

Postcolonial Reading of The Bible: (Evangelical) Friend or Foe?¹

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Abstract

Reading the Bible through a postcolonial lens has become today's trend in biblical hermeneutics. It triggers pros and cons within the evangelical circle. Is it friend or foe? Rather than uncritically accepting or refusing it, the article chooses a middle way, being "open but cautious" toward it. The article assumes that every reading method has its strengths and weaknesses and, thus, it can offer valuable things. Applying the content analysis theory, the author finds that a postcolonial biblical reading is somehow relevant to a contextual and transformative biblical reading, regardless of its multiple problems. It enables the readers to be self-critical, context-sensitive, and practical in faith-life integration. The article concludes that postcolonial reading of the Bible can be both (evangelical) friend *and* foe.

Keywords: postcolonialism, evangelicalism, biblical, interpretation

Membaca Alkitab melalui lensa pascakolonial telah menjadi tren hermeneutika alkitabiah saat ini. Ini memicu pro dan kontra di kalangan Injili. Apakah itu teman atau musuh? Alih-alih menerima atau menolaknya tanpa kritik, artikel ini memilih jalan tengah, "terbuka tetapi berhati-hati" terhadapnya. Artikel ini berasumsi bahwa setiap metode membaca memiliki kelebihan dan kekurangannya masing-masing sehingga dapat menawarkan hal-hal yang berharga. Dengan menerapkan teori analisis isi, penulis menemukan bahwa pembacaan biblia pascakolonial entah bagaimana relevan dengan pembacaan alkitabiah yang kontekstual dan transformatif, terlepas dari berbagai masalahnya. Hal ini memungkinkan pembaca untuk menjadi kritis terhadap diri sendiri, peka dengan konteks, dan praktis dalam integrasi kehidupan iman. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa pembacaan Alkitab pascakolonial dapat menjadi teman dan musuh (Injili).

Kata-kata Kunci: pascakolonial, Injili, biblia, interpretasi

¹ This article is a re-writing version of the author's paper "Postcolonial Reading of the Bible: An (Asian) Indonesian Evangelical Friend or Foe?" presented in 2017 ATA Theological Consultation, "The Calling of an Asian Biblical Scholar/Theologian: Challenges Facing Asian Evangelicals Today," Southeast Asia Bible Seminary, Malang, Indonesia, July 18-20, 2017.

Introduction

Postcolonial discourse has become a trending theme in the intellectual arena for the past two decades. It generated new theoretical and methodological dimensions within various fields of study, such as arts, literature, music, history, socio-politics, economics, education, and religious studies. Consequently, this outcome has drawn attention and responses from many Christian scholars. They discussed, researched, and published works on how the theme relates to their fields of study.² Since identity, migration, and gender issues are continuously pertinent to today's Global South contexts, discussions on such a subject remain significant.

However, the postcolonial discourse has set off pros and cons within the evangelical circle. Some evangelicals agreed to use it as an optic to deal with many subjects in Christian studies. They used it to explore evangelical theological stances and practical engagements in politics, society, and economics. Through this perspective, they proposed to challenge and resist empire ideologies that were once associated with them.³ In the same vein, another group of evangelicals initiated a new conversation regarding the significance of postcolonial discourse for evangelicalism.⁴

Conversely, some other evangelicals are cautious about it. It is due to the postcolonial minimalist (low) view of the Bible. They believed that total commitment to postcolonial hermeneutics of suspicion (suspecting the scripture) might imply a denial of evangelical commitments to a high view of the scripture.⁵ In the same vein, others are concerned about its

²Particularly in main areas in Christian studies such as Christian philosophy, theology, biblical studies, hermeneutics, homiletics, worship and liturgies, education, and missions.

³In some parts of the world, evangelicals or, generally Christians, were often associated with the western imperialism or white domination. Bruce E. Benson and Peter G. Heltzel, eds., *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to Political Status Quo* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).

