EMPIRE AS MATERIAL SETTING AND HEURISTIC GRID FOR NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION: COMMENTS ON THE VALUE OF POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM

ABSTRACT

Using postcolonial analysis to account for the Roman Empire’s pervasive presence in and influence on early Jesus-follower communities (early Christians), as depicted in New Testament texts, is both evident (given its usefulness for analysing situations of unequal power relationships) and complicated. The complications are due partly to the material and conceptual potential and constraints inherent in postcolonial biblical studies, as well as to the complexities involved in dealing with empire and imperialism. The study of the Roman Empire, as far as its impact on early Christianity and (in this article) on the letters of Paul is concerned, requires attention to Empire’s material manifestation, ideological support for Empire, and religious aspects – issues that are identified and briefly discussed. Empire can be understood in many different ways, but it was also constantly constructed and negotiated by both the powerful and the subjugated and therefore attention is required for its possible reach, uses and the purposeful application of discursive power in New Testament texts that were contemporary with Empire.

INTRODUCTION

The materiality of life in the first-century CE Mediterranean context was determined largely by the omnipresent and omnipotent Roman Empire in its various forms and guises. True to imperial ideology, the Empire made its presence felt in tangible and visible ways. Regular contact with the material reality of the Romans controlled foreign territories and this could be called ‘empire’ (Hollingshead 1998:26 n14). However, accounting for Empire as a horizon of understanding in New Testament studies has invoked the empire as both material setting and as heuristic grid. Historical studies have been, and remain, valuable for investigating the nature, reach and impact of the first-century Roman Empire. However, accounting for Empire as a horizon of understanding in New Testament studies has invoked the use of postcolonial criticism and related categories to account for the impact of the Roman Empire on early Christianity, given the problematic relationship between texts and socio-historical context (see Whitelam 1998:35–49, for example). The purpose of this short article is to acknowledge the role of Empire as material setting and heuristic grid in the interpretation of New Testament texts in general and Pauline texts in particular, briefly considering the usefulness of a postcolonial approach when using Empire as heuristic grid.

EMPIRE IN THE FIRST-CENTURY CE

Paul’s material setting

Accounting for the Roman Empire as material setting during New Testament times is of course more

1. The royal family, both the emperor himself and his predecessors, and his wife and children, were well known through statues and coins. From Spain to Syria, everybody knew about Rome, what it stood for, what it did, and who was in charge of it’ (Wright 2005:64).

2. In accounting for Empire as a presence behind, and influence on, New Testament texts, anarchistic scenarios should be avoided, here as much as elsewhere. Jesus and his followers were not the archetypical freedom fighters who, along modern lines of thinking, had their eyes set on reshaping social reality by removing an oppressive regime. However, claims such as Jesus and the prophetic tradition, however, show no interest in structures, democratic or any other. They are only interested in how power is exercised, and to what end! (Bryan 2005:127) are probably also also and equally blunt. Moreover, claims such as the latter tend to divorce agency and purpose from institution, both illegitimately and in a way foreign to the ancient time, and seem to presuppose contemporary structural change as a possibility, notwithstanding the archetypical, at best schematic, rule of Empire, whether directly through its administrative and military apparatus or through its local representatives, in a hierarchically ordered world, not to mention the apocalyptic scenario that presupposed the replacement of existing human structures with a divine dispensation.

3. Important work on the materiality of Empire and its heuristic value has been done, in particular, by Carter (2006), Elliot (1994), Hosley (1997; 2000), Lopez (2008) and others, while a postcolonial optic is presented by, among others, Moore (2006a), and Segovia and Sugirtharajah (2007).

4. With the rise of postcolonial studies and approaches in biblical, theological and religious studies, warnings have been sounded to avoid the pitfalls of recent empire studies, which tend to lean toward the rehabilitation of certain texts rather than a critical engagement with them. Furthermore, a more nuanced approach is required when discussing postcolonial and various types of resistance literature, given the danger of reinscribing privilege and power – power and language (the imagery it uses and the socio-political structures and power relations it draws upon have to be accounted for (Schüssler Fiorenza 2000:14–5).

