

Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies

Toward a Postcolonial Optic

In the previous delineations of the paradigm of cultural studies in biblical criticism in chapters 1, 2, and 4, I have sought to bring to the fore the constellation of elements that I regard as fundamental to this most recent and still emerging umbrella model of interpretation in the discipline. Two of these I see as particularly relevant for the present study. The first involves a view of all interpretation, all recreations of meaning from texts, and all reconstructions of history as dependent upon reading strategies and theoretical models, with a further view of all such strategies and models and the resultant recreations and reconstructions as constructs on the part of real readers. The second concerns a view of real or flesh-and-blood readers as variously positioned and engaged within their respective social locations, with a further view of all such contextualizations and perspectives as constructs on the part of real readers as well. Such views regarding the character of interpretation and the role of critics bear immediate consequences for the dynamics and mechanics of the paradigm as a whole.

First, the task of interpretation is viewed in terms of the application of different reading strategies and theoretical models—whether produced or borrowed—by different real readers in different ways, at different times, and with different results (different readings and interpretations) in the light of their different and highly complex situations and perspectives.

Second, a critical analysis of real readers and their readings (their representations of themselves as well as their representations of the ancient texts and the ancient world) becomes as important and necessary as a critical analysis of the ancient texts themselves (the remains of the ancient world).

Third, all recreations of meaning and all reconstructions of history are in the end regarded as representations of the past—re-creations and reconstructions—on the part of readers who are themselves situated and interested to the core.

Finally, given the paradigm's overriding focus on contextualization and perspective, social location and agenda, and thus on the political character

of all compositions and texts, all readings and interpretations, all readers and interpreters, its mode of discourse may be described as profoundly ideological.

In this chapter I should like to proceed a step further in the definition and analysis of my own stance within the paradigm of cultural studies. In effect, I should like to lay the basic foundations and contours for what I have come to regard as a most appropriate, most enlightening, and most fruitful approach to biblical criticism, as I presently envision and practice the discipline. I have in mind the model of postcolonial studies, currently in vogue across a number of academic fields and disciplines.¹ This is a model that I find both hermeneutically rewarding and personally satisfying. On the one hand, I find that the model can shed precious, concomitant light on the various dimensions that I have posited as constitutive for my own vision and exercise of the discipline. On the other hand, I find that the model speaks to me in a very direct way, not only as a contemporary biblical critic but also as a constructive theologian as well as a cultural critic.²

¹ There is no comprehensive—that is, cross-imperial and cross-colonial—study of postcolonial studies as such, no encompassing account of its origins, histories, and discourses across the various imperial/colonial experiences of Europe and the United States. There are, however, two very good readers. The first of these (P. Williams and L. Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994]) focuses on theory, as a listing of its chapters readily reveals: “Theorizing Colonized Cultures and Anti-Colonial Resistance”; “Theorizing the West”; “Theorizing Gender”; “Theorizing Post-Coloniality: Intellectuals and Institutions”; “Theorizing Post-Coloniality: Discourse and Identity”; “Reading from Theory.” The second (B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1995]) is organized according to themes, as again a listing of its chapters readily demonstrates: “Issues and Debates”; “Universality and Difference”; “Representation and Resistance”; “Postmodernism and Post-colonialism”; “Nationalism”; “Hybridity”; “Ethnicity and Indigeneity”; “Feminism and Post-colonialism”; “Language”; “The Body and Performance”; “History”; “Place”; “Education”; “Production and Consumption.” There are also two excellent studies of literary production in the postcolonial context, both with an emphasis on the anglophone world of the former British Empire: B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin, eds., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989); and E. Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

² I can no longer describe myself solely as a biblical critic, despite my specific hiring, assignment, and location in a department of New Testament and Early Christianity within the context of the highly compartmentalized academic divisions of a graduate department of religion based in a liberal Protestant divinity school. At the very least, I must now describe myself as a constructive theologian [continued]

OPTION FOR A POSTCOLONIAL OPTIC

This is not the first time that I have had recourse to the language and concepts of postcolonial studies. Indeed, I have done so in the past both as a biblical critic and as a constructive theologian. I should like to recall such previous appeals as a point of departure for the present proposal regarding the adoption of a systematic and fully fledged postcolonial optic.³

First, from the point of view of my work in biblical criticism, I have described (see chapters 1 and 2) the development of biblical criticism from its beginning as an academic discipline in the early nineteenth century through to its formation at the end of the twentieth century as a process of “liberation” and “decolonization.” The development itself involved the sequential emergence of four paradigms or umbrella models of interpretation: (1) the initial turn to and long reign of historical criticism, from early in the nineteenth century through the third quarter of the twentieth century; (2) the rapid rise and steady consolidation of literary criticism and cultural or social criticism, beginning in the mid-1970s and continuing right through the present; (3) the recent irruption of cultural studies, beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This development, I further argued, resulted in the present stage of competing modes of discourse within the discipline. Finally, such historical development and disciplinary

as well, not only because I presently regard the traditional distinction between critic and theologian as having altogether collapsed, but also because I see myself as engaged in the task of discoursing about the “this-world” and the “other-world” in the light of my own sociocultural and sociohistorical context in the diaspora, both as a child of the non-Western World and a child of a minority group within the West. Indeed, in the end, I would have to describe myself further as a cultural critic, insofar as I am also interested in these various dimensions of my social context quite aside from their socioreligious aspect. From this point of view, I am quite in agreement with the view that the call of the minority scholar is to engage in academic border crossings (see A. R. JanMohamed and D. Lloyd, “Introduction: Towards a Theory of Minority Discourse: What Is to Be Done?,” in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. A. R. JanMohamed and D. Lloyd [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990], 1-16).

³ Within the model of postcolonial studies, terminology itself proves quite varied and thus problematic. Suffice it to say for now that by *postcolonial* I mean ideological reflection on the discourse and practice of imperialism and colonialism from the vantage point of a situation where imperialism and colonialism have come—by and large, though by no means altogether so—to a formal end, but remain very much at work, in practice, as neocolonialism and neocolonialism. Thus, the postcolonial optic is a field of vision forged in the wake of imperialism and colonialism but still very much conscious of their continuing, even if transformed, power.

dénouement I classified in terms of "liberation" and "decolonization" on two grounds.

