

# POSTCOLONIAL BIBLICAL CRITICISM IN SOUTH AFRICA: SOME MIND AND ROAD MAPPING<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Postcolonial biblical criticism can best be described as a variety of hermeneutical approaches characterised by their political nature and ideological agenda, and whose textual politics ultimately concerns both a hermeneutic of suspicion and hermeneutic of retrieval or restoration. It interacts with colonial history and its aftermath(s), which concerns both a history of repression and of repudiation, but it also deals with exposé and with restoration and transformation. With postcolonial studies intrinsically tied to hermeneutics, it represents a shift in emphasis, a strategy of reading, in an attempt to point out what was missing in previous analyses, as well as to rewrite and correct, although its politics of textuality has already come under fire for its lack of political action. Although some postcolonial readings of the New Testament have been done, this article attempts to identify the most important criteria for and characteristics of postcolonial biblical criticism, and discusses what can be considered three vital elements of such a hermeneutical endeavour.

## 1. Another Tempest in the Postist World?

Why would we want to read the New Testament in a postcolonial way? And, what would such a reading entail? These are two questions not infrequently asked, yet often left unanswered when the topic of postcolonial biblical criticism is introduced. It should be emphasised at the outset that postcolonial biblical criticism is not about adding to the proliferation of

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hermeneutical/exegetical methods, since it utilises a variety of different<sup>2</sup> methodologies, although some methods are excluded because of their theoretical positions and imperialist stances. Postcolonial biblical criticism is about a different focus and purpose, rather than a different hermeneutical method, and it reserves special attention for ideology criticism and suspicion hermeneutics. While it might be true that in South Africa as elsewhere, literary production finds itself between the three “posts” of poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism, it is a question whether biblical studies in South Africa has yet interacted in a sustained serious way with any of these three – individually or in combination of two or more – and more particularly with postcolonialism.

Maybe it is because the term “postcolonial” is not only slippery, but in the South African context notoriously influenced by linguistic and racial position, at least.<sup>3</sup> However, the usefulness of the term is situated in its ability to articulate the desire of subjugated people regarding their sense(s) of identity and self-determination, as well as the ability of postcolonial discourse to pose a counter-offensive against political, economic and cultural forms of imperialism (cf Carusi 1991, 95-96), without neglecting aspects of gender, sexuality and ethnicity in the process. Postcolonial studies remain, however, in terminology a synecdoche (*a part which represents the whole*, or inversely the whole which represents a part) for imperialist–(post)colonial studies.<sup>4</sup> Postcolonial biblical studies is, or attempts to be, “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 but by no means altogether so – to a formal end but remain very much at work in practice, as neoimperialism and neocolonialism” (Segovia 1998a, 51 n3).

In biblical studies the process of decolonisation is often presented as a wide spectrum of stances and practices, emerging with the awareness of

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2 “It must be stressed that it [postcolonialism] is not a homogenous project, but a hermeneutical salmagundi, consisting of extremely varied methods, materials, historical entanglements, geographical locations, political affiliations, cultural identities, and economic predicaments” (Sugirtharajah 1998a, 15).

3 The term colonial is disputed on both sides of the historical Apartheid divide, but Carusi (1991, 96) suggests that the term “neo-imperialism” is more than apt for the contemporary SA society.

4 One commentator goes further in arguing that it is a “classic and confusing study of synecdoche”, opting rather for “Imperial/Colonial Studies” (Segovia 2000b, 14 n1).

imperial forces and accompanying domination strategies. These include strategies for their resistance while exploring alternative positions and practices to foster “liberating interdependence” between nations, races, genders, economics and cultures (Dube 1996a, 38). The culture-critical call by Robert Scholes that “textual studies must be pushed beyond the discrete boundaries of the page and the book into institutional practices and social structures” (Leitch 1994, 281), necessarily becomes integral to postcolonial biblical studies and interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Postcolonial biblical interpretation is not intended to be either a monolithic approach with eyes only for the geopolitical scene of historical colonisation or modern superpower activity, nor can it afford to aspire to become an all-encompassing and replacement master narrative. While it is at times claimed that since postcolonial studies is generally presented as studies which address “nations” and political power formations, issues concerning race, gender, sexual orientation and others have so far not been included in its agenda (Gugelberger 1994, 582), others disagree. “Pioneers of postcolonial criticism are from the outset also seeking to make alliances with those subjected to and seeking liberation from sexual, racial, colonial, and class domination”<sup>6</sup> (Horsley 2000, 10). A postcolonial study concerns itself with social formation and analysis as well as cultural production, and it is therefore an attempt to rewrite history. More than but not excluding the attempt at rewriting history, postcolonialism posits a reflective modality which allows for a critical rethinking<sup>7</sup> (thinking “through” and therefore “out of”) of historical imbalances and cultural inequalities which were established by colonialism (Gandhi 1998, 176). And

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5 So e.g. Segovia claims that besides a biblical critic and even a constructive theologian, he is also a cultural critic, a task which includes a focus on issues of construction, representation and power, through an investment in contextual and ideological analysis as found in the accumulation of studies referred to as Cultural Studies. The task includes the investigation of various other dimensions of the biblical interpreter’s social context besides the socio-religious (1998a, 51 n2; 2000c, 59).

6 Sugirtharajah, also, argues that the overlapping issues of race, empire, diaspora and ethnicity have indeed been included in the hermeneutical agenda of postcolonialism (1998a, 15); cf Dube (1996b, 249) adding issues of religion, gender and nation; Horsley above (2000, 10) adds issues of sexuality and class. To this should be added other forms of hegemony, as supported and promoted by religious bias and/or socio-cultural bias, etc. It is interesting that “religion” as hegemonic category is but for Dube still under-investigated.

7 “Post” should not conjure up the ideas of amnesia or repetition, but rather “a procedure in ‘ana-’, including analysis, anamnesis, anagogy and anamorphosis which elaborates an ‘initial forgetting’” (Lyotard, in Gandhi 1998, 174).

the postcolonial label is therefore both historical and based on a political position (Gallagher 1994, 3).