5. Some scholars rightly warn against a too simplistic equation of all forms of Roman internal rule as empire: ‘It is probably more appropriate to call the different forms of Roman internal rule ‘republic’ and ‘principate’, since even before the emergence of the ‘emperors’ of Rome, the Romans controlled foreign territories and this could be called ‘empire’ (Hollinghead 1998:26 n14).

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The Roman Empire was propped up by a number of important supports, including military conquest, the system of patronage, the rhetoric of peace, prosperity and Concord and the imperial cult (see Horsley 1997:87–90, 2000:74–82 in this regard). However, Empire’s pervasive influence was probably at its strongest on an cult (see Horsley 1997:87–90, 2000:74–82 in this regard). However, Empire’s pervasive influence was probably at its strongest on an cult (see Horsley 1997:87–90, 2000:74–82 in this regard).

The wealth and diversity of various studies on Empire ancient and modern has made an important contribution to a better understanding of the materiality of the Roman Empire in New Testament times.

6 Cf. the two typically modern dangers to avoid when thinking about first-century politics, as suggested by Wright (2005:59–60): a fixed map of post-Enlightenment political opinion on left-right sliding scales of the separation of domains of life such as theology and society, or religion and politics. Regarding the study of empire, three important aspects are: firstly, empire as a structural reality, comprising of and operating in terms of a principal binary of centre and margins; secondly, empire is not a uniform phenomenon in a temporal or spatial sense, but in fact ‘differential’, with its constitution and deployment and, thirdly, the reach and power of empire is of such an extent that it influences and impacts in direct and indirect ways (Segovia 1998:56–57).

7 For studies on the Roman Empire, see Garsey and Saller (1987); Garsey and Whitbaker (1978); Millar (1977), and Scarr (1995); for modern empire studies, see Boron (2004); and Hurd and Negri (2000; 2004). The studies on the interface of the New Testament and Roman Empire in the bibliography are the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

8 Concepts such as peace were, of course, filled out differently by those inside and outside the Empire. Tacitus puts the following words about the Romans in the mouth of the British rebel commander Calpucus: ‘To robbery, butchery and raping, they give the name of “government”‘; they create a desolation and call it “peace” (In Hollingshead 1998:26 n16).

9 An empire is generally driven by a sense of moral virtue and operates with a vision of re-ordering the world’s power relations for the sake and betterment of all.

10 The widespread, insidious presence of Empire in NT texts gives rise to questions about culture, ideology and power, as suggested by Segovia (1998:57–58): ‘How do the margins look at the world – a world dominated by the reality of empire – and fashion life in such a world? How does the center regard and treat the margins in light of its own view of the “world” and life in that world? What images and representations of the other-world arise from either side? How is history conceived and constructed by both sides? How is the ‘other’ regarded and represented? What conceptions of oppression and justice are to be found?'

11 Unlike the Persians and Carthaginians, who used crucifixion against high officials and commanders, the Romans used it primarily against the low classes (slaves, violent criminals and unruly elements) and political threats, which would have included those considered traitors and deserters; cf. Hengel (1977:97).

12 ‘Rome’s system of justice – which, to be fair, was often a considerable improvement on the local systems over which it superseded – supplanted tribunals and courts of law answerable, ultimately, to the emperor himself’ (Wright 2005:64).

and while legitimised as recompense for the privileges provided by Empire, such as peace and security, or freedom and justice, they mostly served to accentuate the inexorably alien and alienating nature of the elite, who ultimately benefitted from imperial machinations.

For the majority of people in New Testament times, the local elites were predominantly the cutting edge of Empire, its public face and an important aspect of its imperial presence. Through their ‘government without bureaucracy’ (Garnsey & Saller 1987:20–40) the Roman Empire yielded administrative authority to indigenous elites. This had a twofold purpose. On the one hand, the local elites kept the imperial wheels turning in many ways, for instance ensuring the collection of tribute, organising businesses and politics and a general support for the Empire through bestowing benevolence and undertaking public-works programmes. On the other hand, the elites were an important aspect of the imperial divide-and-rule politics (Moore 2006b:199), since popular resentment and even uprisings could be blamed on them while the imperial powers retained ultimate authority by remaining remote and unavailable.

