colonialism” (practices deriving from this, 16–17). This is followed by a discussion of postcolonialism and biblical studies, emphasizing the need for this approach in the field (17–18). Then come some considerations about the interface of (missionary) Christianity and (post)colonialism, in the context of which Sugirtharajah notes that this is an underestimated connection (18–19). A next section is dedicated to the issue of feminism and postcolonialism, two perspectives whose synergies should be used more (19–20). Sugirtharajah then turns to the interface of globalization and postcolonialism, noting the similarities and the differences (20–22), and to the (post)colonial identity of the United States of America (22–25). Sugirtharajah’s contribution ends with conclusions and an outlook (25–27). In the latter section, attention is called to the fact that postcolonial studies should throw its net wider than merely nineteenth-century British colonialism. In
addition, he states helpfully that “the issue is not that one is at fault, and that the other is blameless. The issue is how one makes use of the past and who benefits from it” (25).

The second contribution in this section is by Fernando F. Segovia, another veteran of postcolonial biblical studies, and is entitled “Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Towards a Postcolonial Optic” (33–44). Segovia here builds on his earlier work on biblical studies and cultural studies, taking as his starting point the fact that for him the postcolonial model has become “a most appropriate, most enlightening, and most fruitful approach to biblical studies approach to biblical criticism” because he considers it “both hermeneutically rewarding and personally satisfying” (34). Segovia then outlines the appropriateness of the postcolonial perspective in general in terms of the pluralization and contextualization of both hermeneutics (e.g., in terms of the construction of the reader, 34–35) and systematic theology (35–36) and for him personally in view of his immigrant identity as a Cuban in the United States. Segovia then turns his attention to what a postcolonial optic could mean for biblical studies from a historical perspective (e.g., the importance of the Roman Empire, 37–38), from the perspective of the analysis of modern readings of the biblical texts (38–40), and from the perspective of the identity and construction of the reader (40–42), calling for the persistent attention for colonial/imperialist tendencies over against all “others” in the discipline/the world. In these sections Segovia shows convincingly what fruits a postcolonial optic might bear. Finally, in his concluding section, Segovia locates his postcolonial optic among other approaches and optics, noting the dependence of the model on other models and also underlining the need for a multiperspectival approach in a postmodern era. Rightly, he also underlines that postcolonial criticism should view itself as unus inter pares, because “otherwise, it could easily turn into an imperial discourse of its own” (42).

The third and final contribution to this section, by Kwok Pui-Lan, fills out the gap that both Sugirtharajah and Segovia noted: the lack of attention for the feminist perspective in postcolonial (biblical) criticism. She entitles her contribution “Making the Connections: Postcolonial Studies and Feminist Biblical Interpretation” (45–63). After an introduction in which she notes the diversity of this interface, she sets out to map the history of research, which, naturally, first takes notice of the lack of attention for feminist biblical studies in the first wave of postcolonial (biblical) studies (46–47). Second, she presents the fivefold contribution of feminist critics to postcolonial biblical criticism: (1) “they want to investigate how the symbolization of women and the deployment of gender in the text relate to class interest, modes of production, concentration of state power, and colonial domination”; (2) “postcolonial feminist critics pay special attention to the biblical women in the contact zone and present reconstructive readings as counternarrative”; (3) “postcolonial feminist critics scrutinize metropolitan interpretations, including those offered by both male and feminist scholars, to see if their readings support the colonizing
ideology by glossing over the imperial context and agenda, or contribute to decolonizing the imperializing texts for the sake of liberation”; (4) “in order to subvert the dominant Western patriarchal interpretations, postcolonial feminist critics, especially those in Africa, emphasize the roles and contributions of ordinary readers”; and (5) “postcolonial feminist critics pay increasing attention to … the politics and poetics of location” (48–50). Each of these five approaches is illustrated with at least one example. After this overview Pui-Lan turns to two issues that merit individual attention: the interface “postcolonialism-gender-early Christianity” (50–56), discussing how ancient (colonizing) constructions of gender and modern ones interact; and the issue of “postcolonialism, feminism and anti-Judaism” (56–60), in which especially the hermeneutical model of “Jesus the first feminist/postcolonist,” which more often than not is used at the cost of a rather negative description of early Judaism, is brought into discussion with Jewish feminist New Testament critics.