This does not mean that a postcolonial approach champions the “ideal of a cosmopolitics”, serving as ultimate and all-inclusive oppositional front,<sup>8</sup> a “new optic” characterised by an accommodating nature (within its own perceived paradigm, of course). To the contrary, it is given with the dialectic of colonial and imperial experience that projects of resistance and emancipation are disparate rather than harmonious, diverse rather than uniform, “given the diverse nature of domination and oppression” – in other words, “there is no self-evident project of resistance and emancipation for all in the periphery”.<sup>9</sup> It is both important and required that “the differences among the various discourses of resistance and emancipation are to be emphasized as much as the similarities” (Segovia 2000a, 140-41).<sup>10</sup> Postcolonial biblical criticism should therefore not try to be everything to everybody, or attempt to replace or co-opt for example Feminism,<sup>11</sup> or

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8 The danger of “postmodern colonization of the postcolonial” relates to the tendency to assimilate, incorporate and in the end homogenise everything, including the “oppositional other”, into the “Western post(al) network”. In order to avoid such homogenisation while allowing for the unitary sense of the multifarious network of postcolonial studies, Gugelberger proposes to take “postcolonial” to refer to “the cultures affected by the imperial process”. But similarly, the use of postcolonial as a catch-all can make it impervious to addressing the specifics of the past *and* present, and so become an imperialist metanarrative itself. “The ahistorical, universalizing, homogenizing effects of postcolonial theory ... may not provide a politically useful analysis for those cast as Others in a specific time and place” (Gallagher 1996, 232).

9 Postcolonial study insists on transgressing disciplinary boundaries in its advocacy of an interdisciplinarity and a multicultural curriculum. Postcolonial studies is not reducible to a specific “field” or “core” within such a field, as much as it cannot be disconnected from previous disciplines. Cultural and postcolonial studies are deliberately not disciplinary but rather inquisitive activities that question the inherent problems of disciplinary studies; they “discipline the disciplines” (Gugelberger 1994, 582).

10 From a postmodern vantage point, Segovia stresses that a multidimensional and conflicted conception of resistance and emancipation is not debilitating but liberating by adding to the relativising power of diversity in a context of domination or oppression. Not disavowing the ideal of a cosmopolitics, he recognises that it can only be advanced and even defined as a common task of all groups in question, “a most challenging and demanding task” (2000a, 141).

11 Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the combination of a rhetorical emphasis with feminist theory will enable the “full-turn” of biblical studies although a paradigm shift in biblical studies has so far stayed out due to the inability of rhetoric to link up with feminist, liberationist and postcolonial studies (1999, 13). Attention to rhetoric and especially to its epistemic status is

Marxism, since postcolonial criticism addresses a different context and sets of relationships. Rather, a postcolonial approach to biblical studies, “takes competing modes of discourse for granted, renounces the idea of any master narrative as in itself a construct, and looks for truly global interaction” (Segovia 2000a, 33).

Postcolonial biblical interpretation can be understood as a form of ideology criticism, which considers the socio-political context and one's stand within it of primary importance. But at the same time, Postcolonialism is about more than ideology criticism, in that it specifically addresses the silencing of the Other through the colonial strategy of posing the colonised as the inverse of the coloniser, requiring simultaneously the notion of emptying the colonised world of meaning<sup>12</sup> (Gandhi 1998, 15). In the extension of this was often found a vilification of the colonised Other, the savage versus the civilised, the emotional/stupid versus the rational/intelligent, the heathen versus the religiously committed. Imperialism and colonialism, respectively, exhibit many faces, register conflicting impacts on human lives and society and are experienced in a variety of different ways. But both phenomena are intimately related to structures of political power and ideology, economic structures and practices, and social-cultural configurations and experiences.<sup>13</sup> Location becomes a very important, heuristic, political matter, and time, distance and

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certainly important, but it may in the end be postcolonial studies which offers the theory and practice for exposing configurations of center and margin, empire and colonised, hegemony and powerlessness. Postcolonial studies is liberatory in nature, and without eschewing the gender component, or indeed issues of race, sexual orientation, class and social status, it offers a framework which is not predisposed towards creating, anew, an insider-outsider rhetoric based on such components.

- 12 Postcolonial studies illustrate how coloniser and colonised were (are) linked to one another, although the interaction was hardly on equal terms. It attempts to “analyze the major mistakes of the past” while building “bridges for future dialogue” (Dube 1996b, 248-249). But how is coloniser and colonised to be defined? Without much clearer or at least traceable lines in historical colonialism, how does one go about it in the postcolonial era? Can one simply rely on past configurations and/or experiences in a postmodern world with its many manifestations of manipulative, oppressive, excessive forms and practices of power? May one man's liberating experience not be another woman's encounter with hegemony?
- 13 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).

space are categories of prime significance, and so is personal experience, the autobiographical,<sup>14</sup> which is of great importance in getting to grips with imperialist and hegemonic structures of oppression. The production and promotion of New Testament texts during the period of imperial formation are considered as more than merely an important setting or “background”. The imperial context is seen as constitutive for the development and production of New Testament texts. But equally so does the location and practices of interpretation – the politics of biblical interpretation – assume a significance beyond being the tools of the trade and the locations where the trade is practiced.

This study is more theoretical-hermeneutical than exegetical-hermeneutical, that is, informed by important facets of postcolonial theory and studies it asks in what amounts to a stocktaking exercise what the implications of postcolonial theory are for future New Testament studies. How and how far may postcolonial theory be important for the broader hermeneutical task of New Testament studies?<sup>15</sup> Since the value of postcolonial biblical criticism will be determined by its ability to deliver the hermeneutical goods, through rendering readings capable of offering both plausible and anti-imperialist interpretations of the documents of the New Testament, the paper wants to explore the broader parameters within which postcolonial studies can fruitfully be related to New Testament studies. In the discussion, my focus will be on two areas of concern.<sup>16</sup> In the first place,

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14 Autobiographical criticism often resists the personal, with the emphasis on political, economical or social/cultural systems, local or global, which cause inequitable power relations and downright oppression. My own social location is that of a white, male, South African biblical scholar at a historical disadvantaged (black) higher education institution, and a part-time minister in a rural, coloured and black church, while my investigation is naturally informed by the broader South African and global context.