First, with reference to a fundamental transformation in theoretical orientation and reading strategy. In the process, I pointed out, the long-dominant construct of the scientific reader—the universal, objective, and impartial reader, fully decontextualized and non-ideological—yielded slowly but surely to the construct of the real reader—the local, perspectival, and interested reader, always contextualized and ideological. Second, with reference to a fundamental transformation in the ranks of the discipline. In the process, I further pointed out, the male, clerical, and European/Euro-American faces and concerns of the traditional practitioners of biblical criticism gave way, again gradually but steadily, to a variety of faces and concerns previously unknown to the discipline: at first, a large infusion of women from the West; subsequently, a growing presence of women and men from outside the West as well as from non-Western minorities in the West.

The end result of such transformations was not only enormous diversity in method and theory but also enormous diversity in faces and concerns within the discipline. This combined explosion of disciplinary perspectives and interpretive voices, I concluded, could and should be seen as a veritable process of liberation and decolonization: a movement away from the European and Euro-American voices and perspectives that had dominated biblical criticism for so long toward a much more diversified and multicentered conception and exercise of the discipline. Biblical criticism, I observed, had become in the process but another example of a much more comprehensive process of liberation and decolonization at work in a number of different realms—from the political to the academic and, within the academy itself, across the entire disciplinary spectrum.

Second, from the point of view of my work in constructive theology, I have described the recent emergence of contextual theologies, both in the Two-Thirds World and among minorities of non-Western origin in the West, as an exercise in "liberation" and "decolonization."⁴ Thus, in setting out to formulate, as a distinctive expression within the rich matrix of U.S. Hispanic American theology, a theology of the diaspora—a theology born and forged in exile, in displacement and relocation—I characterized it as both a liberation and a postcolonial theology.⁵

⁴ F. F. Segovia, "Two Places and No Place on Which to Stand: Mixture and Otherness in Hispanic American Theology," in *Hispanic Americans in Theology and the Church*, ed. F. F. Segovia (Special issue of *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture* 27 [1992]: 26-27).

⁵ F. F. Segovia, "Aliens in the Promised Land: The Manifest Destiny of U. S. Hispanic American Theology" and "In the World but Not of It: Exile as a Locus for a Theology of the Diaspora," in *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, ed. A. M. Isasi-Díaz and F. F. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 21-31 and 195-200, respectively.

Modern Christian theology, I argued, was a theology that emanated from the center, grounded as it was in Western civilization. As such, certain fundamental traits could be readily outlined. It was a systematic and universal theology, altogether reticent about its own social location and perspective; a theology of enlightenment and privilege, tacitly considered by nature superior to any theological production from outside the West—past, present, or future; a theology of hegemony and mission, with the effective control and progressive civilization of the margins in mind. In contrast, I further argued, diaspora theology—like any other contextual theology—was a theology that emerged from the margins, in this case from the margins within the West itself. Consequently, certain fundamental traits could be readily delineated as well. It was a self-consciously local and constructive theology, quite forthcoming about its own social location and perspective; a theology of diversity and pluralism, highlighting the dignity and value of all matrices and voices, including its own; a theology of engagement and dialogue, committed to critical conversation with other theological voices from both margins and center alike.

The rapid and widespread rise of contextual theologies, such as U.S. Hispanic American theology and my own theology of the diaspora, I concluded, could and should be seen as an undeniable process of "liberation" and "decolonization": a movement away from the longstanding control of theological production by European and Euro-American voices and perspectives toward the retrieval and revalorization of the full multiplicity of voices and perspectives in the margins. As in the case of biblical criticism, therefore, theological studies, I observed, had also become in the process yet another example of the much more extensive process of liberation and decolonization at work in the world and in the academy.

Such past appeals on my part to the linguistic and conceptual apparatus of postcolonial studies have been, though quite useful and revealing to be sure, much too limited and unsystematic as well. A more fundamental grounding and deployment of the model is in order, therefore, and it is precisely this task that I should like to undertake in the present chapter, with biblical criticism specifically in mind. I do so, once again, because of the rich hermeneutical and personal dividends that I see as accruing from an explicit and sustained use of the model.

On the one hand, as I indicated earlier, this is a model that lends itself eminently to simultaneous application across the various dimensions that I see as central to my own conception and exercise of the discipline: first, the level of texts—the analysis of the texts of ancient Judaism and early Christianity; second, the level of "texts"—the analysis of readings and interpretations of such texts in the modern, Western tradition; third, the level of readers—the analysis of the modern and contemporary real readers of these texts and producers of the "texts" both inside and outside the West. In other words, postcolonial studies can function thereby as an excellent model for crosscultural studies in the discipline, and, in what follows,

I shall show how such is the case in terms of these three major dimensions of the discipline.

On the other hand, as I also stated earlier, this is a model that proves extremely appealing to me personally. The reason, I would readily acknowledge, has to do with my own social location and agenda. I come from the margins, from the world of the colonized; I reside in the center, in the world of the colonizers; and I have devoted myself to the struggle for liberation and decolonization, for the sake of both the colonized and the colonizer. For me, therefore, postcolonial studies not only comes from the heart, so to speak, but it also refreshes and invigorates the heart. A colonial genealogy is in order.