A vital component of the first-century imperial footprint was, secondly, its ideological framework. By the beginning of the first century, the Roman Empire had established itself as the supreme political power, after it had some decades before conclusively dealt with its main rival, the Carthaginian, and large-scale and upheavals, consolidating its power, influence and wealth. Imperial ideology was intimately and reciprocally connected to symbols of its power, with the symbols informing ideology and the latter sustaining and providing purpose and justification for the former. The Roman imperial ideology was revisiting the ideals of the old republic and presenting itself as a democratic institution – this pretence being underwritten by notions of liberty and justice. Moreover, following the civil war, Augustus was often deemed the one who brought peace to the Roman Empire and therefore to the world at large. In the end, “[f]reedom, justice, peace and salvation were the ideal goal for everyone; the people could expect to meet in the mass media of the ancient world, that is, on statues, on coins, in poetry and song and speeches” (Wright 2005:63). The claims to such values and achievements were ultimately ascribed to the benevolence of the emperor and were individually and collectively presented as euangelion or ‘good news’, the same word used, of course, by the early followers of Jesus in describing his life, work and message. Poets and historians like Virgil, Horace, Livy and others created, in their different ways, a grand narrative of Empire – a long eschatology that had reached its climax (In the court of Augustus, the story...
of Rome was told as a narrative of culmination – a long process of training and preparation that would see the Empire assume its destiny as ruler of the world.21

At times, the emperors themselves engaged in ideology mongering, as in the case of Augustus, who had his achievements (on behalf of the Roman people and the world) inscribed in various texts and on various memorials.22 Rather than the domination and subjugation of other peoples, the actions of the emperors are described as acts bestowing the friendship and fidelity of the Roman people on the peoples of the world. The defeat of other peoples through conquest and warfare is described as the miraculous achievement of the Pax Romana, as worldwide peace. The ideology of Roman supremacy involved the incorporation of other peoples who were destined to be subservient to the Romans; within this ideology, the Jews were on occasion singled out as a people “born to servitude” (Elliott 2007:187). The breadth and depth of the imperial ideology and propaganda meant that the Roman world was saturated with a carefully managed repertoire of images depicting the piety and benevolent potency of the emperor, and of the routinised representations and celebrations of those virtues through a ubiquitous imperial cult23 (Elliott 2007:183).

And this introduces a third, religious, dimension of Empire, one which featured most prominently in Rome, when biblical scholars considered imperial influence in their studies on the New Testament. Generally, such studies focussed strongly on the emperor cult,24 with some scholars today arguing that, by the middle of the first-century CE, the emperor cult was the fastest growing religion of that time (Wright 2005:64). In addition to encouraging the worship of the gods of Empire, the emperors were often included among those worshipped. While few emperors attempted to claim divine honours for themselves,25 Augustus, the emperor and his predecessor was at most one of adoptive potency of the emperor, and of the routinised representations and celebrations of those virtues through a ubiquitous imperial cult’ (Elliott 2007:183).

The emperor cult was one, albeit an important, element of a much more pervasive religion-saturated imperial system.26 Augustus, 20.In Aeneid 1:255-296, Virgil portrays how, in the aftermath of the Trojan War, Jove promised the goddess Venus that her beloved hero Aeneid would both find a great city and subdue the proud nations. His descendants would prosper but also control all sea and land; Romulus, one of his descendants and the legendary founder of Rome, was destined to rule forever as master of the world (cf. Elliott 2007:183).