The second section of the book is dedicated to “Empires Old and New” and contains, after a short introduction by Sugirtharajah, four contributions, three of which have a historical focus and one that focuses on the interrelationship between biblical/Christian imperializing tendencies and recent U.S. American presidential rhetoric. The first of the historical contributions, Richard A. Horsley’s “Renewal Movements and Resistance to Empire in Ancient Judea” (69–77), reads—through the lens of recent Islamic/Islamist history—the various renewal movements in early Judaism as movements that proceeded from an understanding of Judaism in which religion and politics are parts of an organic whole. Furthermore, these renewal movements were (all) embedded in a context of resistance against the various empires Judea was part of. On this basis he is able to show what is lost if this aspect of early Christianities and Judaisms were neglected:

Blinded by their essentialist assumptions about religion, many modern scholars, as well as contemporary Jews and Christians, are unable to discern and appreciate the historical struggles against imperial domination in which Jewish and Christian histories and literatures originated. Also lost, of course, is the ability to recognize parallels between Jewish and Christian origins and the current struggles of imperially subject peoples to renew their own traditional way of life in the face of persistent western imperial encroachment. (76)

The second historically oriented contribution is that by Jon L. Berquist, “Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization” (78–95). Berquist here traces the development of the canon of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible in a colonized setting, that is, that of the Persian Empire, engaging with contemporary theories about postcolonial literature in order to see if the canon can be read as such. One reason for this attempt is that “the canon is part of a mediation between colonizer and colonized, but it is a troubled mediation, not
a smooth dialectic synthesis,” thus “the canon can never be a truly Persian text; it never becomes a truly imperial artefact. Yet at the same time it is not equivalent to the colony; it does not speak the local vision as the locals would themselves voice it.” (92) Taking this into account, the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible canon is indeed a postcolonial text, but it should also be acknowledged that “the postcolonial canon remains a contested, conflicted site, inscribed with multiple layers of ideologically invested interpretation. It remains a place for interpreter’s ideologies to work themselves out in textual strategies and in the present world, where colonialisms and decolonizing are still at work” (93). This situation calls not only for the recognition of postcolonial elements in the canonical text but also for a commitment to this particular interpretative perspective (93).

The third contribution is Werner H. Kelber’s “Roman Imperialism and Early Christian Scribality” (96–111). It concentrates on scribality and the (re)shaping of the (imperial) world, taking as a starting point the following observation:

Most frequently and influentially, scribality was applied for the purpose of recording the people’s stories and history. And in the producing and controlling the record of the past, those who were in charge of the scribal medium decisively determined how people would remember the past, how they thought of their identity—past, present and future—and how they acted in accordance with it. (96)

After some introductory remarks about the differences between Pharisees and Sadducees, Kelber turns to an analysis of how three New Testament texts (Mark, Luke, and the Apocalypse) deal with the empire in which they find themselves writing. Mark is seen as setting up the kingdom of God as an alternative to Roman power (98–101), while Luke is seen to provide an accommodation to the same (102–6), and the Apocalypse is interpreted as a subversion of Roman power (106–10). This leads to Kelber’s more general conclusion that, “as a marginalized group, the early Christians scribalized their traditions for the purpose of solidifying cultural memory and constructing a sense of history” (110). As noted, this took place in highly diverse ways.

Eric Runions’s “Desiring War: Apocalypse, Commodity Fetish, and the End of History” (112–28) is an entirely different contribution, since it focuses on the (biblically underpinned) imperialistic rhetoric of the current U.S. American administration. Put in his own words:

This paper argues that the repeated buzzwords “history” and “freedom” in official documents of the Bush administration work to conflate religious and economic desire as a means of motivating war. Bush’s apocalyptically inflected invocation of a personified “History”, who calls the US to defend and advance freedom also
betrays a philosophical underpinning that is illuminated through Francis Fukuyama’s explication of the “end of history”. This exploration of the religio-philosophical framework for Bush’s public discourse pays attention to the way in which it mirrors Fukuyama’s ultimately neoconservative, Nietzschean reading of Kojève, in which the Hegelian fight unto death is never quite resolved. (112)

