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

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Keywords:
postcolonial; empire; Paul; biblical hermeneutics; Roman

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.1 Regular contact with the material reality of the Empire was par for the course for first-century people, constantly reinforced by visual images and verbal and written decrees, through military presence and social systems such as patronage, held in place in ways that reinforced both the Roman imperial presence and the people’s sense of submissiveness to Empire. At the same time, but more difficult to account for with immediate references, since it goes beyond citing New Testament texts, requiring attention for the use of discursive power, the context of an all-pervasive Roman imperial presence and practice informed the consciousness and worldview of people around the Mediterranean in the first-century CE. In short, material and historical imperialism, as well as discursive imperialism, informed, sculpted and determined the daily lives of people in a myriad of ways, also at the level of consciousness, through ideology.2

During the last decade or two it has become clear that a new grammar and vocabulary are needed to understand first-century power relations and their structural organisations, especially in the light of the strong apocalyptic framework of many New Testament texts, with their bold challenge to the Roman Empire through privileging God’s imperial designs. In short, it has become increasingly important to account for the empire as both material setting and as heuristic grid.3 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,4 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 Empire5 as material setting during New Testament times is of course more

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.

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, anachronistic 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 2000:121) are probably also too 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 autocratic, at best oligarchic, 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), Elliott (1994), Horsey (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 Floresen 2007:4–5).

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).
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, in practice, the Empire generally operated efficiently and ruthlessly. Punishment for New Testament texts. The basis of Roman power was most symbol of Roman power and cruel brutality. Roman justice was accountable before the courts. Roman taxes cut a broad swathe. Roman provincial governors accused of wrongdoing were held guilty and executed.12 Roman imperial ideology was built on revisiting the ideals of the old republic and presenting itself as a democratic institution – this pretense being underwritten by notions of liberty and justice.13 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.14 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 business and politics and acting as a sort of 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.15 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, Carthage, and later, more potent and dangerous empires, 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.16 The Roman imperial ideology was revisiting the ideals of the old republic and presenting itself as a democratic institution – this pretense being underwritten by notions of liberty and justice.17 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.18 In the end, [freedom, justice, peace and salvation] were the ideals of the Empire that the common people could expect to meet in the mass media of the ancient world, that is, on statues, on coins, in poetry and song and speeches19 (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 evangellion 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.20 In the court of Augustus, the story

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 option on a right-left side; and the separation of domains of life, such as theology and society, or religion and politics. Regarding the study of empire, three important themes are firstly, empire as ‘structural reality’, comprised 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 ‘differentiated in function 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 Garstang and Saller (1987); Garstang and Whitaker (1978); Millar (1977), and Scarr (1995); for modern empire studies, see Boron (2004); and Hardt and Negri (2000; 2004). The studies on the interface of the New Testament and Roman Empire in the bibliography are the tips 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 Calgucus: ‘To robbery, butchery and rapine, they give the name of “government”; they create a desolation and call it “peace”’ (in the mouth of the British rebel commander Calgucus: ‘To robbery, butchery and rapine, they give the name of “government”; they create a desolation and call it “peace”’ (in http://www.hts.org.za

13. Here the importance of the patronage system should be considered within the context of the emperors as ultimate patron, who devoted his power down to other patrons, each with a circle of influence as well as a group of underlings patronising, continuing in a never-ending extension of the patronage system. From trying to eradicate traditional patronage relationships, emperors encouraged their continuation, in part because they were the main mechanism for recruitment of new members of the imperial elite (Garstang & Saller 1987:201). (cf. Crow [1997]).

14. Cassidy (2001:1–18) is of the opinion that, beyond the basic characteristics of Empire (as consisting of military power, political structures and taxation), it attracted local populations in four ways (all providing tangible benefits for the populations of subjugated territories): public works; peace and order; effective administration (including Roman citizenship benefits as a major prize); and imperial propaganda.

15. In exceptional circumstances, such as the Jewish war in 66 CE, the ultimate authority finds it necessary temporarily to relinquish its godlike remoteness and relative invincibility in order to intervene decisively and immediately in the corrupt affairs of its creatures in an attempt to contain the chaos that its own administrative policies has created’ (Moore 2006b:199).

16. Dealing with the ideological aspect of Empire is important because, ‘[i]n practical terms, the Roman way was dominant because the Romans exercised political control over the region, but the Romans never set out to eliminate the cultures they absorbed’ (Holmgren 1998:14). See Richey (2007:27–65) on Augustan ideology.