⁴Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and L. Daniel Hawk, eds., *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014). In other settings, some addressed issues within different subjects using the same lens. Cf. Randy Woodley and Bo C. Sanders, *Decolonizing Evangelicalism: An 11:59 pm Conversation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020); Kathryn J. Smith, "From Evangelical Tolerance to Imperial Prejudice?1 Teaching Postcolonial Biblical Studies in a Westernized, Confessional Setting," *Christian Scholar's Review* 37 (2008): 447-464; Norlan Hernández, "Nurturing the Tenets of a Latin American Evangelical Ecclesiology," *Journal of Latin America Theology* 16, no. 1 (2021): 111-147.

⁵Gene Green, "A Response to the Postcolonial Roundtable: Promises, Problems and Prospects," *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and L. Daniel Hawk, eds. (Downers

subjective approach, giving the readers much freedom to respond to the text through global (empire) readings.⁶ In the Indonesian context, evangelical scholars seem to attend this position. They are not interested in such a discourse,⁷ especially in using a postcolonial lens to interpret the Bible.

This article evades the above polarization by taking a middle way. The rationale is that a postcolonial biblical reading strategy has some positive or valuable things to offer. Being open but critical to it, this article contests to claim that this reading strategy can be both “friend and foe” for evangelical biblical scholars. Regardless of a few limitations, they may utilize such a reading as a hermeneutical tool for a contextual and transformative biblical reading.

Method

The article utilizes a method adapted from the content analysis scheme. Krippendorff defines such an analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matters) to the contexts of their use.”⁸ Based on this approach, the article attempts to find an explanation concerning postcolonial biblical reading from available resources, guided by sets of questions, and view them within their writing contexts and the author’s understanding. Further, it strives to make related inferences from the text(s) to discover description(s) to be analyzed. The article applies the approach’s framework to the availability of the elements analyzed in table 1.⁹

Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 19-28; Cf. Craig S. Keener, “Scripture and Context: An Evangelical Response,” *The Asbury Journal* 70, no. 1 (2015):17-62.

⁶ Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008), 240-242. Cf. Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 22-27; and Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (2nd ed.; Regnum Studies in Mission; Oxford: Regnum, 2014), xiv.

⁷ Resources on postcolonial discourses are only available in the region through the works of non-evangelicals: Martin L. Sinaga, *Identitas Poskolonial “Gereja Suku dalam Masyarakat Sipil (Postcolonial Identity of Tribal Church in Civil Society)* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2004); Mudji Soetrisno dan Hendar Putranto, *Hermeneutika Pascakolonial (Postcolonial Hermeneutics)* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2008); Robertus Wijanarko, “Poskolonialisme and Studi Teologi,” *Studia Philosophica et Theologica* 8, no. 2 (2008): 123-33; and Danang Kristiawan, “Interpretasi Alkitab Postkolonial di Asia: Belajar dari Sugirtharajah,” *Gema Teologi* 33, no. 1 (2009): 1-21.

⁸ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 2nd Edition (London-New Delhi: SAGE, 2004), 18.

⁹ Krippendorff, 29-40.

Table 1. Approaches Framework to the Availability of the elements

Framework	Available Elements
Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Works of postcolonial and evangelical literature
Research Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why do many evangelical biblical scholars not deal with this subject? Why did they seem reluctant to deal with or even reject postcolonialism? Is there anything positive or valuable about it? Is it a friend or foe?
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Postcolonialism and Evangelicalism in Global South
Analytical Construct	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Author’s familiarity with both postcolonial and evangelical sets of knowledge
Inferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The interpretation of the postcolonial texts guided by the raised questions
Validating Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• (Not available due to the nature of the article: not involving observational evidence)

The article has been organized in the following way. First, it explores postcolonial criticisms, theories, and applications to biblical studies to glimpse the core issue. Second, it analyzes postcolonial biblical criticism en route to show its benefits and dangers from an evangelical standpoint. The analysis also covers different aspects of biblical hermeneutics, such as methodological, theological, and practical issues. Lastly, it attempts to decide and conclude on whether evangelical biblical scholars will benefit from the postcolonial approach or not. In general, the article will respond to postcolonial biblical criticism’s challenges into contemporary evangelical biblical scholarship.