15 My discussion of postcolonial studies is from the perspective of its application in biblical studies, and although I am not intent on shying away from postcolonial discourses found in other academic fields, mine is a deliberate attempt at interrogating the possibilities and challenges, and the applications and profits of postcolonial theory for studying the Bible.

16 This is certainly not meant to be exhaustive of the postcolonial task, but is indeed a reflection of my own perception of priorities. Other concerns in biblical studies also demands the attention of a postcolonial perspective, from archeology (cf Brett 1996, 225ff) to migrancy and diaspora identities (cf Segovia 2000b; Gandhi 1998, 153ff) which are entirely explicit in their commitment to hybridity – “positioned on the margins or interstices of two antagonistic national cultures, it claims to open up in-between space of

I will offer ideas on how postcolonial theory affects biblical hermeneutics, namely the study of the texts themselves with regard to their formation and interpretation. This leads to a discussion of three areas in biblical hermeneutics where postcolonial criticism may be of particular concern: the status of the biblical texts; texts' interpretive traditions; and, formulating strategies for rereading the Bible.

## 2. Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Criteria and Characteristics

Some elements found in descriptions of postcolonial biblical criticism, individually or in combination, are likely to be claimed for and by other hermeneutical strategies as well, especially those also having strong ideological leanings or a hermeneutic of suspicion-focus. Although postcolonial biblical criticism will not agonise over this, given its concern not to re-impose a hermeneutical or even intellectual hegemony, it would want to describe itself as adequately as possible, first and foremost because it presents itself as "thoroughly self-conscious of itself as construct" (Segovia 1998a, 63). It is useful therefore to investigate conscious attempts at definition and conceptual clarity of the theory and mechanics of postcolonial biblical criticism.

Postcolonial biblical criticism/studies has, like the broader area of postcolonial studies, been variously described. In one such an attempt at description, Kwok (1998, 110) lists the following five characteristics of postcolonial criticism, specifically as applied in and to the operations of biblical studies. Firstly, It challenges the totalising forms of Western interpretation,<sup>17</sup> exposing its co-optation by imperial interests and destabilizing its frame of meaning. It is, secondly, a counter-hegemonic discourse, paying special attention to the hidden and neglected voices

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cultural ambivalence" (Gandhi 1998, 153); and, e.g. the question whether the Bible is a vanishing mediator in the arena of postcolonial studies, cf. recently Semeia 88.

17 Where a colonial reading would be informed by theories of the innate Western cultural superiority, privileging the male as subject and indigenous people, women and minorities as Other and in need of domination and control. Such readings were (are) reinforced by the replacement of indigenous readings and practices, deliberately biased representations of indigenous people, and the use of such exegetical strategies in commentary and discourse as which would serve to strengthen and legitimise imperial control. Hence, a colonial reading privileges the text over the living communities which interact with it, and it becomes a "frozen artifact" who needs expert readers to activate and re-present its meaning (cf. Kwok 1996, 212-213; Sugirtharajah 1998b, 15).

(Kwok) as well as the voices of protest or opposition in the texts (cf Sugirtharajah 1998a, 21). In the third place, it places the Bible or other religious text within the multi-scriptural contexts of diverse settings and so engenders “an advocacy of a wider hermeneutical agenda to place the study of sacred texts ... within the intersecting histories which constitute them” (Sugirtharajah 1998a, 23). Fourthly, it encourages and welcomes contributions from marginalized groups that have been neglected: the dalits, the indigenous peoples, the migrants, people in diaspora and in borderland, and especially women in these communities. And finally it learns from and debates with other hermeneutical frameworks, such as poststructuralism and postmodernism. Focusing on what it is not, it has also been added that postcolonial biblical criticism does not romanticise or idealise the poor, but further that it refuses to blame the victims. It is rather concerned with such social or other structures and institutions which foster and contribute to victimhood (Sugirtharajah 1998a, 22-23).

According to another advocate of postcolonial hermeneutics, it adheres to three important criteria. Firstly, postcolonial hermeneutics reintroduces *representation*, not in the mimetic sense but rather in recognising and assigning the once colonised their place in the chronicles of history, affirming their agency in the present. With the breakdown of earlier barriers, it is now acknowledged that those previously perceived to be on the periphery and margins are in fact in the center, too! Postcolonial hermeneutics also highlight the acquisition and propagating of a *new identity*, realising the importance of hybridity,<sup>18</sup> where identity is understood as hyphenated, fractured, multiple and multiplying, “a complex web of cultural negotiation and interaction, forged by imaginatively redeploying the local and the imported elements”.<sup>19</sup> Thirdly, postcolonial hermeneutics requires a different *reading posture*, aimed at exposing the relationship between ideas and power, language and power, and knowledge and power, and how these relationships prop up Western (read, hegemonic) texts, theories and learning (Sugirtharajah 1998a, 16-17).

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18 A concept popularised by Bhabha, as “a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once”, and so colonial otherness is situated in a separateness – between the colonialist Self and colonised Other – and not in a particular (essentialist) identity of either coloniser or colonised (cf Wan 2000, 110).

19 Moving away from the positivist and essentialist notions of “identity”, “consciousness” and “origin” (cf Carusi 1991, 100).

The intricate hermeneutical mapping exercises characteristic of traditional biblical scholarship, with their references to pre-critical, critical and post-critical approaches, or pre-modern, modern and postmodern eras, or author-centered, text-centered and reader-centered hermeneutics, are subverted by Sugirtharajah's insistence that from a colonial perspective only two categories are required and really make sense: colonial and postcolonial (1998b, 15), a distinction which notwithstanding its apparent simplicity and clarity, hides a vast set of ambiguities. This observation is subsumed in Segovia's use and further development of colonialism/imperialism to map biblical hermeneutics, when he situates postcolonialism amidst cultural studies but proceeds to plot biblical criticism, and its major foci, on and according to the postcolonial map, with interesting results (1998a, 56-63). After identifying three important foci or dimensions in biblical studies – texts, “texts” or readings of texts, and readers – Segovia aligns them with colonialism/imperialism and its historical development.

