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Moore, Stephen, and Fernando F. Segovia, eds.

Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections

The Bible and Postcolonialism


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This is the sixth volume in an unnumbered series edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah and entitled The Bible and Postcolonialism. In many ways the book under review here functions as the precursor to the first volume in the series, published in 1998 and entitled The Postcolonial Bible. As Stephen Moore and Fernando Segovia state in their introductory essay, “Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Beginnings, Trajectories, Intersections,” most of the chapters in this book had their origin in a 1999 panel discussion within the Bible in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America section of the SBL Annual Meeting, where the papers served as an introduction to the New Testament Studies and Postcolonial Studies Consultation that began the following year.

Six chapters follow the editors’ introduction: “Mapping the Postcolonial Optic in Biblical Criticism: Meaning and Scope,” by Fernando Segovia; “Questions of Biblical Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi; or, the Postcolonial and the Postmodern,” by Stephen Moore; “Gospel Hauntings: The Postcolonial Demons of New Testament Criticism,” by Laura Donaldson; “Margins and (Cutting-)Edges: On the (Il)Legitimacy and Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, and (Post)Colonialism,” by Tat-siong Benny Liew; “Marx, Postcolonialism, and the Bible,” by Roland Boer; and “Very Limited Ideological Options’: Marxism and Biblical Studies in Postcolonial Scenes,” by
David Jobling. Following each chapter is a bibliography (apparently of works cited), while a five-page index of authors completes the volume.

The assemblage of biblical scholars who have contributed to this book is its major strength. These are all well-published authors, most of whom have spent decades traversing the theoretical underpinnings of various critical approaches to the Bible—poststructuralism, postmodernism, Marxism, ideological criticism, feminism, and race/ethnicity—before turning to postcolonialism. While four of the six authors teach in the United States (the other two teach in Canada and Australia), those from the U.S. reflect a broad range of cultural displacement (Hong Kong, Cherokee, Ireland, Cuba), and each displacement enriches the book’s theoretical context—even if the authors’ biographies are not explicitly foregrounded.

Fernando Segovia’s essay (“Mapping the Postcolonial”) sketches broadly the postcolonial enterprise and is an excellent introduction to postcolonial theory for those biblical scholars unfamiliar with the “PN” Library of Congress heading. Segovia’s bibliography takes the reader up to the year 2000, which enables him to talk about the important works by Leela Gandhi (Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction), Ania Loomba (Colonialism/Postcolonialism), and John McLeod (Beginning Postcolonialism), along with general overviews of the field published in the mid-1990s. Perhaps the most important critical issue raised in this survey of the field is Segovia’s discussion of postcolonial “lacunae.” Here he names the realm of antiquity (but see Jobling’s critique, below); Latin America and the Caribbean (but see now Shalini Puri, The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post/Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004]); Russia and the Union of Socialist Republics; the United States of America; and the lacuna of religious discourse.

Stephen Moore’s chapter raises the important question of the relationship between postcolonialism and postmodernism—especially valuable for biblical scholars who generally seem much more comfortable with the idea of postcolonialism than with anything vaguely resembling postmodernism. The chapter also functions as a helpful introduction to the work of Homi Bhabha for those biblical scholars who might otherwise be put off by such strange-sounding concepts as colonial ambivalence and hybridity.

I found the chapters by Laura Donaldson and David Jobling particularly insightful—Donaldson because she engages in a sustained critical conversation with biblical texts in the process of writing about postcolonialism and feminism (1 Sam 28:3–25; Mark 5:1–20 and parallels, 7:24–30 and parallels). And like me, she enjoys a good ghost story (her use of the Derridian neologism “hauntology” was new to me and quite suggestive). Jobling’s chapter, the last one in the book, is useful because he, like Boer in the chapter...
immediately preceding his, is able to critique the “first generation” of postcolonial biblical critics in constructive ways. For example, Jobling interacts with Boer’s essay and R. S. Sugirtharajah’s postcolonial biblical criticism by addressing the relationship of Marxism to postcolonialism in the context of postmodernism’s distrust of the “grand narratives of modernity.” Jobling questions biblical scholars’ rush to draw parallels between ancient empires and the neocolonialism of modern globalized economies (see Segovia’s chapter, above), and he raises the important question of the relationship of the Bible to Christianity in postcolonial thought.

Tat-siong Benny Liew’s essay (apart from an irritating overuse of parentheses) raises important questions about the effects of race and ethnicity on biblical authority and postcolonial biblical criticism. To be fair, the issue has been an important one for postmodernity as well, where the undermining of master narratives comes with the postmodern territory. But Liew does well to raise the issue here, since the challenge can all too easily be ignored by neophyte postcolonial biblical critics who might see a postcolonial approach to the Bible as an easy way to subvert U.S. imperial and hegemonic claims while uncritically replacing those claims with another “authoritative” text and hegemonic interpretation. Liew ends his essay by exploring Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s use of the Bible in her mixed-genre text, Dictée, which Liew describes as an ethnically and racially constructed, postcolonial interpretation of the Bible that is “an illustration of cutting-edge (biblical) scholarship.”

Boer’s essay examines the way postcolonial theory has forgotten its rootedness in Marxist thought and the effect that loss has had on postcolonial biblical criticism. In the former context, Boer focuses on the work of Homi Bhabha; in the latter he explores the work of R. S. Sugirtharajah and Mark Brett, ending by “disinterring” Ernst Bloch’s critiques of the Bible (Atheism in Christianity, The Principle of Hope).

The book’s concluding (two-chapter) emphasis on Marxism and postcolonialism is apparently accidental (184) but leaves the reader with the distinct impression that Marxist thought is/was or ought to be a central concern of postcolonial discourse. My own reading of postcolonial literatures—especially Native American and Asian American—does not support the book’s (unintended?) emphatic critique. Readers newly initiated to postcolonial studies would be wise to explore a wide range of postcolonial literatures before taking Boer and Jobling as the final critical word.

In conclusion, this reviewer wishes the book could have been published about four years ago. As the editors note in their introductory essay—and as most of the other authors are quick to point out—there have been numerous exegetical articles written since 1999 that make use of postcolonial theory, so for those in the guild who have been working with
postcolonial issues—some of them for ten years or so—these essays will seem passé, addressing concerns that they had grappled with years ago. But for many biblical scholars, most of whom may be just beginning to reflect on concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence, dislocation, diaspora, colonialism, and the like, this book should find a ready reading audience. The authors have a firm grasp of the issues at stake in interpreting the Bible along postcolonial lines. The book deserves to be read widely and would be especially useful in upper-division undergraduate classes in Bible and in seminary courses dealing with hermeneutical issues.