Result and Discussion

Postcolonial Theory: A Brief Discussion

Postcolonial biblical criticism has its roots in postcolonial theory.¹⁰ The theory presumes that human beings are locked up in history and

¹⁰ The author will interchangeably use the term with “postcoloniality,” “post-colonialism,” “postcolonial studies,” and “postcolonial criticism” for they all contain the same substance, things related to “what follows and questions the colonial” (See Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera, eds., *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* [St. Lois: Chalice, 2004], 6). Accordingly, the prefix “post” here is not simply meant “after” but also “the multiplicity of (oppressor-oppressed) conflicting and frequently parallel narratives.” See J. Jorge Klor de Alva, “The Postcolonization of the [Latin] American Experience: A Consideration of “Colonization,” “Postcolonialism,” and “Mestizaje” in *After Colonialism, Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, ed. Gyan Prakash (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 245.

strongly affected by their socio-political, economic, and cultural cataclysm. It believes in the continuing tensions of the binaries, such as the powerful-the powerless, the oppressor-the oppressed, the colonizer-the colonized, and other binary strains. Postcolonialism reacts toward colonialism and assumes that the colonizers conquered the land and indigenous people through power(s) and force. They subjugated and exploited land and people through all means to establish control, dominance, and welfare. The advent of modern democracy and human rights—championing freedom, equities, and rights—ended imperialism and colonialism, particularly after World War II (after 1945). As a result, many free and independent Afro-Asian nations have emerged.¹¹

Although colonialism seems to be over, yet its negative impacts remain alive. Not all people in the above free and independent nations tasted the sweet fruits of liberation, especially in countries affected by destructive colonial legacies in the post-independence eras such as those in Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, Oceania, and other parts of the globe. They carried on their historical burden, lost their cultural identity, continued undeveloped, and struggled to eliminate colonial residues.¹² In a free nation, people ironically remain dependent on and informed—even determined—by their ex-colonizer(s).¹³ Sugirtharajah affirms that these are apparent in the form of “the hegemonic systems of thought, textual codes, and symbolic practices which the West constructed in its domination of colonial subject.”¹⁴ It performs a chaotic hegemonic colonial pattern: from colonization to decolonization to (re-/neo) colonization.

Some postcolonial exponents have placed the discourse into academia. It is a critical discourse that resists any subsequent related projects of dominance.¹⁵ Its initial origin has been associated with the

¹¹ Neil Larsen, “Imperialism, Colonialism, Postcolonialism” in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Malden-Oxford-Carlton: Blackwell, 2005), 23-52.

¹² Significantly, on April 18-24, 1955, at the Bandung Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, they assembled, celebrated the liberty and independence, shared universal values such as peace-freedom-justice, promoted entirely mutual economic, cultural and political cooperation, and started a non-aligned movement. See Lutfi Hamadi, “Edward Said: The Postcolonial Theory and the Literature of Decolonization,” *European Scientific Journal* 2 (2014): 39-46.

¹³ Frank England, “Mapping Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa,” *Neotestamentica* 38, no. 1 (2004): 89.

¹⁴ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfiguration: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (St. Lois: Chalice, 2003), 15.

¹⁵ Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, 7.

postcolonial holy trinity: Said-Spivak-Bhabha.¹⁶ Within cultural and literary studies, they used postcolonialism as a reading scheme to investigate and expose the link between knowledge and power in producing the West's texts.

There is also a connection between postcolonial criticism and Marxism and postmodernism/poststructuralism. Gandhi believes that postcolonialism can be an interstitch between these ideologies.¹⁷ Although Marxism and postcolonialism have different time frames and analysis subjects, both share the same concern for anti-imperial/colonial thoughts, particularly materialism and the colonial-capitalist implications. Meanwhile, postmodernism/poststructuralism shares things in common with postcolonialism. They both criticize western cultural epistemology and hegemony.¹⁸ Postcolonialism seemingly needs to obtain more information from other ideologies. One paradigm is inadequate to answer questions from issues of identity and culture that emerged from neocolonialism and liberal economics.