The study of ancient texts in relation to their socio-cultural context is placed within the larger dimension of an “omnipresent, inescapable and overwhelming sociopolitical reality ... of Empire” which assumed many forms during the time of the texts: Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek/Hellenistic and Roman. Modern readings of these texts are similarly situated amidst the overpowering and relentless presence of Empire, but in this context the reference is to the West, whether Europe or North America.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the focus on real readers and the producers of “texts” (or readings of texts) both inside and outside the dominant Western tradition takes place within the postcolonial Two-Thirds World and the neo-colonial West. In all three these dimensions questions of culture, ideology and power

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20 And here some caution is advised. Segovia identifies (with Sprinker and Walls respectively) three eras of Western imperialism – early imperialism, from the 15th through most of the 19th century, from Portugal, Spain and later England, France and the Netherlands; high imperialism from the end of the 19th through the middle of the 20th century from the UK; and late imperialism, since the end of formal colonialism but including its aftermath, with the USA being most prominent – and two major “waves” of Christian missionary movement, with the former predominantly Catholic (1492-1792) and focussed on the Americas, and the later Protestant-dominated wave, since 1792 in Africa, Asia and the remaining parts of the Americas. The first missionary surge coincided with early imperialism, and the second assisted in the move from early to high imperialism, and in its apex (monopoly capitalism) at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries (1998a, 59-59). For the ambivalency of the missionary enterprises, cf Gallagher (1996, 238-239, and her reference to work by L Sannah [sic, read Sanneh]).

becomes central to the postcolonial interpreter, and “postcolonial studies can function ... as an excellent model for cross-cultural studies in the discipline” (Segovia 1998a, 54).

Fernando Segovia, however, has gone far beyond this description of broad characteristics of postcolonial biblical criticism, and developed a set of constructive proposals, which he relates to other hermeneutical programmes. He advocates a hermeneutical model of otherness and engagement, which views texts, readings of texts and their readers as others, not to bypassed, overwhelmed or manipulated but to be acknowledged, respected and engaged (Segovia 1995a). This he supplements by a reading strategy of intercultural criticism, which approaches texts, readings of texts and their readers as literary or aesthetic, rhetorical or strategic, and ideological or political products, which have to be analysed as well as critiqued in dialogue (Segovia 1995b). The textual posture of intercultural criticism he later defines as a strategy of “reading across”, attempting to break with the scientific reading strategies’ characteristic competitiveness, hierarchy, empiricism and objectivism (Segovia 2000c).

Postcolonial biblical criticism is concerned to point out the broader scene of cultural production in and around the Bible, implicating the Bible. But as their partners in rereading the Bible in the postmodern world, postcolonial biblical critics cannot afford to turn a blind eye to criticism raised against this project by Marxist critics. Whether the accusation from the latter, namely that postcolonial critics emphasise cultural production to the detriment of social formation, is true or not, postcolonial critics cannot neglect the investigation of the “material base or social formation of the Bible” (cf Segovia 2000a, 136-40). As much as the focus in postcolonial biblical criticism is on flesh-and-blood readers, it is not acceptable to negate or relativise the value of historical, literary and socio-cultural investigations of the Bible. This is the case even if it is agreed that such investigations need to admit to their aesthetic, strategic and political settings, and open these settings up for dialogue in and with the wider arena of biblical studies.

Postcolonial biblical studies would certainly want to avoid the perception of being merely a new kid on the block, little more than a novelty or the latest fad, as much as it would go against the grain of its own origins and genealogy to suggest itself as a centripetal force, or a valid refuge for all subversive (i.e. non-traditional) approaches. Not only would it then lose much of its *raison d’être*, its characteristic focus, its ability to show up – identify and provide

alternative readings of – the colonial, imperial and hegemonic, but it would also falsely claim more than it can deliver. The temptation for postcolonial biblical studies to posture itself as an all-inclusive concept capable of accommodating all ideological critical readings is real but should be avoided. As various scholars lay claim to the nomenclature it does not yet have a particular focus, operating according to such scholars' different philosophical, theoretical constellations and ideological agendas, including modernism, poststructuralist postmodernism and postcolonial postmodernism (cf Segovia 2000c, 68). On the other hand, postcolonial biblical studies can position itself intertextually as a dialogue partner with other “subjugated discourses” such as gender studies, queer studies, race studies and the like. Although the ethics of interpretation does not explicitly occupy much time in the writing of postcolonial biblical critics, they indeed are most concerned with autobiography,<sup>21</sup> overtly for the sake of positionality (situating themselves and others) but also for the sake of hermeneutical up-frontness, intellectual honesty and, as a matter of fact, for the sake of ethical responsibility and accountability.

With postcolonial criticism resisting a final or exhaustive description, but following up on these broad characteristics of such reading strategies, three important elements of postcolonial biblical hermeneutics in the South African context can be listed.

### **3. Elements of Postcolonial Hermeneutics: Textuality and Postcolonial Politics**

[T]extuality is endemic to the colonial encounter (Gandhi 1998, 142).

It is widely accepted, as Gandhi also argues, that texts – documents, books, and literature of various kinds – played an important role in the colonial endeavour. “Imperial relations may have been established initially by guns, guile and disease, but they were maintained in their interpellative phase largely by textuality” (Lawson and Tiffin, in Gandhi 1998, 142). The use of the Bible in the colonial enterprise in Southern Africa, as elsewhere, formed

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21 Autobiographical biblical criticism becomes particularly profitable when it is conceived of as being in dialogue with the biblical text, and where the latter transforms and enlarges the horizon of the reader. But autobiographical criticism also acts as “provisional monologue” which invites replies from other readers from other locations, while the inviting self creates space for others in their alterity (Brett 1998, 313-314).

part of colonial textual politics, although the Bible has in the process become a “vanishing mediator” (cf Boer 2001, 1-12). Its continuing presence today is often inadequately accounted for, or neglected altogether in the resulting discourses and practices it was powerful enough to instigate, in whole or in part, in the first place. Colonial discourse presents itself as a system of instrumental ideas, “an inter-textual network of interests and meanings implicated in the social, political and institutional contexts of colonial hegemony” (Said, in Gandhi 1998, 143), in which the Bible featured prominently as religious text with strong moral overtones.<sup>22</sup> This inter-textual network of interests and meanings came to re-inscribe the world upon which the colonial powers descended, in an attempt both to comprehend and to exert comprehensive control.<sup>23</sup> Such re-inscription entailed the self-definition of Empire through self-representation and narrative sensibility, but simultaneously described the colonised context and peoples accordingly. The result was not only an exalted self-image and *carte blanche* for the colonising endeavour,<sup>24</sup> but also the attendant, inverse depiction of the colonised in aberrant terms.