17. In a situation of conflict, those whose power exercise will seek to do so not only in terms of control of wealth creation but also in terms of ideological control which can justify and support the way in which the world is run’ (Rowland 2006:659).

18. ‘The republic has long printed itself on its justice, and in the middle years of Augustus, the reign ‘justitia’, too, became an official goddess: Rome possessed Justice, and had the obligation to share it with the rest of the world’ (Wright 2005:63).

19. Amidst the ideological onslaught of the Empire with its propaganda, pockets of dissent were still found; of Wright (2005:63); Holmgren (1998:26 n16).
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.20

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.21 Rather than the domination or subjection 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 subordinated to the Romans; within this ideology, the Jews were on occasion singled out as a people “born to servitude” (Elliott 2007:187).

And this introduces a third, religious, dimension of Empire, one which featured most prominently in the East, where biblical scholars considered imperial influence in their studies on the New Testament. Generally, such studies focussed strongly on the emperor cult,22 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,23 the emperor cult was the fastest growing religion of that time, even if the relationship between 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 ritualised representations and celebrations of those virtues through a ubiquitous imperial cult’ (Elliott 2007:183).

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21 This ideology, like most imperial rhetoric, got rewritten as the empire wore on, but managed to survive the ridiculous chaos 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, 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, Galus Caligula made a disaster of his rule, and was followed by the feeble but cunning Claudius, after whose death in 54 CE Nero came to power as the new hope for the Empire. Upon Nero’s death in 68 CE (accompanied by contrasting assessments of his rule), the year of four emperors followed. Augustus’ successors, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, managed to encapsulate most of the Mediterranean and some parts of the hinterland as well (White 1999:110–135; Wright 2009:62–63).

22 In various self-serving, propagandist texts, the emperors are lauded for their contribution to securing peace on earth: Augustus declared his own agency as one of the primary and security (Res Gestae Divi Augusti 13); supported by Virgil (Aeneid 1:291–296), who saw this as revisionist-apologist for Roman glory from the early years of the Empire. Upon Nero’s death in 68 CE (accompanied by contrasting assessments of his rule), the year of four emperors followed. Augustus’ successors, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, managed to encapsulate most of the Mediterranean and some parts of the hinterland as well (White 1999:110–135; Wright 2009:62–63).

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’ (Garmsse & Saller 1987:202); cf. 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 a living emperor as a god became increasingly common, with the emperor frequently being portrayed as the divine ‘saviour’ of the empire (Ehrman 2008:28).

25 An evaluation of the perceived benefits of oppressive rule probably requires more than what is expressed in the claim, whether the costs of Roman conquest and the broader social and political consequences of Roman rule, throughout the empire’s life was certainly safer and more stable (Hollingshead 1998:5). Alexander (1991:11–12), for instance, quotes a number of sources claiming both the benefit 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 wheats; baths, to wallow in; bridges, to levy tolls’ (in Shab. 32b).

26 On the Ara Pacis, the Augustan Peace altar in Rome, the image of the pious Trojan hero, Aeneas, making sacrifices on the shore of Latium was paired with a similarly pious Augustus offering sacrifices on behalf of the Roman people (Elliott 2007:183).

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

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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.

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 overcome its distractions.

PAUL, EMPIRE AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

Empire as heuristic grid

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

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Article #330

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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 (Garver & Saller 1987:203). 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. Burris 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, inescapable 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 was, in another sense, public transcripts of power within the socio-political reality of Empire, imperialism and colonialism. Roman rule accentuated rather than broke down the divisions between city and country, rich and poor, local elites and the urban and rural masses (Garnsey & Saller 1987:203).

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).

This is partly a problem with terminology: should all forms of political rule and/or government in the Bible simply be portrayed as ‘empire’, 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.

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 2000a: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 2001:117). 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-serving suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question’ (Gandhi 1998:85, referring to Talpade Mohanty).

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).

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 rural masses (Garnsey & Saller 1987:203).

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35. The problem with using postcolonial criticism when discussing biblical and other contemporary texts, such as those of Josephus or Philo or other authors, is that these texts come from the literate and therefore higher classes, accustomed to wealth and influence. In other words, these texts originate from that particular time, that time, even if privilege in the first-century CE was always a relative concept. The question, of course, is to what extent and in what way these texts convey something of the life and concerns of people generally (cf. Bryan 2005:25).