The history of my own colonial mapping is quite complex. To begin with, I am a child of the Caribbean Basin, one of the most highly colonized and contested sites of the globe, as both the almost total absence of indigenous peoples and the presence of anglophone, francophone, and hispanophone populations readily attest. Here the project of imperialism and colonialism was so immensely successful and so radically effective that, in a relatively brief period of time, the original local populations had disappeared and the original local languages had been replaced. Indeed, in the Caribbean archipelago one has to go almost island by island to explain the imperial and colonial dynamics at work over the five centuries since the European "discovery." Then, with emigration and exile, a further distinguishing mark of the Caribbean Basin, I became a child of the diaspora, a part of the Hispanic American reality and experience in the United States, a context of internal colonialism not unlike that facing other groups from outside the West now residing in the West.⁶

In my own case, therefore, as a native of the island of Cuba and an exile-immigrant in the United States, such mapping entails four distinctive experiences of imperialism and colonialism: (1) the aftereffects of possession by the Spanish Empire, from the very beginning of its landfall in "the Americas" to the very demise of the empire itself—from the first voyage of Christopher Columbus to the Spanish-American War (1492-1898); (2) the continuing effects of occupation by the American Empire at the very apex of its period of manifest destiny (1898-1902), followed by the period of the republic (1902-59), a period of neocolonial dependency marked by the watchful supervision of the United States, a number of military interventions by U.S. forces, and a series of cruel and corrupt dictatorships—from the declaration of independence to the triumph of the Cuban Revolution; (3) the new effects from the implantation of a socialist-Leninist system of government at the very height of the Cold War, under the neocolonial aegis of the Soviet Empire (1959-89), followed by the continuation of such a system of government even after the total

⁶ Segovia, "Two Places and No Place on Which to Stand," 27-33; idem, "Aliens in the Promised Land," 21-31.

collapse of the imperial center (1989-present); (4) the situation of internal colonialism affecting by and large the Hispanic American population as a whole in the United States.

In the light of such a long and distinguished pedigree, it should come as no surprise that I regard and construct myself as carrying imperialism and colonialism in my flesh and in my soul, as a human subject and as a real, flesh-and-blood reader—and hence as a biblical critic, as a constructive theologian, and as a cultural critic. For me, therefore, the reality of empire—of imperialism and colonialism—constitutes an omnipresent, inescapable, and overwhelming reality. My option for a postcolonial optic should thus be obvious: it is a model that I find most helpful, most revealing, and most liberating. In what follows, therefore, I proceed to unpack its particular importance and relevance for biblical criticism.

POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES AND BIBLICAL CRITICISM

Postcolonial studies is a model that takes the reality of empire—of imperialism and colonialism—as an omnipresent, inescapable, and overwhelming reality in the world: the world of antiquity, the world of the Near East or of the Mediterranean Basin; the world of modernity, the world of Western hegemony and expansionism; and the world of today, of postmodernity, the world of postcolonialism on the part of the Two-Thirds World and of neocolonialism on the part of the West.

Postcolonial Studies and Ancient Texts

A first dimension of a postcolonial optic in biblical criticism involves an analysis of the texts of ancient Judaism and early Christianity that takes seriously into consideration their broader sociocultural contexts in the Near East and the Mediterranean Basin, respectively, in the light of an omnipresent, inescapable, and overwhelming sociopolitical reality—the reality of empire, of imperialism and colonialism, as variously constituted and exercised during the long period in question. Some preliminary observations regarding this phenomenon of empire are in order.⁷

First, the reality of empire should be seen as a structural reality that is largely defined and practiced in terms of a primary binomial opposition:

⁷ For good, concise introductions to the phenomenon of imperialism and colonialism in general, see E. Said, "Yeats and Decolonization," in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. S. Deane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 69-95; idem, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 3-61; S. Deane, "Imperialism and Nationalism," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. F. L. Lentricchia and T. McLaughlin, 2d ed. enl. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 354-68.

on the one hand, a political, economic, and cultural center—more often than not symbolized by a city; on the other hand, any number of margins politically, economically, and culturally subordinated to the center. This grounding binomial entails and engenders, in turn, any number of secondary or subordinate binomials: civilized/uncivilized; advanced/primitive; cultured/barbarian; progressive/backward; developed/undeveloped/underdeveloped.

Second, such a structural reality, despite the many and profound similarities in common, should not be seen as uniform in every imperial context across time and culture—say, for example, from the world of Assyria and Babylon, to the world of Greece and Rome, to the world of Western Europe and the United States—but as differentiated in constitution and deployment, though again with many and profound similarities in common.

Third, this reality, I would argue, is of such reach and such power that it inevitably affects and colors, directly or indirectly, the entire artistic production of center and margins, of dominant and subaltern, including their respective literary productions.

From the point of view of ancient Judaism and its literature, it is necessary to speak not just of one empire but of a succession of empires involving, depending on the locality of the center in question, the Near East as well as the Mediterranean Basin: Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome. From the point of view of early Christianity and its literature, it is obviously the massive presence and might of the Roman Empire, master and lord of the entire Circum-Mediterranean, with its thoroughly accurate if enormously arrogant classification of the Mediterranean Sea as *mare nostrum*.

To begin with, therefore, the shadow of empire in the production of ancient texts is to be highlighted. A number of key questions come to the fore as a result: 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 the 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? From the perspective of postcolonial studies, such questions—questions of culture, ideology, and power—emerge as crucial.

Postcolonial Studies and Modern Readings

A second dimension of the proposed postcolonial optic in biblical criticism involves an analysis of the readings and interpretations of the texts of Jewish and Christian antiquity that takes seriously into account their broader sociocultural context in the West, whether by way of Europe or

North America, in the light of the same omnipresent, inescapable, and overwhelming sociopolitical reality that surrounded the production of the texts of ancient Judaism and early Christianity—the reality of empire, of imperialism and colonialism, now with regard to the Western imperial tradition of the last five hundred years.

First, the imperial tradition of the West may be approached in terms of three different phases and periods:⁸ (1) early imperialism, with reference to the initial, mercantile phase of European imperialism—from the fifteenth century through most of the nineteenth century, from the monarchical states of Portugal and Spain to the early modern states of England, France, and the Netherlands, among others; (2) high imperialism, involving monopoly capitalism with its integration of industrial and finance capital in the major capitalist nation-states—from the end of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century, with England as prime example; and (3) late imperialism, with reference to both the end of formal colonialism and the continued impact and power of imperial culture in the world—from the middle of the twentieth century to the present, with the United States as its prime example.

