Prejudice and Christian Beginnings
Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies

Laure Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, editors

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Prejudice and Christian Beginnings is an excellent collection of twelve essays revised from a symposium held at Harvard Divinity School in early 2007. The first of two parts investigates how one might proceed analyzing the titular trifecta of race, ethnicity, and gender in late antiquity. Each essay in this section accomplishes its goal through a dual gaze upon ancient and contemporary sites of racial/ethnic import. The second part recounts key moments where New Testament interpretation intersected with racial and ethnic prejudice. These moments extend from the 1880s to ongoing scholarship. Authors implement social constructionist theories of gender, race, and ethnicity, accompanied by left-leaning politics of varying explicitness. Though it would be inaccurate to label the work “postcolonial” in its orientation, the influence of the movement’s most prominent thinkers is unmistakable throughout.

The editors compile several notable investigations of race and early Christianity from the past decade, as well as previews into forthcoming treatments into a single volume—and therein lies Nasrallah and Schüssler Fiorenza’s most important contribution. Their contributors have avoided the easy and all-too-frequent route of summarizing or otherwise watering-down earlier work into essay-length papers. They instead proffer alternate takes on previously published materials and occasionally address critics,
providing familiar readers ample reason to peruse this book. While some readers may become frustrated by contributors’ disagreement regarding the meaning and analytic utility of basic terms such as “race” and “ethnicity,” diversity of this sort presents academic debates on a level that makes the book all the more commendable. But one should note that the title is somewhat misleading. The topic of gender arises consistently but is primarily considered for its function in the construction of ethnicity and race. Discussion of gender is therefore limited to the male-female binary and its capacity for encouraging racial prejudice; queer concerns thus arise only in the final study. Whatever missed opportunities result, the editors have assembled a diverse and worthwhile anthology concerning ethnicity and early Christianity that many will find useful.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s introduction (1–23) sets up the book’s theme of highlighting prejudice and domination. As such, she identifies the collection’s four prerogatives: (1) to advance the use of critical race theory in the study of early Christianity, (2) to determine why scholars of early Christianity have been less likely to address race, ethnicity, and empire than experts in cognate fields, (3) to foster a discussion of methods adequate to analyze ethnicity in early Christianity, and (4) to integrate feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theories for the study of early Christianity. She also discusses her concept “kyriarchy,” which plots multi-axis systems of domination onto a single analytic diagram.

Shelley P. Haley’s “Be Not Afraid of the Dark: Critical Race Theory and Classical Studies” (27–49) opens part 1 with a look at the role of skin color in Roman othering and its subsequent construal. She opts for the Aeneid’s descriptions of Dido and Pseudo-Vergil’s Moretum as the primary loci of her analysis. She argues that scholars have interpreted the “Africanism” out of Dido by failing to adequately contextualize Vergil’s reference to her blonde hair, which may allude to a ritual performed under advisement from an African priestess. For the latter text, Haley observes the racist trends in translating and interpreting Pseudo-Vergil’s description of an African woman named Scybale. She proposes that modern denigrations of African bodies have played a larger role in its analysis than has any effort to discern where Roman conceptions of ethnic difference were at variance with Euro-American ones.

Laura Nasrallah, in “The Knidian Aphrodite in the Roman Empire and Hiram Power’s Greek Slave: On Ethnicity, Gender, and Desire” (51–78), considers the function of ethnicity in the Christian reception of each sculpture. The Knidian Aphrodite stood as the quintessence of Greekness for ancient writers, provoking ethnic polemic from Clement of Alexandria and Tatian. Art historians have similarly situated the Aphrodite within a narrative of Roman unoriginality usurping Greek beauty. Powers’s Greek Slave presents an interesting parallel: itself influenced by the Knidian Aphrodite,
interpretations of the “sugar white” *Greek Slave* assessed the work’s racial components with an acute awareness of then-ongoing American slavery.

Cynthia M. Baker’s “‘From Every Nation under Heaven’: Jewish Ethnicities in the Greco-Roman World” (79–99) begins by examining conceptions of ethnic diversity among Jews in Philo’s *Flaccus* and *Embassy*. Jews, like Greeks, claimed numerous countries and cities as their fatherland. The contours of the Jewish ethnicity—and how one went about determining such contours—were subject to widespread disagreement. While Philo’s writings assume the Jewish capability of holding multiple allegiances in this respect, scholarship on Acts 2:5–11 has interacted insufficiently with this document. Baker notes the various supersessionist and colonial agendas informing its interpretation; above all, there has been a tendency to contrast Jewish provincialism with Christian universalism.