Postcolonial Influence on Biblical Criticism

Postcolonialism has influenced proponents in many academic disciplines. Christian scholars, particularly in biblical studies, were no exception.¹⁹ They lined up in the queue and developed models for postcolonial biblical criticism.²⁰ These scholars believed that one might

¹⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 2003); *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994); Gayatri C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and The Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313; *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990); *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward the History of Vanishing Present* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁷ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). The link between postcolonialism and Marxism/post-structuralism is obvious because of a fact that Said, Spivak and Bhabha are strongly influenced by Marxist/poststructuralist proponents such as Gramsci, Fanon, Foucault and Derrida. Cf. Ranabir Samaddar, *Karl Marx and Postcolonial Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); and Tat-siong Benny Liew and Erin Runions, eds., *Psychoanalytic Mediations between Marxist and Postcolonial Readings of the Bible*, Semeia Studies 84 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016).

¹⁸ Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, ix, 23-30.

¹⁹ It also recently became a trend among Asian and Asian American hermeneutical methodology. See Chloe Sun, "Recent Research on Asian and Asian American Hermeneutics Related to the Hebrew Bible," *Currents in Biblical Research* 17, no. 3 (2019): 238-265.

²⁰ R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (London: SPCK, 1995); Fernando F. Segovia and A. M. Tolbert, eds., *Reading from*

apply the critical postcolonial approach in interpreting or reading the Bible. This criticism evaluates the totalizing forms of western interpretation, counter-hegemonic discourse, hidden and neglected voices, and place of the Bible in diverse multi-scriptural contexts and settings.²¹ It encourages and welcomes contributions from marginalized and neglected groups (the Dalits, the indigenous peoples, the migrants, people in diaspora and borderland, especially women in these communities). Further, it engages poststructural and postmodern hermeneutic as mutual dialogue partners. Thus, the criticism does not intend to romanticize or idealize the poor or the oppressed, nor it refuses to blame the victims.²²

Biblical scholars have developed postcolonial models and proposals for reading the scripture. Samuel sorted out these into four categories:²³ first, the *essentialist/nativist model*.²⁴ This model views the Bible as a

the Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Laura E. Donaldson, ed., *Postcolonialism and Biblical Reading* (Semeia 75; Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature, 1996); Justin S. Ukpong, et.al., *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: Cape Town* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998); *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999); *Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); *Postcolonial Reconfiguration: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and doing Theology* (St. Lois: Chalice, 2003); *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margin* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000); *Interpreting Beyond Borders* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000); Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections* (London: T&T Clark, 2006); Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, eds., *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007); and Mark G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible and the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008).

²¹ Kwok's assertion, as quoted in Jeremy Punt, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa: Some Mind and Road Mapping," *Neotestamentica* 37, no. 1 (2003): 65.

²² *Ibid.*, 65.

²³ These four categories are fully adapted from Simon Samuel's four classifications of postcolonial biblical readings. See his work, *A Postcolonial Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, LNTS 340 (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

²⁴ Laura E. Donaldson, "Postcolonialism and Biblical Reading: An Introduction" in Laura E. Donaldson, ed., *Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading*, Semeia 75; Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 1-14. Her other works are "Are We All Now Multiculturalists? Biblical Reading as Cultural Contact" in *In Search of the Present: The Bible through Cultural Studies*, ed. Stephen D. Moore, Semeia Studies 82 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 79-97; and "Gospel Hauntings: The Postcolonial Demons of New Testament Criticism" in *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 97-113.

colonial, axiomatic European discourse, and anti-Canaanite at the core. Arguably at the hands of the first European Puritan conquerors and settlers, the biblical conversation becomes an ideological means for annihilating the native American peoples and their cultures. It aims to reclaim the indigenous voices and the essence of their learning, reaching back to the Canaanite voice subsumed within the biblical discourse. This form intends to cater to the nativists and nationalistic agenda and may serve as facilitators for the reclamation and renegotiation of native pre-colonial experience. Through this mode, the interpreter can assert indigenous peoples' subjectivity and affirm their personhood. Their valuable and rich aboriginal heritage, such as myths, religions, culture, and history, can play an essential counter-discursive role in this postcolonial reading of the Bible.