A detailed analysis of the interaction of (biblical) apocalyptic discourse and the philosophical insights mentioned in the quotation follows, which leads to this conclusion:

It appears that the use of apocalyptic metaphors to motivate economic ends is not benign; the stakes are deadly, both at home and abroad. Moreover, it appears that war, for this administration, is not simply a means to an end; rather, it is the beginning of a new imperialist history. (124)

After Runions’s contribution, the third and largest section of the volume commences with an introduction by the editor (131–33). This section is entitled “Empire and Exegesis” and contains nine examples of postcolonial exegesis, engaging with the paradigm as it has been sketched by the more theoretical contributions in the first section of the reader. In view of their exemplary character, these contributions will be discussed in less detail than the contributions from the volume’s first section.

The first essay, “The Implications of the Text of Esther for African Women’s Struggle for Liberation in South Africa,” by Itumeleng J. Mosala, reads the book of Esther self-consciously as a representative of black feminist theology in the context of African women’s struggle for liberation (135). She only does this, however, after addressing an issue of colonization within the field of the theology of liberation, namely, the subsumation of much theology of liberation under the label of (South-American) liberation theology (134–35). The first step of Mosala’s reading is therefore outlining the South African interpretative context (135–36). After this she continues with a review of biblical scholarship on Esther (136–37) and a treatment of African Women’s Struggle for Liberation (137–38). On this the actual reading of Esther follows (138–40), which is original in terms of outlining how the character of the heroine is entirely inscribed with the dominant discourse of patriarchy and imperialism (140).

In “Rahab Says Hello to Judith: A Decolonizing Feminist Reading,” Musa W. Dube engages with the interests of empire (and patriarchy) and the two biblical women in her title. She acknowledges both the possibilities for liberation that Rahab and Judith and their stories offer as well as the fact that these possibilities have their limitations, as “the master’s tools can never dismantle his house” (156). This leads her to a conclusion that
calls to mind Segovia’s earlier warning that the decolonizing discourse itself might also become a colonist in turn:

In short, while a decolonizing feminist biblical hermeneutics must critique both patriarchy and imperialism in the available world scriptures, it also needs to liberate itself from the bondage of patriarchal and imperial texts whose liberative power comes as crumbs that fall from the master’s table. Instead feminists of various backgrounds need to embody God’s Spirit, to enter a new space, to speak new words, and to speak into existence a new world of justice and liberation of the earth community. (157)

Laura E. Donaldson’s “The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes” (159–70) offers a reading of the book of Ruth with sympathy for Orpah, who, contrary to the author’s intention, returns to the land of Moab rather than become a model proselyte like Ruth. Donaldson views Orpah as a possibility for identification for (in this case) a Native American (Cherokee), who can find a source of empowerment to return (or stay) with the aboriginal traditions rather than to convert to Christianity (or Judaism, for that matter) (168).

Philip Chia’s “On Naming the Subject: Postcolonial Reading of Daniel 11” (171–85) presents from a Hong Kong Chinese point of view a reading of Dan 11. Hong Kong Chinese cultural identity is seen as caught between the past British colonist rule and the present reintegration into China (see 182 n. 1), which results in an uncertain and hybrid identity. Chia’s reading of Dan 11 focuses on Daniel’s strategy (and that of his companions) to claim and find an authentic identity within the context of being colonized, such as an authentic name and authentic food, thus resisting the imperial forces that attempt to overcome them.