Recognition of the importance of textuality in colonial enterprises, and also in their continuing legacies, requires of the biblical scholar to deal with the scriptural texts with regard to their implication in hegemonic practices. The nature of the Bible as document, as metaphor for Christianity (and lifestyle), as icon and as fetish (cf Punt 2001, 64-67) have to be considered alongside the ambiguity and ambivalence of and within the biblical texts, which are at once oppressive texts-of-terror (Trible) and also liberative and empowering discourses for many today.

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22 Even if the “‘English text’ effectively replaced the Bible – and thereby, the evangelical ambitions of Christian missionaries – to become the most influential medium for the colonial civilising mission” (Gandhi 1998, 144).

23 Against Said who argues that colonial discourse is all-powerful, Bhabha reasons that it is inherently unstable, ambiguous and fractured (Wan 2000, 110).

24 But it of course also served as disguise for the material purposes of colonialism through its purported “disinterested humanist commitment to the pedagogic enlightenment of their subjects”, which served as “a mask for economic exploitation” (Gandhi 1998, 145, quoting Viswanathan).

### 3.1 *The status of the texts*

[C]olonialism dominates and determines the interest of the biblical texts, and we could reasonably describe the Bible as a colonial document (Sugirtharajah 1998a, 19).

The status and the nature of the Bible as a literary, as well as a cultural product (cf Kwok 1996, 212), and its complicity in the colonial and imperial projects of the past as reflected in its texts, deserve as much attention as its later profitable use in legitimising colonisation. In its texts, the Bible gives evidence of its agency in its own embodiment and sanctioning of imperialist intent as claimed by Sugirtharajah above, as well as being the casualty of the imperialism of others. In fact, the two probably most prominent New Testament personae – Jesus and Paul, prominent also in their experience of Roman imperialism – are often quoted for their apparent strategy of acquiescence to the Empire or at best for avoiding explicit critique of the Empire. Revolt or other practical measures for its destruction are never held out as options in biblical texts, with many concluding therefore that the Bible is no less than a colonial text in character<sup>25</sup> (cf Sugirtharajah 1998a, 19-20; cf Tamez 1996, 203-205).

An investigation of the formation of the biblical texts and ultimately the biblical canon, requires more than just an investigation and analysis of the historically layered development of the text as found in historical approaches, and have to deal with the importance of cultural materialist assumptions. Such assumptions include that “texts are implicated in their economic and political contexts” and that “all literature is symptomatic of, and responsive to, historical conditions of repression and recuperation” (Gandhi 1998, 141-142). It is ironic, but also useful, that attention to postcolonial criticism of *current* political-economic and cultural relations allows for the identification of layers in the ancient biblical literature, as the products of an emerging struggle for domination and authority (Horsley 2000, 153). Clearly, when it is admitted that colonising elements were present during the production of the texts (Berquist 1996, 32-33; Kwok 1996, 213; Tamez 1996, 204), the status of the texts and the nature of the

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25 So for example Peskowitz argues that the Bible “cannot be separated from an imperial history and its attendant occupations and displacements, its degradations and pain” (1996, 192). And, “[a]lthough the Bible’s democratization was greatly enhanced by translations into vernaculars, it remained confined in elite secrecy” (Brenner 2000, 11).

Bible as authoritative or authorising document(s), as well as the ambivalence of both the texts as such and the Bible, form part of a postcolonial agenda for biblical studies.

I would argue that in this regard, at least three distinct but related sets of investigations are required. A postcolonial study of the history of the formation of the texts and ultimately the canon as imperialist construct, would concern itself with their layered nature, and will relate these to the dominant (dominating?) interests of the time. But secondly, a focus on the history of the presentation of the texts and that ultimate symbol, *the Bible*, in the Southern African context will lead to the investigation of the ways in which and the reasons why it soon attained authoritative status.<sup>26</sup> A valuable and informative framework for such studies is provided when the text is seen as Other (e.g. Segovia; McDonald), and when this framework is heuristically combined with views of the canon as prototype rather than archetype (e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza), or even as “diasporic adventure” (Kwok).<sup>27</sup> And finally, postcolonial biblical studies have to cross the boundaries of the canon, leading to a transversal look at the biblical text (Tamez 1996, 205). Multiscripturality demands not only the discovery and creation of different texts but also the coming to terms with other religious texts on different levels (cf. Punt 2001).

However, if in the framing of postcolonial hermeneutics it is in the final instance not concerned with the “truth of the text” but rather with the central issue of the texts’ promotion of colonial ideology (Sugirtharajah 1998a, 19), its usefulness on the African continent where the Bible is still highly valued for many reasons, becomes a concern. If the Bible is studied only for identifying “those intrinsic textual features which embody colonial codes”, and when the value of studying these texts for their own sakes or for theological and spiritual inspiration are secondary at best, it remains a question whether postcolonial hermeneutics are not short-circuiting itself, in

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26 Studies on the “Word-of-God” theologies in Africa already points in this direction. Cf. the debate on the Bible as “Word of God” in the African context (e.g. Punt 1998, espec. 272-276); Kwok (1996, 213) on the “apolitical reification” of the Bible as Word of God.

27 Where the canon and texts are no longer “fixed, stable and privileged points of origin” (Kwok 1996, 213).

Africa, but also elsewhere.<sup>28</sup> Should the rehabilitation of biblical texts relevant to a reading practice shaped by interlocking concerns such as self-determination, ethnicity, migration and other such themes, not also include a rereading on theological and spiritual level, in light of past and remaining imperial tendencies in this regard? Given the complicity of religion and, in particular, Christianity in the discourse and practices of Western colonialism and imperialism, and the powerful role accorded to the Bible in all this, is it advisable to focus on the colonial codes only in the texts?