Joseph A. Marchal, in “Mimicry and Colonial Differences: Gender, Ethnicity, and Empire in the Interpretation of Pauline Imitation” (101–27), explores Paul’s command of imitation in 1 Corinthians in the context of colonial discourse. Marchal offers three interpretations of the epistle, each through the lens of a different postcolonial theory of mimicry. Marchal begins with Homi Bhabha, understanding Paul’s vague calls to obedience as the demands of a power-hungry man, a departure from the recent portrayals of a marginal figure grasping at straws. Rey Chow, herself critical of Bhabha, inspires the second interpretation. Chow’s work leads Marchal to see Paul’s polemic as a form of “lateral violence” of Christian authenticity politics imposed from above. The work of Meyda Yeğenoğlu and Anne McClintock, also responding to Bhabha, informs the third interpretation. This reading centers on Paul’s efforts to divide the Corinthians by gender and “conquer” the minds of women first.

Sze-kar Wan’s “‘To the Jew First and Also to the Greek’: Reading Romans as Ethnic Construction” (129–55) discusses Paul’s concept of Judaism in Rom 1–2 in relation to his partial subversion of imperial constructions of ethnicity. Wan follows recent “political Paul” readings that understand the apostle as responding primarily to the Roman Empire, but he questions Paul’s choice of circumcision as the apostle’s primary synecdoche for Judaism insofar as it only applies to male Jews.

Part 2 opens with Denise Kimber Buell’s “God’s Own People: Specters of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Early Christian Studies” (159–90), which offers a theoretical chapter identifying the concept “haunting” as a useful means for thinking about the unwanted legacies of racial thinking on early Christian studies today. She suggests that this approach allows for critique of theological traditions while avoiding “reductively … humanist terms” to create space for an emic critique of Christian biblical scholarship (170).
Shawn Kelley, in “Race, Aesthetics, and Gospel Scholarship: Embracing and Subverting Aesthetic Ideology” (191–209), looks at the subtle use of “aesthetic ideology” in parable scholarship. Kelley finds evidence of this ideology—summarized as the academic duty to recover “the original (Western) voice standing behind the (female, foreign) domestication of that voice” (202)—in the works of Burton Mack, Werner Kelber, Robert Fowler, and Stephen Moore. Despite open opposition to the principles behind the aesthetic worldview, these and other scholars often make recourse to its narrative of decline from white male greatness.

Susannah Heschel, in “Race as Incarnational Theology: Affinities between German Protestantism and Racial Theory” (211–34), devotes most of her essay to the relationship between Christian biblical scholarship and the Third Reich. She presents a brief history of Nazi attempts to minimize Jesus’ Judaism. These interpretations result from New Testament preoccupations with Jewish wrongdoing and establishing social hierarchies that are easily transferable to other contexts, thereby implicating formative Christian writings in injustices as much as the Nazis using them.

Gabriella Gelardini’s “Religion, Ethnicity, and Ethnoreligion: Trajectories of a Discourse in German-Speaking Historical Jesus Scholarship” (235–58) explores the frequent disjuncture manufactured between Jesus’ Jewish ethnicity and religion. This disconnect played various purposes in each of the quests of the historical Jesus. Reimarus, Herder, and Baur primarily denationalized Jesus, whereas Wellhausen and Bultmann de-Christianized him. The third quest, largely undertaken at a distance from the Continent, emphatically situates Jesus in a Jewish context.

Vincent L. Wimbush’s “‘No Modern Joshua’: Nationalization, Scriptures, and Race” (259–78) looks at Frederick Douglass’s application of the exodus story in relation to its other uses in U.S. political discourse at the time. Douglass proposed that the wilderness—meaning the increased attention to racial issues after the Reconstruction—was both a problem and a solution to ongoing prejudice; a modern Joshua to lead the nation’s exit would merely exacerbate the issue. Wimbush also identifies in Douglass’s speech an imperative to advance a “liberationist/integrationist/monogenetic agenda of nationalization” in all Scripture-reading exercises (276).