Second, this tradition of Western empire-building was accompanied by a very prominent socioreligious dimension as well. Thus, the Western missionary movement may be divided into two major waves and periods, represented by the highly symbolic dates of 1492 and 1792.⁹ The first date stands, of course, for the first European landfall in the “New World.” This first stage of the missions (1492–1792) was primarily Catholic in orientation, involved the massive evangelization of the Americas, and found itself near exhaustion by the end of the eighteenth century. The second date, not as well-known, recalls two different though related events: first, with regard to Asia (India), the publication of William Carey’s *Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Heathens* and concomitant formation of his missionary society; second, with regard to Africa (Sierra Leone), the establishment of the first church in tropical Africa in modern times (interestingly enough, by people of African birth or descent from North America). This second stage (1792–present) was at first primarily Protestant in nature, concerned the massive evangelization of Africa, Asia, and remaining areas of the Americas, and remains quite vigorous today. Over the last five

⁸ I find myself in agreement with the caution offered for postcolonial studies in general by M. Sprinker (“Introduction,” in *Late Imperial Culture*, ed. R. de la Campa, E. A. Kaplan and M. Sprinker [London: Verso, 1996], 1–10), who insists on the need to offer and follow a historical periodization of the different types of imperialism at work in the West over this period of five centuries.

⁹ I follow here the thesis of A. Walls, “Christianity in the Non-Western World: A Study in the Serial Nature of Christian Expansion,” *Studies in World Christianity* 1 (1995): 1–25.

centuries, therefore, the different phases of European imperialism and colonialism brought with them, wherever they turned, their respective religious beliefs and practices, whether Catholic or Protestant.

Third, a comparison of this twofold division of the missionary movement of the West with the previous threefold division of Western imperialism proves instructive. On the one hand, the first missionary wave of the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries coincides with the first imperialist phase—the mercantile stage of early imperialism; on the other hand, the second missionary wave of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries coincides with the transition from the first to the second imperialist phase in the nineteenth century and its full bloom at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth—the monopoly, capitalist stage of high imperialism.

As such, the structural binomial reality of empire should be seen as involving a strong socioreligious component as well. The political, economic, and cultural center also functions as a religious center; that is to say, the practices and beliefs of the center are invariably grounded on, sanctioned, and accompanied by a set of religious beliefs and practices. Consequently, the primary binomial of center and margins entails and engenders a further binomial in this sphere as well—believers/unbelievers—pagan—which in turn gives rise to a number of other secondary and subordinate binomials, such as godly/ungodly (worshippers of the true God/worshippers of false gods) and religious/idolatrous-superstitious. As a result, the margins politically, economically, and culturally subordinated to the center must be brought into religious submission as well: their religious beliefs must be corrected and uplifted; their gods attacked and destroyed; their practices ridiculed and replaced.

Finally, such a reality, I would argue once again, further colors and affects, directly or indirectly, the entire artistic production of both center and margins, the dominant and the subaltern, including their respective literary productions.

From the point of view of biblical criticism, therefore, it is clear that the academic study of the texts of ancient Judaism and early Christianity, given the formation and consolidation of the discipline in the course of the nineteenth century, parallels the second major wave of the Western missionary movement as well as the transition period to the second, high phase of Western imperialism and colonialism: first, as Europe turns to Africa and Asia, in a renewed and frantic scramble for territories and possessions; second, as the United States turns West and beyond, with its eyes increasingly set on the islands of the Caribbean, the heart of Mexico, and territories in the Pacific.

Consequently, the shadow of empire in the production of modern readings of the ancient texts should also be underlined. In the process, certain crucial questions again come to the surface, not unlike those raised earlier but now from a different angle: How do such readings and interpretations,

coming from the metropolitan centers of the West as they do, address and present such issues in the ancient texts as empire and margins, oppression and justice; the world and life in the world as well as the other-world and its inhabitants; history and “the other,” mission and conversion, followers and outsiders; salvation, election, and holiness? Once again, from the point of view of postcolonial studies, questions such as these—questions of culture, ideology, and power—prove all-important.

Postcolonial Studies and Readers

For this third dimension of the proposed postcolonial optic in biblical criticism, I would argue once more for an analysis of the readers of the texts of ancient Judaism and early Christianity that takes seriously into consideration their broader sociocultural contexts in the global sphere, whether in the West or outside the West, in the light of the same omnipresent, inescapable, and overwhelming sociopolitical reality that engulfed the texts of Jewish and Christian antiquity as well as the readings and interpretations of such texts in the West—the reality of empire, of imperialism and colonialism, now in terms of not only the Western imperial tradition of the last five centuries but also the reaction against such a tradition from outside the West within the context of the postcolonial yet neocolonial world of the last half-century. Some preliminary observations are once again in order.

First, despite what I have described as its omnipresent, inescapable, and overwhelming character, the structural binomial reality of imperialism and colonialism is never imposed or accepted in an atmosphere of absolute and undisturbed passivity. Always in the wake of the fundamental binomial of center/margins and ultimately deconstructing it as well, in principle if not in praxis, lies the inverted binomial of resistance/fear. I say inverted because this is the one binomial opposition where the margins actually take the initiative, while the center is forced into a reactive position.

In effect, there is always—sooner or later, major or minor, explicit or implicit—resistance to the center on the part of the politically, economically, culturally, and religiously subordinated margins, even when such resistance brings about, as it inevitably does, further measures of control on the part of the center, designed to instill fear into the minds and hearts of the margins. Such measures, to be sure, only serve to contribute to a further deconstruction of the binomial reality, as the civilized, advanced, cultured, progressive, developed, and believing center turns increasingly to measures of an uncivilized, primitive, barbarian, backward, undeveloped, and unbelieving order against the marginal groups. At some point, such resistance on the part of the margins may come to a climax, and this climax may involve in turn a variety of gradations: open challenge and defiance; widespread rebellion and anomic; actual overthrow and reorientation.