### 3.2 *Texts and their interpretative traditions*

Is the Bible imperialist *per se*, a colonial document at heart, or do its readers construct and construe it imperialistically? Are the biblical texts documents *of colonialism* or documents *for colonialism*? Is it the texts themselves that are inherently colonial, or are the traditions of their interpretation to blame, traditions which are the heirs of a religion which became since the fourth century more and more aligned with the Empire and imperial powers, not least of which the institutionalised church?<sup>29</sup> It is, in fact, ironical that the Bible is claimed as the foundational document of Western Christianity – and often in the same breath, for Western “civilisation” – and so becomes a document legitimising Empire. The biblical documents were not only crafted by people who were historically subject to a Western Empire, but these documents proclaim a new political order, inaugurated by God to replace the existing Roman, imperial order (Horsley 1998, 155). Without prematurely absolving the texts of the accusations of their implicit colonialist or at least imperialist stance regarding issues of gender, slavery and sexual orientation, in particular, their interpretive histories demand at least equal attention from a postcolonial optic, analysis and engagement.

Biblical studies is probably the best place to start such an inquiry, since it is itself an area of study which is the product of Western imperial culture, heavily influenced by imperial discourse, indicated by its virtual silencing or

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28 Whereas postcolonial biblical studies indeed intends to address, among others, the gulf between the academic study of the Bible and “the needs of Christians around the world” (Warrior 1996, 207).

29 Is this not what Sugirtharajah (1998a, 21-22) is in fact admitting to, when he renders different, anti-imperial readings of the parable of the tenants (Lk 20:9-19) and of the blind man at Bethsaida (Mk 8:24)? Cf also Gallagher (1996, 238) on the same postcolonial ambivalence of biblical mission texts.

at best submerging of imperial subjected people, and its restriction of the wide-ranging aspects of biblical literature to a religious dimension only. Western individualism placed further demands for a particular form of its fabricated monolithic religious focus on the Bible, and imposed its super-structural processes of the formation of identity and “othering” on its contents. The resultant interpretation was dependent upon dichotomies such as parochial-political, legalistic-ritualistic Judaism versus universal and spiritual Christianity, with its derivatives such as Hellenistic versus Jewish and wisdom versus apocalyptic. Concomitant to the spiritual emphasis was the depoliticisation of the biblical documents, their *personae* and their authors (Horsley 1998, 154-155). The restrictions imposed by the dominance of such a perverted history of interpretation with its Augustinian-Lutheran essentialist, individualist and depoliticised approach to the Pauline literature has been pointed out before (cf Punt 2002, 125-132). Once this legacy is pushed aside in the Pauline letters, however, it is possible to connect three aspects of decolonising cultural resistance to Paul’s letters which are already characterised by his uncompromising anti-imperial stance and programme. The restoration of the colonised community, and his earlier defense of Judaism<sup>30</sup> was an attempt to maintain the traditional way of life in the adverse conditions of imperial rule. Secondly, an alternative way of conceiving human history was made possible by Paul’s apocalyptic sensibilities, and finally, a more integrative view of human community and liberation was foreseen in the Pauline thrust towards the formation of communities aimed at creating an international, anti-imperialistic alternative society (Horsley 1998, 163-167).

The contention that the New Testament and especially Pauline documents call upon their readers “simply to endure in their belief in the return of Jesus, who will bring liberation to the tyrannized world” (Sugirtharajah 1998a, 20), is probably a more apt description of the ensuing tradition of biblical interpretation than to claim it as an wholly adequate reflection of the documents themselves. Again, this is not to argue against the ideologically-laden nature of biblical texts<sup>31</sup> or to suppose their neutrality (Sugirtharajah 1998a, 20), but to affirm the importance of readers and their traditions for interpreting (ancient) texts in an even more radical way. This is a strategic

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30 In this regard, however, cf Boyarin’s argument that Paul eventually and unduly trades the cultural-specific of Judaism for a universalist perspective (1994).

31 Not that everyone would agree that the ideology “sits in” the text; cf e g Fowl (1995, 15-34).

move and implies that the Bible may not uncritically be scapegoated for readerly practices of hegemony and imperialism as much as it cannot summarily be exonerated, and given a clean bill of moral health.

Again, is the opposition between the oppressive and liberative traditions encapsulated in the texts, or between the ambiguity of the texts and the imperialism of interpretive history(-ies)? Should one want to engage in alternative readings of the biblical texts, I would argue, one needs to move beyond the claim of the texts' *prima facie* inscription with colonialism. This implies realising the difficulty in removing the interpretive guise of the multi-layered tradition of history of interpretation from the texts and as a result the improbability of dealing with these texts and their interpretive histories in unadulterated format. In fact, "postcolonial discourse aims to emancipate previously submerged (colonized) histories and identities and, in the process, to reveal the complex hybridity and contingency of peoples in the contemporary world" (Horsley 1998, 155).

### *3.3 Rereading the texts: Proficient rediscovery and subversive rereading*

With its roots firmly in literary criticism, it is understandable that much of the postcolonial activity which took place in biblical studies of late, also focused on readings and interpretations of texts, and that it has therefore largely been employed as a new hermeneutical approach. Especially two broad strategies dominate the postcolonial hermeneutics within the discipline of biblical studies, namely a search for the marginalised or suppressed voices in, behind and below the text – what I have termed proficient discovery – and the formulation and implementation of subversive readings, or a deliberate inversion of the traditional reading and understanding of the biblical texts. Since the *modus operandi* of postcolonial biblical criticism is predisposed to a hermeneutics of suspicion rather than trust (Segovia 2000c, 62-63), it will probably be important to accommodate also a strategy of retrieval. The latter is capable of addressing ecclesial as well as spiritual-religious concerns and commitments, in order to make it resonate with African readings (trained and popular, but especially the latter) since these concerns and commitments were often the primary reason for disavowing a suspicion-based criticism.<sup>32</sup> These two strategies often

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32 Cf Barton's (1998, 16-19) argument on historical criticism's inherently suspicious and against-the-grain readings of ecclesially authorised readings of the Bible; although, he

overlap, and where the emphasis might initially be on the rediscovery of subjugated voices, it can end with an emphasis on subverting the traditional interpretation of the text, or, of course, the other way round.