Fernando F. Segovia, in “Poetics of Minority Biblical Criticism: Identification and Theorization” (279–311), provides a dense essay about various methods of subversion by minority biblical scholars in the United States. He constructs a taxonomy of such strategies; four overlapping methods are employed most commonly. The first, “interpretive contextualization,” highlights the political interests of both interpreters and biblical texts themselves. The second, “border transgressionism,” exposes exclusionary
parameters of the discipline and undercuts them by redrawing such boundaries. The third, “interruptive stocktaking,” similarly looks at the history of biblical criticism to investigate the questions that have proven formative for the discipline. The final, “discursive cross-fertilization,” interacts with approaches to identity that presently exist apart from minority criticism.

For all of *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings*’ strengths, two broad difficulties require attention. First, the intended readership is unclear. Kelley assumes his readers’ unfamiliarity with the Sayings Gospel Q (200 n. 26), whereas Schüssler Fiorenza directs her essay to educators (16) and quotes abstruse publications with no elaboration (5). Other essays vary in accessibility, but less so. Second, Schüssler Fiorenza states her editorial vision of “Early Christian Studies as a discipline capable of articulating knowledge that does not reproduce the intersecting structures of domination” (18). Most contributors would assent to that proposal, but Kelley, Heschel, and Wimbush appear more pessimistic about the value of New Testament historiography—at least in its present configuration. Though these writers submit valid and helpful criticisms, such points sometimes become obscured when they guide the reader into less productive realms. Two examples will suffice. First, Kelley’s criticisms of Burton Mack seem misplaced (200–202). Mack reconstructs Galilee as a complex amalgamation of Mediterranean and other Near Eastern cultures. Mack does advocate the expurgation of domesticating “pollutants” when reconstructing the historical Jesus, but Kelley seems to misread the metaphor of “domestication” as a matter of ethnicity and gender; Mack describes Jesus in full participation with his homeland’s cultural assimilation, and his trickster Jesus is hardly a paragon of masculinity. Mack’s “domestication” more closely resembles class accommodation by the radical intelligentsia to (middle-class-like) peasants unwilling to defect from society so definitively. If Mack’s narrative evinces the latent misogyny and xenophobia of aesthetic ideology, it is not obvious to this reviewer.

Heschel’s contribution also exemplifies this problem, albeit by unnecessarily restricting her study’s implications. She directs our attention to biblical scholarship’s capacity to both intellectualize racism and act in service of nation-building projects. But she limits the scope of her criticism by concluding her essay with the legacy of Nazi efforts to dejudaize the New Testament. William Arnal has made two points relevant to Heschel’s study: that recent scholars deemphasizing stereotypical elements of Jesus’ Judaism typically do so to make him more cosmopolitan and that many others fixated upon an “authentically Jewish Jesus” do so to promote theological and social agendas of their own (*The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity* [Religion in Culture: Studies in Social Contest & Construction; London: Equinox, 2005], 41–72). Ironically, scholars from this latter group often employ covert supersessionism and subtly disparage Judaism, despite claiming to do the opposite.
Far less insidious than National Socialism, it is a parallel nonetheless worth exploring. It is clear that insistence upon Jesus’ Jewishness does not preclude a negative depiction of Judaism, a point for which her essay could better account.

But the flaws of the book do not outweigh the strengths of its thought-provoking essays. The topics covered, methods employed, and postures toward contemporary Christianity vary considerably from essay to essay, contributing to its value for familiarizing one’s self with the status quaeestionis of race and ethnicity in New Testament studies. It is heartening to witness numerous studies demonstrating that theological reflection and biblical interpretation are culturally embedded practices addressing concerns that arise from seemingly irrelevant spheres of human life. The collection’s contributors often go one step further, agreeing that the academy often serves as an arena for promoting various interests at the expense of easily dismissed Others. This concern both unifies the investigations and serves as an implicit plea for intellectual reflexivity. The editors have also sufficiently distinguished this book from recent collections discussing similar topics by committing to “early Christianity” for its investigative parameter, accenting the ethical aspects of biblical scholarship, and employing directness atypical of meta-analyses.