Second, I would argue that such resistance is precisely what has occurred in the discipline in the last quarter of the century, as more and more outsiders have joined its ranks. Such outsiders can be classified according to two groupings: women from the West; and men and women from outside the West as well as from ethnic and racial minorities in the West. In both cases a similar pattern of resistance can be observed: early stirrings in the 1970s—what could be called a situation of open challenge and defiance; maturation and solidification through the 1980s—a clear situation of widespread rebellion and anomie; sharpened sophistication in the 1990s—what could be compared to a situation of actual overthrow and reorientation.

Third, it should not go unobserved that such disciplinary changes took place not long after the commencement of the third major phase of Western imperialism and colonialism, marked by the end of formal colonialism, with wars of independence and the loss of colonies everywhere—the age of the postcolonial, and the continued impact of imperial culture everywhere—the age of the neocolonial. More specifically, such developments, one should recall, came soon after the crisis experienced by the West, both in Europe and North America, during the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Quite clearly, the upheaval in the world at large ultimately affects the discipline as well.

Finally, such a reality, I would argue yet again, does affect and color as well, directly or indirectly, the entire artistic production of center and margins, dominant and subaltern, including their respective literary productions.

From the point of view of biblical critics, then, it now becomes necessary to distinguish between two general groupings: On the one hand, those readers associated with the long imperial tradition of the West, especially from the time of transition to high imperialism to the present phase of neocolonialism within late imperialism—still the vast majority of critics; on the other hand, those critics associated with the colonies of the Western empires, what has come to be known as the Two-Thirds World, now raising their voices for the first time during the present phase of postcolonialism within late imperialism—a growing minority of critics.

Therefore, the shadow of empire in the lives of modern as well as contemporary readers must, yet again, be highlighted in biblical criticism. In so doing, a number of crucial questions come to the fore, similar to those outlined before but formulated from yet another angle of approach: How do traditional (male) critics, from the metropolitan centers of the West, stand—and construct them—"selves"—with regard to the relationship between empire and margins, the West and the rest, Christendom and outsiders; mission and conversion, oppression and justice, history and the other; salvation, election, and holiness; the this-world and life in the world as well as the other-world? What is the position of Western women in this regard, in their role as previous outsiders from the West itself? How do

men and women from outside the West as well as from ethnic and racial minorities in the West respond to such issues? Such questions—questions of culture, ideology, and power—emerge as all-important from the point of view of postcolonial studies.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

From the point of view of cultural studies, that paradigm within which I presently situate myself in the discipline, the model of postcolonial studies should be seen as one major line of approach, alongside others. Such a line of approach, furthermore, should also be seen as quite broad and quite rich—multidimensional, multicentered, multilingual. Not only is its theoretical apparatus immense and its range of reading strategies phenomenal, as reflected in the exploding corpus of critical literature, but also its scope and its reach prove to be radically global as well, drawing as it does on the discourses and practices of imperialism and colonialism across cultures and historical periods.

In the introduction I remarked that, as a model within cultural studies—an intermediate model within an umbrella model, as it were—postcolonial studies proves most appropriate, most enlightening, and most fruitful. The reasons should now be evident.

First, the model is not only thoroughly self-conscious of itself as a construct, dependent upon certain theoretical claims and reading strategies, but also calls for self-consciousness on the part of its would-be practitioners as constructs, dependent upon certain representations of themselves, of their own social locations and agendas, as real readers. Both with regard to interpretation and interpreters, therefore, the model presupposes and demands a specific optic with clear implications for both the representation of the past and the representation of the present.

Second, the model can address at one and the same time the various interrelated and interdependent dimensions of criticism: the analysis of texts—the world of antiquity; the analysis of "texts"—the world of modernity; the analysis of readers of texts and producers of "texts"—the world of postmodernity.

Finally, the model is profoundly ideological, for it looks upon the political experience of imperialism and colonialism as central to the task of criticism at all levels of inquiry.

In the end, however, as a model within cultural studies, postcolonial studies has no choice but to see itself and represent itself as *unus inter pares*; otherwise, it could easily turn into an imperial discourse of its own. It is an optic, not *the* optic, in full engagement and dialogue with a host of other models and other optics. Yet, even as one among equals, it proves most incisive and most telling, for it reminds us all, the children of the colonized and the children of the colonizer, that the discipline of biblical

criticism as we know it and have known it must be seen and analyzed, like all other discourses of modernity, against the much broader geopolitical context of Western imperialism and colonialism. In so doing, furthermore, the goal is not merely one of analysis and description, but rather one of transformation: the struggle for "liberation" and "decolonization."

6

Notes toward Refining the Postcolonial Optic

I should like to preface my remarks with a word of gratitude as well as a word of commendation to the members of the panel: gratitude, on the one hand, for their kind willingness to undertake the critical review of this volume, always a demanding and time-consuming task; commendation, on the other hand, for having done so in such a thorough, elegant, and well-meaning fashion.¹ It is from critique that one always stands to learn the most, and ever more so if such critique is formulated with care, decorum, and goodwill. This you have all done in eminent fashion, and, in so doing, you have forced me to think, both as contributor to the volume and as editor of the series, and for this I am always most grateful. Indeed, it is on the basis of such reflections that I have entitled these remarks of mine as I have, thereby picking up on the title of chapter 5 and signaling the need for ongoing refinement in the theorization and formulation of this interpretive project.

THE QUESTION OF NOMENCLATURE

I must begin with a critical comment of my own regarding the term "postcolonial" itself, as found, for example, in both the title of the volume (*The Postcolonial Bible*) and the field of studies in question (post-

¹ This chapter was a response to the review panel of *The Postcolonial Bible* (R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *The Bible and Postcolonialism Series 1* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998]) that took place at the 1998 AAR-SBL Annual Meeting in Orlando, Florida, in a featured session organized by the Bible in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America Section. The panel's reviews appeared in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 74 (1999): 113-21.

I also find increasingly problematic. I have availed myself of it, within the context of ideological criticism and what I have come to call cultural studies,³ to signify the realm of the geopolitical—the relationship between center and periphery, the imperial and the colonial, on a global political scale. This relationship I see as encompassing both social reality and cultural reality, that is, social formation as well as cultural production. At the same time, I find it no longer an altogether proper designation for all that the sphere of the geopolitical implies and entails. In other words, as a signifier I regard it as much too restrictive for all of the signified, all of the critical activity, that I see as falling within its compass.