Looking for hidden aspects previously neglected in the Canaanite woman's story, Dube (2000, 127-195) provides a close, counter-reading of the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28, to hear her voice – and that of Rahab (Matt 1:5) – above that of the imperialist constructs of the implied author, and his quest for power (152). With her sophisticated rereading, Dube asserts that the stance of Matthew's implied author towards the Roman Empire is largely positive, preferring them as holy and acceptable over against the local religious leaders, and furthermore, that Matthew's account of Jesus' mission is imperialist, sanctioning authoritative travelers and reducing all nations to obedient student disciples of Jesus. This involves not only a cultural imposition but also support for political and economic submission to the Empire, elements that at the time were interlinked with the religious (140-141). Describing the encounter in Matt 15 as a "type-scene of land-possession" (144) she argues that Matthew's implied author all along meant to legitimise the Christian mission based upon subjugation (148). After evaluating and criticising Western male (158-169) and (certain) feminist readings (169-184), Dube argues that the approach of women in African Independent Churches amounts to liberating interdependence (184-195). An evaluation of Dube's decolonising feminist approach deserves attention, but for our purposes here it suffices to present her work as an example of how postcolonial biblical criticism seeks to rediscover neglected voices or elements in the biblical texts.<sup>33</sup>

In similar vein, it is argued that "[v]ernacular interpretation seeks to ... overcome the remoteness and strangeness of these biblical texts by trying to make links across the cultural divides by employing the reader's own cultural resources and social experiences to illuminate the biblical narratives" (Sugirtharajah 1999, 97) and so makes sense of imported and foreign

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argues, the historical readings have been subverted over time through their inclusion in ecclesial life.

33 Many more examples can be tabulated, but for the similar gospel narrative in Mk 7:23-30, cf Perkinson (1996, 61-85).

concepts, spatially and temporally through indigenous resources, texts, and concepts.<sup>34</sup>

An important and related concern in the rereading of texts focused on proficient rediscovery is the “topographical trope” (Gallagher 1996, 233-235), which is in the Southern African situation of historical land-dispossessions and current land claims and land restorations perhaps even more pertinent than elsewhere. Since nineteenth-century colonialism, unlike today’s global economic focus, entailed the physical appropriation of land and the displacement of indigenous people from the land they identified with in more than one way, “[s]patiality joins temporality as a primary structure of thought and analysis in postcolonial theory” (Gallagher 1996, 233). Map-making – with the emphasis on its nature as construction of space and in the colonial period construction of what was believed to be empty space – led to imperial impositioning, extending and defining colonial control. The supposedly rational endeavour of scientifically evidenced map-making was seen to reinforce both the biblical texts, and more importantly its colonial readings, which often amounted to the securing of Western privilege and the domination of the indigenous. “As discursive symbols, maps both represent and embody power” (Gallagher 1996, 235).

A recent example of how the traditional line of interpretation of a biblical text is subverted through a postcolonial reading, is found in Sugirtharajah’s proposed inversion of the father-son roles as traditionally portrayed in parable of Prodigal Son (1998a, 96-97). The father turns from being a benevolent patriarch into an overpowering tyrant who refuses the individuality of his own son and delights in his failure. The value of such a reading is in its subversion of the acclaim bestowed upon Asian family life and its promotion as superior in fostering industriousness and discipline, while it in fact smothers freedom and individuality.

However, while a postcolonial reading attempts to deconstruct the colonial interpretation and to simultaneously forge an alternative approach to texts, it has to remain ever alert of the “continuing, even if transformed, power” of

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34 Sugirtharajah (1999, 98-103) provides a brief overview of the three different cultural categories or elements used in vernacular readings: ideational or conceptual correspondences; parallels on the level of performative actions; and, material elements, especially in the form of literary content and genres, included in narrative enrichments.

colonialism and imperialism, and their strategies and tactics<sup>35</sup> (Segovia (1998a, 51 n2). And such recognition of the inherent danger in postcolonial biblical criticism to “re-colonise” the Bible, its readers and the guild raises the question to what extent postcolonialism can operate in a setting where it is “business as usual”.

### 3.4 “Colonial mimicry”? *Using the master’s tools indeed!*

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 which is sought after, as a multiplicity of meanings are acknowledged from the outset. This includes the revaluating of the little traditions (Meeks), the hidden transcripts (Scott) of the disadvantaged, marginalised and displaced, in other words, the Other embodied in women and minorities. Segovia emphasises that a move beyond an essentialist notion of text *vis-à-vis* meaning is required, since it is not texts which contain meaning, waiting to be discovered, but meaning is properly viewed as being constructed in the text-reader interaction.

The readings of postcolonial biblical critics are generally illustrative of “colonial mimicry”,<sup>36</sup> firstly in the sense of appearing to avail themselves of the “political and semantic imperatives of colonial discourse”, which in biblical studies would mean using the stock in trade hermeneutical tools of the established (read: imperial) academy. To some extent, postcolonial biblical studies and commentary is not about the construction of new methodologies as much as about reinventing the tools of the trade, while

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35 In general, postcolonial biblical studies questions the ideals and principles of Enlightenment-based biblical studies, as embodied in the notions of “the character of biblical studies as *science* and the use of the *scientific* method; the nature of *history*; the possibility of *value-free* observation; the role of the *rational, disinterested* researcher; the notion of *progress*” (Segovia 2000a, 39).