36. A ruling class ideology will offer strategies of legitimation, while an oppositional culture or ideology will often in covert ways seek to contest and to undermine the dominant value system (Rowland 2006:659).

37. The association of postcolonial biblical criticism with ideology criticism comprises two elements in particular: first, the inevitable link between the ideological nature of texts with vested interests related to social formations and second, the importance given to socio-political context and the interpreter’s stance within it. Ideological criticism is not only intent on exposing overt self-interests and unconcealed support for certain factions, but also the covert backing and self-justification afforded to the dominant in society. It involves laying bare the contradictions in society and the habit which the dominant groups have of neutralizing their potential for resistance and change, for example by co-opting some of the ideas into the dominant ideology (Rowland 2006:657).

38. This does not mean that texts ‘have’ ideologies (cf. Fowl 1995:15–34), since ‘[text] will not usually produce a particular ideology in a pure form’ (Rowland 2006:659). However, ‘[t]his is part of the task of interpretation to lay bare the ambiguities and contradictions that are inherent in all texts’ (Rowland 2006:659, 662).

39. ‘People endure indignities because the coercive power of their rulers gives them no alternative and in some cases because they become habituated to the ideology and rituals that enforce their subordination’ (Horsley 2008).

40. Hegemony in postcolonial thought is often posited as domination by consent (Gramsci), ‘the active participation of a dominated group in its own subjugation’, and regardless of the fact that the subjugated numerically outweigh those exercising power and even if the oppressor or army of occupation may have the advantage in terms of instruments of subjugation, such as sophisticated weaponry and the like. ‘In such
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. The 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-righteousness (Bhabha 1994:85–92). In its submissive subservience, mimicry is therefore not only ambivalent through its insistence on and desistence of mimesis; it constitutes the risk for colonisers of having their culture parodied (Moore 2006:110). In fact, mimicry 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 judgement (cf. Elliott 2007:186) be according to works (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’ (gesētēs; 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 offstage 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 reprimals. As texts are always imbued with ambiguities 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 aversion and ambition, resentment and desire, rejection and imitation, resistance and cooption, separation and surrender (Moore 2006a:x); therefore, those who found and find themselves engaged by postcolonialism 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 mapped, 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, as a multiplicity of meanings are acknowledged (Tillich 1951). This is a distinction that, notwithstanding, its apparent simplicity and clarity, hides a vast set of ambiguities. Sugirtharajah’s observation is subsumed in Segovia’s use and further development of colonialism to map biblical hermeneutics, when he situates postcolonialism in relation to the Empire.

46:As was shown by Castelli (1991), mimesis is an important mechanism through which Paul stabilised his own discourse of power. Cf. also Punt (2008) for a more sustained discussion on Pauline mimicry in 2 Corinthians 10–13.

47:We are not always talking about the other in the way that Sugirtharajah has been understood in these texts. He aligns himself with colonialism (Rom 2:12–16) and displaced, in other words, the Other embodied in women and minorities. Segovia aligns them with colonialism and its historical development.

48:As Castelli (1991:655–671) observes, 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 aversion and ambition, resentment and desire, rejection and imitation, resistance and cooption, separation and surrender (Moore 2006a:x); therefore, those who found and find themselves engaged by postcolonialism can reflect on such complexities in an appropriately nuanced way.

49:As was shown by Castelli (1991), mimesis is an important mechanism through which Paul stabilised his own discourse of power. Cf. also Punt (2008) for a more sustained discussion on Pauline mimicry in 2 Corinthians 10–13.
However, while other critical theories and methodologies50 used in the interpretation of the New Testament texts generally offer either account for the material setting of Empire (through broad-ranging historical-critical approaches and even socio-scientific methodology), or are engaged in examining the ideological aspects of Empire (with ideological criticism or even feminist criticism), postcolonial theory currently probably offers the best possibility of investigating Empire as both material setting (as cultural production and social matrix) and heuristic grid for New Testament interpretation.

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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-embracing 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 2005:80) 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 (1995:38–39). On the other hand, this is not to deny historical criticism’s initial suspicious and against-the-grain readings of ecclesiastically authorised readings of the Bible (cf. Barton 1998:16–19).