To begin with, one can and should distinguish between “imperialism” and “colonialism,” with their respective discourses.⁴ One can and should further distinguish between these discourses and their corresponding counterparts, “anti-imperialism” and “anti-colonialism.” Lastly, one can and should distinguish as well among different stages or periods within such discourses, with their resultant subdiscourses: “pre-imperialism” and “pre-colonialism”; “imperialism” and “colonialism” proper; “post-imperialism” and “post-colonialism”; “neo-imperialism” and “neo-colonialism.” At this point, I readily confess, I have no substitute to offer with which I would find myself completely at ease, although I do find the expression “imperial-colonial” (as in imperial-colonial studies) more and more attractive. The hyphenated juxtaposition of these more abstract terms can, in my opinion, more accurately convey the various critical activities and subdiscourses at work, certainly far more so than “postcolonial,” which in the end amounts to a not very helpful and perhaps even confusing example of synecdoche.

Even then, I would hasten to point out, in employing all such categories one continues to view the reality and experience of the periphery—as the various prefixes (pre-; post-; neo-) and qualifiers (proper) themselves make clear—with reference to the center and hence in terms of external intervention, domination, and oppression. As a result, the role of the center

² Actually, I would argue that the term as applied to the volume is not quite proper. My preference would have been to reserve such a designation to an actual commentary on the Bible from this perspective. Indeed, I would point out that this was not the original title intended for the volume. That was to have been, as specified in the original prospectus for the series, *The Bible and Post-colonial Criticism*, a far more acceptable description of its character and goal.

³ See chap. 2 in this present volume.

⁴ The question of nomenclature in this regard is extremely complex. I myself favor the use of “imperialism” to refer to all that pertains to the center and of “colonialism” to mark all that pertains to the periphery. For a similar position, see A. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, *The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1-19.

continues to be privileged over that of the periphery. While this is perhaps inevitable given the highly unequal, long-lasting, and totalizing nature of the relationship in question, I should very much like to think otherwise. For now, however, I must limit myself to the question of nomenclature—whether the term “postcolonial” is appropriate and, if not, what is to be substituted in its place—and leave to another time the question of a more autochthonous definition on the part of the periphery. Nonetheless, given the still-tentative nature of my position on this point, I shall continue to employ the term “postcolonial” in what follows.

READING THE RESPONSES

With this reservation in mind, I turn to *The Postcolonial Bible* and the critical reviews. The volume itself is the first in a new series, *The Bible and Postcolonialism*, for which I have the honor of serving on the editorial board. As such, it represents an early attempt to bring together the fields of biblical studies and postcolonial studies.⁵ A critique at this stage, therefore, is not only most welcome but also most useful, for such a critique can only serve to render the proposed dialogue between these two discourses more substantial, more sophisticated, and more fruitful. From this perspective, I see the responses as raising three main issues with regard to the project as a whole: (1) the question of pedagogy—teaching biblical studies in such a way that the postcolonial optic emerges as central rather than tangential to the enterprise; (2) the question of solidarity—doing postcolonial analysis in biblical studies without losing sight of its commonalities and links with other discourses of resistance and emancipation; (3) the question of applicability—deploying the postcolonial optic in biblical studies in a way that is keenly mindful of the differences between and among historical contexts and imperial/cultural formations.

Of these the most radical challenge to the project comes from the last point, raised by Professor David Jobling. Since it is the most fundamental, it is the one that requires the most attention, and so it is on this issue of applicability that I shall focus in my reflections. I begin with a reformulation of its basic premise, continue with a contextualization of this premise, and then turn to the beginnings of a response to the challenge in question. By way of conclusion, I deal briefly with the other two issues of solidarity and pedagogy.

⁵ To the best of my knowledge, *Semeia* 73 represents the first such attempt (L. Donaldson, ed., *Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998]).

Challenge of Applicability

Basic Premise

The premise for this challenge consists of a variation, formulated in the Marxist tradition, on the classic argument from historical distance, with reference to the "gulf" or "chasm" said to exist between the world of the past, the world of biblical antiquity, and the world of the present, the world of contemporary interpretation. Professor Jobling notes the crucial importance of the concept of mode of production in Marxist theory: not only does a mode of production frame all praxis and all theory in a society, but also a shift in mode of production changes all theory and all praxis, indeed, "down to the meaning of words." Such a phrase obviously comprehends the words of the Bible itself and raises immediately the problematic of interpretation. In effect, while the Bible was produced under one mode of production, that of tribute-slavery, we find ourselves at present under a very different mode of production, that of late capitalism. The question of applicability is sharply foregrounded as a result. In general terms, How can the Bible speak to our world? In specific terms, What can the Bible have to say to us with respect to matters of imperialism and colonialism? As Professor Jobling puts it, what sort of thing is the Bible in postcolonial analysis? A proper response, he argues, must go beyond simple links in the form of ahistorical analogues and must involve instead a complex process of historical comparison and translation. This sort of work, he concludes, is simply not to be found in this first volume of the Bible and Postcolonialism series, to its detriment.

Premise in Context

Two observations are in order with regard to this argument from historical distance. First, one should keep in mind that its theoretical framework is that of traditional Marxist theory, with its view of history in the grand style, as objective, comprehensive and teleological, and its distinction between material base and superstructure. Second, one should also keep in mind the raging debate between Marxist critics and postcolonial critics. From the Marxist perspective, postcolonial critics deal with the superstructure of imperialism while bypassing the question of its material base. In so doing, they argue, postcolonial critics remain throughout at the level of the cultural production of capitalism and fail in the process to affect its social formation in any significant way. From the postcolonial perspective, Marxist critics fail to recognize any social difference other than that of socioeconomic class (relationship to the mode of production). Thus, they argue, Marxist critics ignore altogether the highly negative stance of the West toward its "others," following the example of Marx himself, who affirmed the need for the primitive world outside the West to undergo development so that the worldwide revolution of the proletariat could ensue as envisioned. In the end, Marxist critics can and

do accuse postcolonial critics of succumbing to the ideology of late capitalism, just as postcolonial critics can and do accuse Marxist critics of falling prey to the ideology of racism present at the heart of the West.