36 A concept which at once indicates “the ethical gap between the normative vision of post-Enlightenment civility and its distorted colonial (mis)imitation”, and also becomes the “sly weapon of anti-colonial civility, and ambivalent mixture of deference and disobedience”. Gandhi suggests that traces of Harold Bloom’s (literary) notion of the *anxiety of influence*, where the “beginning poet” struggles in Oedipal fashion against the “crippling influence of powerful literary ‘forefathers’” (and the gender specification is intended), are found in Bhabha use of colonial mimicry (Gandhi 1998, 149).

abrogating their hegemonic elements. However, some traditional approaches in biblical studies might have to be consigned to the past, or alternatively might have to be so fundamentally altered as to no longer resemble their original vantage point, reasoning and format. Remaining claims to these approaches might serve only a final defiant, hegemonic purpose of claiming academic validity on their perceived institutional status – in other words, retaining and maintaining academic privilege and power. This would of course apply in particular to such hermeneutical paradigms and models that are reliant upon a Cartesian model of truth and reason. In the second place, colonial mimicry is also, and simultaneously, present among postcolonial biblical critics through recurrent attempts to “systematically [misrepresent] the foundational assumptions of this discourse by articulating it ... ‘syntagmatically with a range of differential knowledges and positionalities that both estrange its “identity” and produce new forms of knowledge, new modes of differentiation, new sites of power” (Bhabha, in Gandhi 1998, 150).<sup>37</sup>

Mimicry is about the indispensable and many-sided hermeneutical and translational activities through which the transition from colonial vocabulary to its anti-colonial use is achieved, exemplified in postcolonial biblical studies by the rereadings which invert the traditional readings and understandings, and recognise the suppressed voices in and around the texts. Mimicry is not postcolonial revenge, epistemological and cultural revenge of previously excluded or marginal voices, but postcolonial approaches readjust its target to “diversify its mode of address and learn to speak more adequately to the world which it speaks for”, and to “acquire the capacity to facilitate a democratic colloquium between the antagonistic inheritors of the colonial aftermath” (cf Gandhi 1998, x). Postcolonial studies along with other liberatory approaches will, of course, want to avoid the accusation of enacting the mimetic desire of empire.

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<sup>37</sup> Some postcolonial literary critics refuse the syncretism and hybridity inherent to mimicry, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o therefore decided to write only in his native Gikuyu. Ngugi’s approach is often compared to that of Raja Rao who continues to use English in his work, and so subverts the supremacy of imperial textuality while simultaneously denying any invocation of an authentic or essential nativism (in his case, Indian-ness). Rao’s approach is not without danger, since from without the anti-colonial writer is co-opted for a critique of “third world cultural nationalism” (Gandhi 1998, 151).

#### 4. Conclusion

A contemporary critical practice must retain the right to adapt, adulterate, amalgamate and parody any theories in its struggle to achieve a coherent understanding in a pluralistic world (Sugirtharajah 1999, 110).

Some critics are very optimistic about the potential, use and value of postcolonial studies, sometimes positing it as the last available counter-discourse, which can be “conceptualized as the last bulwark against an encroaching total capitalism” (Gugelberger 1994, 584). Globalisation<sup>38</sup> is evidently about more than globality, and is often described as “neo-capitalism” or neo-colonisation, operating through the agency of institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. Globalisation is politically present in a debt-ridden Two-Thirds World or “developing” countries along with images of their starving populations,<sup>39</sup> economically displayed in radical dog-eat-dog capitalism and structural adjustment programmes in Two Third-world economies, and culturally perceived in the global expansion of Western brand names, ranging from restaurants and soft drink companies to clothing. Globalisation has become a “soft ideology” (Bosch 1995, 20) with harsh results for Africa and other Two-Third worlds.<sup>40</sup> It will continue to be the task of religion scholars, among others, to find new and other ways of “defining human worth and social relationships”, characteristic of critical practices as Sugirtharajah argued above. One major achievement claimed for postcolonialism is its contribution towards the inauguration of “a new era of academic inquiry”, which allows for the

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38 Potter lists the following characteristics of the global economic system: it is capitalist; it is not accountable to any entity; it presupposes a core and periphery; it “naturally breeds unrest and the struggle for an economic order which is more genuinely liberating and just” (1993, 16-19). A corner-stone of this system is the “gospel of competitiveness”; where the ruthlessness and brutality of the system is clearly seen (Potter 1993, 19-21).

39 The use of the term *postcolonial* has been questioned against the backdrop of the economic dependency of otherwise political independent – postcolonial – states (Avalos 1996, 87, 102).

40 However, the religion of the market is already showing signs that it fails to deliver for the vast majority of people, even in the US, which has the highest rate of poverty among developed countries, at twice the average rate. Although more state involvement in welfare programmes is noticeable since the 1930's, it lags far behind other developed countries (Lipset 1996, 71-75).

scrutiny of various interrelated and overlapping concerns such as empire, nation, ethnicity, migration and language (Sugirtharajah 1998b, 16).

At its widest level of conception and application, postcolonial biblical studies is confirmation that biblical interpretation has always been influenced by reigning and dominant cultural values, that all interpretation subscribes to cultural codes, thought-patterns and the social location of its interpreter.<sup>41</sup> “[W]ithout conscious and committed attention to the entangling of biblical studies and colonial culture, Biblical Studies continues with these foundations, and continues within its colonial legacy” (Peskowitz 1996, 180). Like postcolonial studies, postcolonial biblical hermeneutics cannot be content to merely fit into the hegemonic discourses of “the academy”, but has to initiate change in structure and content, if not also epistemology.<sup>42</sup> “[P]ostcolonialism will continue to challenge the context and contours of biblical interpretation, and the existing notions and preconceptions of professional guilds and academics” (Sugirtharajah 1998b, 21). In this it will be important for postcolonial biblical hermeneutics to remain conscious of its origins, in order for it not to become or allow itself to be perceived as yet another derivative of the Cartesian post-Enlightenment, modernist project, and to rather align itself with the marginal and often “subjugated discourses” (Foucault) as well as anti-colonialist struggles of many peoples. The question is how do we *change* and not only subvert or *criticise* the current hegemony of imperialist theories and modes of reading the New Testament documents. Or, to ask the question differently, how do we minimise and eventually eradicate the epistemological violence of the colonial encounter, the legacy of which still lingers on in biblical studies?

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41 Cf the interesting examples from 8th-century Saxon poetry (Germanic chieftainship and Christology), and the more familiar examples of Anselm’s atonement theology (with a medieval peasant’s insult of the king as the reference), Luther’s reinterpretation of justification by faith (in the era of emerging individualism), and Bultmann’s existentialist interpretation (reacting to Heideggerian existentialism) (Sugirtharajah 1999, 104-105).

42 In order to counter the epistemic violence of colonisation. But, “[g]iven its poststructuralist inheritance, recent postcolonial critique tends to favour those varieties of counter-hegemonic anti-colonialisms which subvert rather than reverse the chronic oppositions of colonial discourse” (Gandhi 1998, 112).

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