21. This ideology, like most imperial rhetoric, got rewritten as the empire wore on, but managed to sustain the ridiculous claims of CE 69 and carry on well into subsequent centuries’ (Wright 2005:64). After the murder of Julius Caesar and the civil war, which also saw the collapse of the Roman Republic, Octavian, as Caesar’s adopted heir, was eventually victorious over Anthony (who, of course, toward the end, joined forces with Cleopatra) at Actium in 31 BCE, and took the title Augustus. After ruling for more than four decades around the turn of the era (27 BCE to 14 CE), his son Tiberius took over and consolidated his power. After him, in 37–41 CE, Gaius Caligula made a disaster of his rule, and was followed by the feeble but cunning Claudius, after whose death in 54 CE Nero come to power as the new hope for the Empire. Upon Nero’s death in 68 CE (accompanied by various other activities such as games, festivals and other celebrations in honour of the emperor. Given the imperial military might through which the emperor laid claim to all territory and people ‘[as far as most of the Roman world was concerned, the “divinity” of the emperor was obvious and uncontroversial’ (Wright 2005:65; cf. Richley 2007:34–40). Everything considered, the Roman Empire did not have to force-feed its imperial subjects its ideology and propaganda, or impose accompanying socio-cultural, political and religious rituals, since the provincial elites were eager to develop their own versions of imperial splendour in imagery and ritual to demonstrate the new configuration of power in their cities. Competition with their counterparts elsewhere for the best reproduction of Caesar’s example of ritualised piety and benevolence soon led to the blurring of boundaries between the emperor and the elites – to such an extent that such values were identified with each other (Elliott 2007:183). Imposing the emperor-cult through the threat of force would prove unnecessary, in any case, as long as the threat of violent action was considered real enough and that the perceived benefits of imperial rule, such as safety and stability, seemed to overwhelm its distractions.25

22. In various self-serving, propagandistic texts, the emperors are lauded for their contribution to the peace of Rome and the Roman province. The emperor Augustus declared his own age as one of peace and security (Res Gestae Divi Augusti 13); supported by Virgil (Aeneid 1:291–296), who saw as a natural extension of Roman glory from those days; cf. also Calpurnius Siculus (Ennius 1:45–54) on Nero’s cosmic victory over the bound enemy in the ‘imipious war’ (cf. Elliott 1994:185).

23. The emperor cult served three main functions: the diffusion of imperial ideology; the focusing of the loyalty of subjects on the emperor; and the social and political advancement of these provincials who presided over its operation’ (Garnsey & Saller 1987:202); cf. also Friesen (2001) and Price (1984).

24. Initially, Roman emperors were declared divine by the Senate only posthumously. Outside of Rome and already during the time of the New Testament, however, the practice of worshipping an emperor as a god became increasingly common, with the emperor frequently being portrayed as the divine ‘saviour’ of the empire (Ehrman 2008:28).

25. This cult should be understood in conjunction with Empire’s other aspects. [G]overnment and religion both functioned, theoretically, to secure the same ends of making life prosperous, meaningful, and happy. The gods brought peace and prosperity and made the state great. In turn, the state sponsored and encouraged the worship of gods’ (Ehrman 2008:27).

26. See White (1999:110–135) for a discussion on piety in Augustus’ political agenda amid public grandeur and civic works programmes.

27. The Ara Pacis Augustae was erected on the field of Mars in Rome and the building of Vespasian’s Temple of Peace (Templos Peace) in 75 CE emphasised the Pax Romana as the domination of other nations (cf. Crossan & Reed 2004; Swartley 2006:37).

28. An evaluation of the perceived benefits of oppressive rule probably requires more than is expressed in the claim, whatever the costs of Roman conquest and the broader social and political consequences of Roman rule, throughout the empire daily life was certainly safer and more stable (Holingshead 1998:5). Alexander (1991:11–12), for instance, quotes a number of sources claiming both the benevolence and the benefits of Empire for its subjects, as well as the protest and denial of advantage brought about by the Roman Empire (including a second-century CE rabbinic dialogue, in which Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai exclaims, ‘Everything they [the Romans] have made they have made only for themselves: market-places, for wares; baths, to wallow in; bridges, to levy tolls’ (in Sab. 32b).

29. Both in the sense of acknowledging the value of understanding Paul’s letters in the light of Empire and its influences, as well as in the sense of accounting for imperial influences in Paul’s consciousness (and theology), as reflected in his letters.