I see the challenge of applicability as raised by Professor Jobling as falling well within the parameters of this ongoing debate between Marxist critics and postcolonial critics. Thus, in the face of this beginning application of postcolonial analysis to biblical studies, Professor Jobling argues that postcolonial critics must take into account not just cultural production in the Bible but also the material base or social formation of the Bible, and must do so according to the grand-scale model of successive modes of production in history, if such dialogue is to be at all productive; this, he contends, they have failed to do thus far.

Notes toward a Response

Needless to say, this challenge to the postcolonial project in biblical studies as represented by *The Postcolonial Bible* deserves far more time and space than the present response allows. In fact, it deserves far more reflection than I can, from a theoretical point of view, devote to it at this time. What I can do, however, is to offer a set of "notes" toward such a response, with the theoretical refinement of this postcolonial project in mind, a task that I regard as both necessary and ongoing.

A first note concerns the force of the argument from distance as such, regardless of theoretical framework. I would respond in both the affirmative and the negative. I do so, moreover, from the point of view of postmodernist historiography.⁶ On the one hand, I would argue that two "texts" of any length or sort, from across historical or cultural distances, can be brought together in dialogue to see what sparks are generated in the process. Such a view would rest on the postmodernist conception of all models of comparison as constructions and thus as arbitrary.⁷ On the other hand, I would argue that one can proceed to compare "texts," again of any length or sort, by paying close attention to issues of historical and cultural distance. Such a view could rest on any number of theoretical frameworks, as in the present case of an appeal to Marxist historiography and its concept of mode of production, though again, from a postmodernist perspective, I would regard all such models as constructs. With regard to the classic argument from distance, therefore, I see myself as able to go in either direction, depending on the purpose for so doing at the time of the

⁶ For an excellent analysis of the impact of postmodernism on historiography in general, both in terms of history as metanarrative and history as pointillist, see K. Jenkins, "Introduction: On Being Open about Our Closures," in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. K. Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1-30.

⁷ On this point, see A. K. M. Adam, *What Is Postmodernist Biblical Criticism?*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship: New Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 61-71.

exercise. For the most part, however, I confess that I favor a preservation of a sense of distance as a way of trying to safeguard what I call the otherness of the text.⁸

The second note has to do with the reach of the proposed postcolonial optic and thus with the particular insistence of the Marxist model on matters socioeconomic. I would hold that such an optic should encompass both social reality and cultural reality, and thus demands an analysis of the forces that shape social formation as well as of the representations that emerge in cultural production.

Two further observations are in order. First, while the ideal in such analysis would be to undertake both sorts of investigation at the same time and to the same degree, questions of expertise, time, or sheer preference may drive any one critic in one direction or the other. From this perspective, one pursuit emerges as important as the other. Second, such analysis involves, whether at the level of society or of culture, attention to a variety of dimensions, among which the socioeconomic is certainly most important but neither unique nor necessarily primary. Once again, however, questions of expertise, time, or sheer preference may lead the critic in one particular dimension or another. From this perspective one focus is as important as the other. I would only add that, from a postmodernist perspective, social formation and cultural production should by no means be seen as poles of a dichotomy, since in the end social formation can only be addressed and analyzed by way of representation in cultural production.

A third note addresses the possibility of comparative studies with regard to imperial and colonial formations from different times and/or different places and is thus related to the first note above. A spectrum of logical positions comes readily to mind:

At one end, one can argue that each imperial and colonial formation is utterly unique, so much so that no comparison is possible or valid across history and/or culture. From this point of view, one can no more compare, say, the British Empire of the twentieth century with its contemporary counterparts in Japan, France, or the United States, than one can compare it with the Spanish and Portuguese empires of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries or the Roman Empire of the first centuries. At the other end, one can argue that all imperial and colonial formations are basically the same regardless of history and/or culture. From this point of view, one can proceed to the task of comparison with confidence, whether that task concerns the British Empire and the Japanese, French, or U.S. empires of the twentieth century, the Spanish or Portuguese empires of

the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, or the Roman Empire of the first centuries. Between these two poles, then, one would find any number of positions advocating a comparison mindful of similarities and differences between and among imperial and cultural formations, with varying degrees of emphasis on similarities or differences.

From a postmodernist perspective, and in keeping with my remarks of the first note, I would situate myself within the comparative side of the spectrum, not objecting to wholesale comparison across time and/or culture but favoring attention to similarities and differences between or among the various formations in question.

The fourth and final note involves the character and provenance of the study of antiquity and comes back in a roundabout way to the argument from distance. I would propose that the study of ancient imperial and colonial formations, such as those to be found in biblical antiquity, is not that removed, historically or culturally, from the study of recent imperial and colonial formations, since the study of antiquity has been the almost exclusive preserve, until quite recently, of the West. As such, it has been carried on and produced at the heart of its various imperial and colonial formations. Consequently, the study of the Bible and the study of the West cannot be easily separated or differentiated from one another.

Let the socioeconomic model of Marxism serve as an example in this regard. The very recourse on the part of Marxist theory to the concept of mode of production as a critical tool is a construct of the nineteenth century, neither conveyed nor demanded by the "data" for proper interpretation, yet applied by Marxist historiography on a grand scale to the study of antiquity in general and regarded by Professor Jobling as indispensable for proper historical comparison and translation with regard to the Bible. Its use, I would argue, reveals as much about the West as about antiquity, if not more. Indeed, from a postmodernist point of view, I would further argue, all methods and models as well as all recreations of meaning and reconstructions of history are constructions—and this includes all approaches to and all views of biblical antiquity, and its variety of imperial and colonial formations. In the end, therefore, while the historical "gulf" in question is quite profound, its representation is not, since all models for and accounts of such a "chasm" are either of recent or contemporary vintage, and unavoidably so.

