A recent development in biblical scholarship is postcolonial biblical criticism. Postcolonial biblical criticism, at the risk of oversimplification, is a reading strategy that aims to open up critical discourses of emancipation by undoing language, historical narratives, and interpretations that are quintessentially colonial and oppressive. Such a strategy might analyze the word basileia as kingdom or empire in the Gospels or understand the crucifixion narrative as part of Roman imperial rule, or deconstruct an interpretation of the Bible employed during the colonization of South America or Africa. Postcolonial biblical criticism endeavors to understand the imperial-colonial framework at work in the worlds behind the text, in the text, and in front of the text. It challenges contemporary readers to avoid reinscribing the sin of colonialism through our own interpretations, homilies/sermons, communication of tradition, and even our pastoral relationships.

Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism often refers to a historical period following the independence of a colony from its colonizer. The term also references the sociopsychological effects of colonization and neo-colonization that is reflected in the minds of individuals and communities who are examining their colonial memories, identities, or state of being “Other” as a result of colonization. In the field of biblical studies, the term has been used both ways. Scholars examine the colonial features within the historical, imperial-colonial matrix of the text (e.g., imperial cult worship, the Pax Romana, Roman authority, and patriarchy) as well the literary and interpretative imperial-colonial production of the text (e.g., the use of colonial language such as legion, the role of the prefect Pontius Pilate, and even how the tradition has been used to demonize strangers).

The Significance of Postcolonialism

Postcolonial analysis is important for numerous reasons. First, postcolonialism provides those on the margins with a discourse to speak about their own experience. For example, in dealing with the issue of immigration, postcolonialism provides a lens for Latino/a scholars to analyze those
factors that shape migratory experience, factors like U.S. foreign-colonial policies (e.g., Monroe Doctrine, Manifest Destiny, NAFTA) that have had a direct impact upon immigrants’ nations of origin. Postcolonial analysis is a way to understand migrations as part of an imperial-colonial formation, rather than from an apolitical perspective.

Second, postcolonial studies have helped scholars from minority or marginalized communities address dominant constructions of their respective communities as “colonial scapegoats” for the political, social, and economic problems that may plague their particular contexts. It provides a way to speak about their “otherness” while insuring an agency that allows them to challenge these negative perceptions. For example, within the United States, postcolonial analysis challenges stereotypes in the media that portray immigrants as lazy, uneducated lawbreakers whose mere presence threatens the social fabric and economic well-being of the country. Postcolonial analysis turns these perceptions upside down by unmasking the false assumptions that ground colonial constructions of the “Other.” At the same time, postcolonialism seeks to insure that “non-Western” people can exercise their voice, in their own language—and that their perspectives matter.

Third, postcolonialism reveals how imperialism and colonialism have historically played a major role in portraying “non-Western” peoples as inferior, childlike, incapable of ruling themselves, and therefore in need of patronizing rule for their own good as well as in the best interest of the “West.” In the case of the United States, it provides a means of making sense of the geopolitical situation of this country vis-à-vis the rest of the world. To understand Iraq today, for example, one also needs to comprehend it from an imperial-colonial point of view. At the turn of the twentieth century the “Western” colonial powers, using organized violence, began to subjugate Iraq while inserting a colonial system of governance. To understand the history of Central America, one needs to investigate U.S. economic and political interests from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries, with particular attention to the 1980s. To understand the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, one needs to be aware of the centuries of colonial and contemporary neocolonial relationships between the United States and Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic.

**Postcolonialism and Biblical Studies**

With regard to the discipline of biblical studies, postcolonialism matters for a variety of reasons. First, in the history of European and American colonial enterprises, biblical interpretation not only failed to take into account the perspectives of those being evangelized, but at times the Bible was used to justify the violent subjugation of encountered peoples. From the Spanish conquest of the Americas to European colonization of Africa and Asia, the use of the Christian Bible to colonize, enslave, and even disperse peoples across the globe is well documented. In the history of Asia, particularly India, R. S. Sugirtharajah has shown how Indians were taught and trained to read the Bible as British Christians in order to conform them to a presumed Anglo normative Christian understanding of truth and justice.

Postcolonialism contests these dominant, imperial, and colonial interpretations of Scripture and proposes readings from different perspectives. How is the Bible used, interpreted, and received by those who are enslaved, colonized, or subjugated and by their descendants? Postcolonial critiques challenge those shaped by “Western” worldviews, both in the church and in education, to heed these other interpretations from these other worlds in front of the texts and to take them seriously.
Second, the elements of imperialism-colonialism are surely present in the historical periods reflected in the literary development of the Hebrew Bible. This is evident during the period of Early Israel in terms of the relationship between the Egyptian empire vis-à-vis the Hebrew people and again during the period of the conquest of the Canaanites and the settlement of their lands. The era of the Monarchy exhibits imperial-colonial elements as does Israel’s rise to power as an empire/kingdom. Israel experiences imperial conquests by the Babylonians and later by the Assyrians. Finally, during the period of Early Judaism, the ramifications of the Babylonian conquest and the subsequent exile, the return and restoration of Jerusalem within the context of the Persian Empire, and the rise of Hellenism within the context of imperial rule by the Seleucids invite postcolonial readings of the Hebrew Bible. Even from a sociopsychological point of view, the role of colonial memory and the colonial construction of identity of the other are embedded within the historical matrix of these biblical texts as well as in the history of their interpretations.

Third, the New Testament was composed during the Roman colonial period. In so doing many imperial-colonial markers are featured in the text and in the language of the text. These markers pertain to the economic, political, and cultural Roman system and ways of thinking. Postcolonialism calls attention to these markers and points to the colonial formulations embedded in the texts as well as in particular readings of these texts. Such a reading strategy raises questions about the appropriateness of these constructions for contemporary audiences.

In conclusion, postcolonialism challenges the way we read and the methods we use to engage ancient texts. It involves a reorientation toward the perspectives, experiences, knowledge, and interpretations of those who have been marginalized especially by centuries of colonization, with effects that linger long past independence. Postcolonial critiques manifest a commitment to transforming conditions of oppression by giving voice to subalterns, that is, peoples whose experiences of subordination limit their full participation in their respective contexts. Most important, postcolonialism challenges the privileging of hermeneutics emanating from the “West” and counters the fallacy that these other perspectives have nothing to offer the church and the world.

For all these reasons, postcolonialism matters. It is a cluster of perspectives that allows those who never qualify as the norm to create a space and to speak with authority. It encourages those who have been marginalized or colonized over the centuries to continue to ask the question “Who am I?” and to respond in their own words rather than having the colonizers tell them who they are. Finally, it is a way to read texts that shifts momentum from imposing imperial theologies that subjugate toward constructing theologies that aim for decolonization and liberation for all of God’s people.

References