It is on this imperial canvas, then, that a portrayal of the earliest communities of Jesus-followers can be painted by means of broad strokes (as far as Empire was concerned), but also with the purposefully directed strokes (as far as each Letter’s own distinct purpose was concerned) of the various, contingent Pauline Letters in the New Testament. Empire was a material reality for the New Testament authors and certainly also for Paul, with his metropolitan make-up and extensive travel experience. Paul’s urban-focused mission would have brought him in close

Empire as material setting and heuristic grid for New Testament interpretation

PAUL, EMPIRE AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

Empire as heuristic grid29

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contact with the omnipresent imperial tentacles, since Roman cultural hegemony was particularly strong in the cities and their immediate spheres of influence. So, more than a socio-historical material reality, the Roman Empire is also a heuristic grid for understanding Paul’s vision of the cosmos, life and God, especially in light of his experience of Jesus Christ.

And this is where another approach with different terminology and grammar is needed and which, this article suggests, can be found particularly, but not necessarily exclusively, in postcolonial theory and criticism. An ‘anti-imperialist’ reading cannot simply be equated to a ‘postcolonial’ reading, since the understanding of what constitutes the postcolonial – and even the imperial – requires consideration. However (and depending on the literary nature of the New Testament documents) a postcolonial approach would want to bear upon the indeterminacy and instability that can be identified in many texts (cf. BURRAS 2007:153). The value of postcolonial criticism for studying biblical texts has been established over the last two decades and no longer needs elaborate arguments to justify its use in biblical studies. Postcolonial criticism is not a monolithic enterprise, nor is it beyond criticism (cf. Moore & Segovia 2005), but its usefulness for the study of the New Testament appears to be settled. And, in focus here, it has the ability to provide a broader interpretative framework, creating the capacity to both frame and analyse imperialism and colonialism in their hybridity and as contained and reflected in biblical texts. In picking up on surface-level and underlying tensions in texts, postcolonial biblical criticism is useful and effective in studying Empire as heuristic grid for biblical interpretation, something that can be illustrated by briefly looking at the concept of mimicry.

Paul and Empire: ideology, ambivalence and mimicry

In biblical hermeneutics, a postcolonial optic can be framed as an analysis of the texts of early Christianity in and according to a specific context. The broad socio-cultural context of these texts would include the omnipresent, inseparable and overwhelmingly socio-political reality of Empire, imperialism and colonialism around the Mediterranean as constituted and exercised during the first century CE (cf. Segovia 1998:56). The documentary evidence – sometimes limited to mere hints – about the Empire and its usefulness for the study of the New Testament appears to be settled. And, in focus here, it has the ability to provide a broader interpretative framework, creating the capacity to both frame and analyse imperialism and colonialism in their hybridity and as contained and reflected in biblical texts. In picking up on surface-level and underlying tensions in texts, postcolonial biblical criticism is useful and effective in studying Empire as heuristic grid for biblical interpretation, something that can be illustrated by briefly looking at the concept of mimicry.

30. ‘The possession of Roman culture was another symbol of the status of a community and its leading members, many of whom continued to use the vernacular as the language of common discourse. Roman rule accentuated rather than broke down the divisions between city and country, rich and poor, local elites and the urban and local masses’ (Garnsey & Saller 1987:203).

31. Postcolonial studies remain, terminologically speaking, a synecdoche (a part which represents the whole, or the whole which represents the part) for imperial and (post) colonial studies. One commentator, in fact, goes further in arguing that it is a ‘classic and confusing study of synecdoche’, opting rather for the nomenclature ‘Imperial/Colonial Studies’ (Segovia 2000b:14 n1).

32. This is partly a problem with terminology: should all forms of political rule and/or government in the Bible simply be portrayed as ‘empires’, as some scholars appear to do? (cf. Bryan 2005). Greater sensitivity is needed for the most plausible socio-historical settings, as well as for the intricacies and involved-nature of Empire (as gleaned from social and political sciences): attraction/allure; mimicry; hybridity, etc.