Kari Latvus, “Decolonizing Yahweh: A Postcolonial Reading of 2 Kings 24–25” (186–92), presents within the framework of Segovian and Sugirtharajahan theory (187) a succinct argument for the case that in 2 Kgs 24–25 YHWH is presented from the imperialist point of view of the Babylonian Empire, thus coaxing the reader into the view that all the misery recounted in these chapters (demolishing of Jerusalem, deportations) is part of a divine decision and even the deserved fate of Israel. Latvus suggests that this kind of theology should be countered by: (1) analyzing the Deuteronomistic History from a postcolonial point of view; (2) balancing the results with other elements of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament theology; and (3) interrelating the results with a more contemporary understanding of God (191).
While Kelber already touched on the Markan discourse of “kingdom versus empire,” Stephen D. Moore contributes an analysis of the same discourse under the title “Mark and Empire: ‘Zealot’ and ‘Postcolonial’ Readings” (193–205). Moore takes Mark 5:1–9, the exorcism resulting in a herd of swine tumbling down a cliff, as his starting point. This narrative is read in terms of a veiled reference to the (postcolonial) wish to get Roman legions to tumble down cliffs (193–94). This Moore relates to Jesus’ valiant march to Jerusalem, interpreted in terms of an attempt to overthrow the metropolis and related to other aspects of Mark (195–201). This dream of destruction and of the exchange of empire for kingdom is seen to stand in contrast by the accounts referring to an absolute gift in Mark 12:44 and 14:3–4. The two women figuring in these texts represent to Moore an alternative mode of resistance in terms of an absolute gift. He concludes, however, that Mark himself does not embark on the road of this alternative, as he concludes that “Mark’s gospel refuses to relinquish its dreams of empire, even while deftly deconstructing the models of economic exchange that enable empires, even eschatological ones, to function” (204).

Tat-siong Benny Liew’s “Tyranny, Boundary, and Might: Colonial Mimicry in Mark’s Gospel” (206–23) considers a very similar subject as Moore’s and Kelber’s contributions. He, however, concentrates on his own Hong Kong Chinese background (207–9) as an interpretative context, while questioning other liberationist readings of relationships (of Jesus to others; cf., e.g., 209–13) in Mark’s Gospel (206). His conclusions are not all that liberationist, since he notes that Mark still uses a kind of binarism, regarding people to be insiders or outsiders respectively (213–14), and retains a notion of authority closely associated with wielding power (214–15). This leads him to the further conclusion that Mark mainly imitates the colonial discourse that it seeks to oppose, without offering a true alternative (215–16). He comes close to Moore in this respect.

Mary Huie-Jolly, who contributes an essay entitled “Maori ‘Jews’ and a Resistant Reading of John 5.10–57” (224–37), offers a highly interesting account of the interaction between Christian mission, the biblical text, and colonizing endeavors in (now) New Zealand. Noting the polarizing structure of John 5:16–47 (225–27), Huie-Jolly gives an account of early contacts of Christian missionaries and Maoris, whereby the former encouraged the latter to identify with the biblical people of Israel when reading the biblical text. The aim was, of course, to align them with those to whom Christ had preached. This enterprise, however, began a life of its own as soon as the intimate (even if sometimes naïve or innocent) connection between these very missionaries and land-claiming colonists became apparent: while still identifying themselves with biblical Israel or, for that matter, the Jews in John, the Maoris stuck to that identity, leaving Christ to the colonists and enabling themselves to construct an independent (postcolonial) identity on the basis of the biblical text (227–34).
As the sixteenth contribution to the volume, Mayra Rivera offers a reflection on divine wisdom (Sophia) from a postcolonial point of view: “God at the Crossroads: A Postcolonial Reading of Sophia” (238–53). The crossroads from the title are a metaphor for the “in-between” state of many involved in postcolonial identity-finding (239). Rivera reviews the biblical (and to a certain extent extrabiblical) material about Sophia (240–45) and considers the way in which these accounts have been read (245–48), noting that the highly hybrid identity of Sophia (240) makes an unsettling readerly experience, which has given rise to attempts to “pigeonhole” her rather than to appreciate her as she is, at the crossroads. The latter observation constitutes for Rivera a source of theological inspiration and identification in a postcolonial setting (248–49).

In a section on “Postcolonial Concerns” one finds four final contributions dealing with issues of translation, misrepresentation, misperception, and dislocation (see Sugirtharajah’s introduction, 257–58). The first contribution is by Dora R. Mbuwayesango (“How Local Divine Powers Were Suppressed: A Case of Mwari of Shona” [259–68]). She recounts the story of the endeavors to translate the Bible into the appropriate native language of the Shona. Mbuwayesango gives a detailed overview of the choices that were made, especially with regard to the translation of the divine name (261–66). She then argues that mistakes were made in this respect, which led to a considerable loss of theological substance. Therefore she calls for retaining the Hebrew names of God in biblical translations, in order to rescue the Shona deity, and aligns herself with a proposal not only to translate the Bible but, what would be more appropriate, to rewrite it entirely (267). In this way the liberating character of the aboriginal religion(s) would be saved in a postcolonial fashion.