Summary

Postcolonial studies and biblical studies may be brought together in dialogue with either scant or abundant reference to historical and cultural boundaries, with neither option to be posited as inherently better than the other but with the latter as favored. In such dialogue, first of all, the postcolonial optic should examine with the same vigor and thoroughness both the sociology and the culture of imperial and colonial formations. In such dialogue, furthermore, the postcolonial optic should not refrain from

⁸ On this point, see F. F. Segovia, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement," in *Reading from This Place*, vol. 1: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. F. F. Segovia and M. A. Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 57-73.

comparisons of imperial and colonial formations across time or culture, with neither open nor restricted comparison as inherently better, but with the latter as preferred. In the end, such dialogue actually brings together two discourses that are not that far apart, insofar as the study of imperial and colonial formations in antiquity arises and develops at the heart of the imperial and colonial formations of the West and thus represents constructs of the West, with as much to say about the West as about the Bible, if not more. In a very real sense, therefore, postcolonial studies and biblical studies constitute thoroughly interrelated and interdependent fields and discourses.

Challenges of Solidarity and Pedagogy

Solidarity

The proposed postcolonial optic in biblical studies is obviously a discourse of resistance and emancipation. It takes as its reading lens the geopolitical relationship between center and periphery, the imperial and the colonial, not only at the level of the text but also at the level of interpretation, of readings and readers of the text. It does so, moreover, with decolonization and liberation in mind, as it proceeds to highlight the periphery over the center and the colonial over the imperial. As a result, the question of its relationship to other discourses of resistance and emancipation in biblical studies—such as socioeconomic (Marxist) or feminist criticism—is inevitably and variously raised, always with the hope in mind of a collective practice of oppositional reading. Behind such hope, it seems to me, lies an underlying fear that the new optic may serve to disperse rather than strengthen the envisioned oppositional front, hence the call from various and different quarters for it to be mindful of its similarities and links with these other discourses. This is what I would refer to as the ideal of a cosmopolitics, a most worthy and most attractive endeavor indeed.

But a most problematic one as well. The project of resistance and emancipation, I would argue, should be seen not as uniform and harmonious but as multifaceted and conflictive, given the varied nature of domination and oppression, and thus as a dialogue between a global ideal (cosmopolitics) and a broad number of local ideals (micropolitics). From this perspective, the differences among the various discourses of resistance and emancipation are to be emphasized as much as the similarities, so that no one voice or stance is silenced or subsumed by others. In this regard, the focus of postcolonial analysis is clear: the geopolitical relationship between center and periphery, the imperial and the colonial, whether in antiquity or modernity or postmodernity. From this perspective, for example, neither the project of Marxism nor the project of feminism suffices in and of itself, since they both reflect their own origins in the West.

On the one hand, the ideal of socialism, lofty as it is, has to be critically examined. After all, the experience and reality of "real" socialism has been not only Marxist but also Leninist-Stalinist in orientation. Its record is clear, despite a longstanding and continuing romanticization of it on the part of a good many Western intellectuals. This record shows: (1) the solidification of an imperial-colonial formation as interventionist, controlling, and totalizing as any other, if not more—the Soviet Empire with Russia at its center and with surrounding spheres of colonial influence in Eastern Europe and beyond; (2) a policy of massive and systematic violations against human and social rights. From a postcolonial perspective, the historical track of real socialism is as imperial as that of any other geopolitical formation in the West.

On the other hand, the ideal of feminism, exalted as it is, has to be critically reviewed as well. In effect, the experience and reality of the women's movement has been not only feminist but also racist in orientation. The record is clear as well, as non-Western feminists have consistently pointed out: (1) a systematic bypassing, undervaluing, or dismissal of the experience and reality of both women in the non-Western world and non-Western women in the West; (2) an underlying attitude of racism toward men in the non-Western world or non-Western men within the West. From a postcolonial perspective, the historical track of "real" feminism is as prejudiced as that of any other social movement in the West.

In the end, I would argue, there is no self-evident project of resistance and emancipation for all in the periphery, although there may be quite self-evident projects for the various groups that comprise the periphery. The ideal of a cosmopolitics, therefore, is not one that can be advanced or defined by any one group, but rather one that has to be forged by all groups in question—a most challenging and demanding task. From a postcolonial perspective, such an ideal cannot do without the question of the geopolitical relationship between center and periphery. At the same time, this geopolitical ideal cannot dispense with either the factor of gender or that of class; socioeconomic and feminist criticism impinge upon it as much as it impinges upon them. In this regard, a clearing space is absolutely necessary at this point in time in which non-Westerners can dialogue with one another away from the eyes of the West, including those of Western feminists and those of Western Marxists.

I would only add by way of conclusion that I regard this conception of resistance and emancipation as a multidimensional and conflicted phenomenon as not at all debilitating but rather as liberating, insofar as it brings the issue of diversity to the fore, in itself a tremendous victory in the struggle of resistance and emancipation. Indeed, there is nothing more feared or disliked in any context of domination and oppression than the very possibility of diversity, of thinking and/or acting differently, away from the norm.

Pedagogy

The proposed postcolonial optic in biblical studies clearly demands, I would agree, a pedagogical vision to go hand in hand with its interpretive vision. Such a vision further demands, I would also agree, that this optic be central rather than tangential to the project. I would make but one comment. For such an optic to be central, it should be applied to both texts and their interpretation, the readings and readers of texts.⁹

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I would conclude by reiterating that these reflections of mine represent but notes on the way toward a more ample and substantial response on my part to the challenges brought to the project of postcolonial criticism in biblical studies. For such reflections, brief and undeveloped as they are, I can only express, once again, my profound gratitude to the panel and their critical reviews. In forcing me to think as you have, you have provided me with an excellent point of departure for the goal of refining the conceptualization and verbalization of this project; as both editor and contributor, I stand in your debt.

PART IV

VOICES FROM OUTSIDE

⁹ For a first step in the formulation of such a vision, see chap. 4 in this present volume.