33. Imperialism, as general description of what concerns the centre or metropolis, can be distinguished from colonialism, as that which is related to the margins of periphery (Segovia 2000c:13). In the discussion of Rome and its role and impact on the communities of the early followers of Jesus, the city of Rome constituted such a metropolis or rather imperial centre; and areas such as western and in particular eastern parts of the ancient world, including subcontinents such as Asia, were among the peripheral areas (Friesen 2001:17). Imperialism and colonialism each exhibit many faces, register conflicting impacts on human lives and society, and are experienced in a variety of different ways. However, both phenomena are intimately related to ideology, economic structures and practices, and socio-cultural configurations and experiences. Used more loosely, colonialism refers to ‘any relation of structural domination which relies upon a self-asserting suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question’ (Gandhi 1998:85, referring to Talpade Mohanty).

34. Cf. Edward Said’s distinction between imperialism and colonialism, as respectively ‘the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan city ruling a distant territory’ and (as a consequence of imperialism) ‘the implanting of settlements on distant territory’ (Said 1993:9–10).
Empire as material setting and heuristic grid for New Testament interpretation

Postcolonial interpretation wants to acknowledge that imperialism and colonialism are set in such strong ambivalence, particularly where the relationship between the powerful and the powerless is concerned. Here the notion of cultural mimicry is often employed as an analytical tool.

In postcolonial theory, cultural mimicry—a term coined by Bhabha (1994:85–92) — refers to the imposition of a compelling, cultural framework on the colonised, resulting not only in the coercing of the colonised but also in the internalisation and replication of the coloniser’s culture by the colonised—mainly through a process of enticement. This replication is not perfect, however, and neither is it intended as such by the coloniser, since it would erase the all-important boundaries of power between coloniser and colonised. The discourse of mimicry is governed by additional ambivalence: that the colonised may use that very mimicry to mock—and therefore subtly challenge and subvert—the control and authority of the coloniser, while simultaneously subverting the coloniser’s narcissistic claim to self-right (Bhabha 1994:85–92). In its submissive subversiveness, mimicry is therefore not only ambivalent through its insistence on and desistence of mimicis; it constitutes the risk for colonisers of having their culture parodied (Moore 2006:110). In fact, mimic often becomes mockery, exposing the falsity of the claims made, deriding the conventional rhetoric through exaggeration and misapplication, and imitating the claims of Empire and its associates, only to make them appear ridiculous.

Paul’s rhetoric to the communities he addressed within the prevailing hegemonic situation can be understood, for example, along the line of mimicry, which would show that the Roman imperial context is more than an underlying canvas for the first-century portrait and indeed also functions as hermeneutic grid. For example, what would the Pauline emphasis on the replication on justification (Rom 2:12–16) have implied in an ideological context in which the superiority of the Roman people was celebrated? On the other hand, how would the Pauline insistence on faithfulness (pistis) ‘apart from works (erga)’ have resonated when Roman patronage and the ‘works’ of benefactors determined people’s lives and livelihood (as ultimately underwritten by the emperor as benefactor par excellence) which readily claimed his ‘works’ (cf. Augustus and the Res Gestae)? How would Paul’s proclamation of one, single ancestor for all people of the whole world, Abraham, as father of faith but also ‘impious’ (gesei; Rom 4:5), have been perceived in a world where the imperial ideology focused so strongly on the legacy of piety as exemplified in the portrayal of Aeneas? (cf. Elliott 2007:186).

Criticism of, and opposition to, the practices and claims of the imperial regime that occurred in the ‘social space in which offshore dissent to the official transcript of power relations may be voiced’ (Scott 1990:xii) were the ‘hidden manuscripts’ of the oppressed. Criticism and opposition (that no-one dared to express for fear of fatal retribution) form a hidden discourse linked to culture, religion and imperial rule and originate from those who, on the one hand, did not have the resources to record this discourse, or, on the other hand, chose to hide the discourse, not making it public for fear of reprisals. As texts are always imbued with ambivalences and ambiguities, (indicative of the intricacies of the real-world contexts where they originate) they conceal, beneath their concern for the dominant hegemonic, elements more characteristic of the oppositional culture or values (cf. Rowland 2006:655–671). Through dissenting deference, Paul’s mimicry of Empire created the impression that he internalised and replicated imperial culture while he actually used the ambivalence of the hegemonic discourse to his advantage. To some extent, therefore, Paul’s public transcripts to communities scattered around the Mediterranean served as hidden transcripts in relation to the Empire.