The second contribution in this section, Hephziah Israel’s “Cutchery Tamil versus Pure Tamil: Contesting Language Use in the Translated Bible in the Early Nineteenth-Century Protestant Tamil Community” (269–83), charts the debate about the use of various kinds of Tamil (to be) used in two Bible translations. The postcolonial focus of the debate lays in the fact that the earliest of the two translations featuring in the article was received by (a particular group/caste of Tamils) in such a way that they resisted the introduction of a new translation, which would destroy the true religion (and language) as found in the earlier version. Thus, the revised translation was, in truly postcolonial fashion, resisted to by referring to an earlier one, which was appropriate to such an extent that the colonizer was attacked with his own tools.

The penultimate essay is by Karen L. King and discusses a case of “Canonization and Marginalization: Mary of Magdala” (284–90). King charts the various New Testament women who came to be identified with Mary Magdalene and outlines how she became eventually imagined as a model repentant sinner (284–86) rather than as an important disciple of Christ (284, 286–88), as is indicated by a more critical analysis of the New
Testament texts as well as various extracanonical traditions. This case is well-known, and one wonders why precisely this article on Mary of Magdala was included into the reader.

Elazar S. Fernandez, “Exodus-toward-Egypt: Filipino-Americans’ Struggle to Realize the Promised Land in America” (289–304), uses the matrix of exodus to Egypt to interpret the experiences of Filipinos in the United States, which is a highly ambivalent issue:

For Filipino Americans, exodus from their homeland has meant release from poverty and fatalism—an exodus toward a land of wealth and opportunity. The irony, however, is that this exodus has as its destination the homeland of their colonial masters, where they are able to share in the cornucopia of their masters’ blessings but also remain colonized in brazen as well as subtle ways every day of their lives. (293)

In other words, it is indeed a true (liberating) exodus, but its blessings are mixed. Fernandez furthermore outlines the politics of (reconstructing) identity in the States (293–97) and the highly religious character of this enterprise in terms of finding the “promised land” and so forth (297–302). His contribution ends with a note on the fact that, even though some have indeed “made it,” others “have had their bodies broken by the forces of death” in the process (303). Indexes of biblical texts and subjects conclude the volume (305–17).

Having thus outlined the contents of The Postcolonial Biblical Reader, a few concluding comments may be added. First, the volume is a very rich one, still, as becomes apparent in the first section on theory, there remains much ground to be covered. Sugirtharajah’s and Segovia’s introductions into postcolonial theory are very illuminating, although the overlap between them is significant, and one wonders whether there would not be other supplements possible than merely a feminist contribution—certainly a contribution from a same-sex perspective would not have been out of place in view of the double or triple colonization experienced in such relationships.

Second, the section on “Empires Old and New” provides a number of very exciting and thorough contributions, but one wonders why the contribution of Runions on the current Bush administration is so lonely here; again, however, this is asking for an even thicker volume. More attention for the interface of current imperialistic rhetoric and its use of the Bible would have been an exciting topic to read more about.

Third, the large section on “Empire and Exegesis” contains much thought-provoking material, although sometimes the level of scholarly thoroughness is a little disappointing (e.g., in Mosala’s contribution on Esther the review of scholarship on said book consists
of a reference to only one work). Also, as noted earlier in view of Dube’s contribution, sometimes the theological (or even hermeneutical) reflection falls into the trap identified by Segovia of working with a “good–evil” matrix, which is just as colonizing as any other enterprise.

Fourth, postcolonial biblical criticism is a very valuable enterprise, not in the last place theologically, but it seems necessary that this theological reflection take place on a systematic-theological or at least on a hermeneutical level as well, which, unfortunately, is not the case with most of the examples of postcolonial exegesis contained in this book. This leaves some of the contributions standing on their own, without any obvious relationship to (at the very least) mainstream Christian theology. Reflection would be appropriate especially in view of contemporary missionary enterprises with which there is no apparent dialogue in this volume.

Many more remarks could be made at the level of individual contributions, which, however, would go beyond the scope of this review. Rather, it would be exciting to teach a course on postcolonial criticism with the help of this volume, in the course of which most, if not all, contributions would give rise to significant discussion due to their uncommon and sometimes controversial perspectives.