Postcolonial hermeneutics represents a shift in emphasis, a strategy of reading that attempts to point out what was lacking in previous analyses, as well as to rewrite and correct (Punt 2003:59). Indeed, the postcolonial condition is about more than subscribing to either of the two extremes, of choosing either submission or subversion, but rather comprises unequal measures of avering and admiration, resentment and desire, rejection and imitation, resistance and cooperation, separation and surrender (Moore 2006:ax); therefore, those who found and find themselves engaged by postcoloniality can reflect on such complexities in an appropriately nuanced way.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of social and political contexts during New Testament times cannot be divorced both from accounting for the history of biblical interpretation and for the social location and ideological setting of modern scholarship (cf. Whitelam 1998:45). The realisation that Empire was a pervasive presence in New Testament times and, as a result, finding its traces in these texts, probably does not require postcolonial theory.

43. A text will not usually produce a particular ideology in a ‘pure’ form, whether it be supportive of the status quo or not. Accordingly, however loud the note of protest in a text, it is going to be shot through with the ambiguities of being part and parcel of a world that is itself full of contradiction and pain (Rowland 2006:659).

44. ‘Only with difficulty is it possible to retrieve from the biblical text an alternative perspective to the dominant ideology which has so permeated the text’ (Rowland 2006:689).

45. Postcolonial biblical interpretation accepts, with postmodernism, that truth is mimesis (i.e. enacted, constructed and negotiated), and rejects the notion of objective and neutral truth as expressions of political, religious and scholarly power. As far as the Bible is concerned, it is also no longer the meaning of the text that is sought, but a multiplicity of meanings are acknowledged (1989:10). This is a distinction that, notwithstanding its apparent simplicity and clarity, hides a vast set of ambiguities. Segovia’s observation is subsumed in Segovia’s use and further Medieval imperialism to map biblical hermeneutics, when he situates postcolonialism in cultural studies but proceeds to plot biblical criticism, and its major forms, on and according to the postcolonial map, with interesting results (Segovia 1998:56-63). After identifying three important foci or dimensions in biblical studies – texts, ‘texts’ or readings of texts, and readers – Segovia aligns them with colonialism/ imperialism and its historical development.

http://www.hts.org.za
Vol. 66 No. 1 Page 5 of 7
HTS 5

Article #330

HTS Neoterigese Studies/Theological Studies

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However, while other critical theories and methodologies used in the interpretation of the New Testament texts generally allow one to evaluate past accounts, the critical theories used in the interpretation of the New Testament texts generally offer the best possibilities of evaluating the material setting of these accounts. While historical-critical approaches and even socio-scientific hermeneutical approaches may offer the best possibilities of evaluating the material setting of these accounts, some approaches may offer the best possibilities of evaluating the material setting of these accounts.

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50 Postcolonial theory is, notwithstanding its opposition to modernist approaches to history (linearly, evolutionary progression, etc.), an important asset in making sense of the material setting and related aspects of history, by indeed providing hermeneutical perspective and analytical tools with which to interpret the materialities of the all-encompassing imperial setting. While a historical perspective (and a critical one at that) is important in postcolonial studies, it is doubtful whether the claim that ‘postcolonial criticism does not reject the insights of historical criticism’ (Kwok 2005:89) is altogether appropriate – cf. e.g. Segovia (1990:278–280, 2000a:39) on the danger of ‘promiscuous marriages’ of theoretical frameworks of perspective, cf. Schüssler Fiorenza (1999:38–39). On the other hand, this is not to deny historical criticism’s initial suspiscus and against-the-grain readings of ecclesiologically authorised readings of the Bible (cf. Barton 1998:16–19).