The second, the *resistance/recuperative model*. It assumes that colonialism dominates and determines the biblical texts' interests. However, the biblical interpretations from the western colonial frame of reference are unconcerned with decolonization. On that note, the postcolonial reading strategy overlapped postcolonial issues of empire, nation, ethnicity, migration, and language by scrutinizing and exposing the colonial domination embedded in biblical texts. This model intends to investigate the biblical narratives and stand along with the universal liberation of the poor and oppressed. It aims to identify the embedded colonial ideology and practice and engage critical questions about the biblical promotion of xenophobia, expansionism, militarism, and ethnicism. The model is a search for a hermeneutical alternative that, on the one hand, overturns colonial assumptions inherent in western interpretation and, on the other hand, interprets the text in "our own" terms and reads them accurately from "our own" specific locations.²⁵

Third, the *diasporic intercultural (subcultural) model*. This model emerged from a diasporic cross-cultural perspective. It proposes shifting focus from the colonized world (the margins) to the colonizers (the centers).²⁶ The approach looks for reading ancient texts—products of socio-religious, cultural, and political (imperial and colonial) reality—as historically and socially conditioned individuals. Consequently, the ancient readers and authors of those texts engaged in the process of "self"-construction. Since it creates a destination (otherness), modern (diasporic) readers of ancient texts may exercise a similar intercultural

²⁵ R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Biblical Studies after Empire: From a Colonial to a Postcolonial Mode of Interpretation" in R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Bible*, 15f.; and *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism*, ix-x.

²⁶ Fernando F. Segovia, "Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Postcolonial Optic" in *The Postcolonial Bible*, 54f.; and "Interpreting beyond Borders: Postcolonial Studies in Biblical Criticism" in *The Postcolonial Bible*, 11-34.

critical engagement via recognizing the plurality of “texts,” readers, and experiences. It then deconstructs the axiomatic western colonial biblical reading to accomplish postcolonial universal goals (liberation and decolonization). Therefore, this model attempts to explain the heterogeneity and polyphony of the margins (the politics of difference).

Fourth, the *strategic essentialism (transcultural hybrid)* model. Several biblical scholars proposed a new and less oppositional postcolonial alternative. It revises the earlier binary approaches (nativist-essentialism, or resistance-recuperation) and intercultural (subcultural) fragmentations. Boer takes the ideas of hybridity and ambivalence seriously. Focusing on the subalterns (the Australian Aboriginal communities), he proposes “the nominalist” as a conceptual tool for searching for self-identity. Accordingly, it is an act of self-nominating and self-altering to disturb, challenge, and survive colonial settlers’ oppression.²⁷ Reading the scripture from this “socio-political” context may help the readers discover their nominalist identity.

Concurrently, the Bible is not a trouble-free book. Its canonization of the Hebrew Bible is complicated. It combines colonial syncretistic and hybrid nature, particularly during Persians’ reign in colonial Yehud (Judah). This complex canonical process signals that the Bible contains both colonial and postcolonial documents. The former refers to the empire’s intentions to control Judah. The latter points to the texts’ social location, describing a close relation between empire and colony. From a deconstructive perspective, the Hebrew canon is not a complete, coherent, or consistent document. Instead, it consists of a multiplicity of viewpoints, languages, geographies, classes, and ideologies. To escape oppositional duplex and fragmental models used in postcolonial studies, this model looks for an approach beyond the center and margin dichotomy.²⁸

The above discussions lead to an essential inquiry on what postcolonial biblical criticism is. There is no single and overarching explanation for this. This criticism is part of the existential approach of studying the Bible,²⁹ specifically the ideological criticism. The readers

²⁷ Roland Boer, *Last Stop before Antarctica: The Bible and Postcolonialism in Australia* (Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), particularly in Chapter 5: “Green Ants and the Gibeonites: B. Wongar, Joshua 9, and Some Problems of Postcolonialism,” 109-134.

²⁸ Jon L. Berquist, “Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization” in *Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading*, ed. Laura E. Donaldson, Semeia Studies 75 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 15-35.

²⁹ Accordingly, this approach (sometimes called “anthropological”) was started by Heidegger and then Bultmann. Slightly different with them, Barth believed that the Bible is not primarily history and theological textbook, although it contains both history and theology. It is a book about existence, life at its most comprehensive

will critically read the biblical texts within their socio-political contexts, like the struggle of the marginalized/oppressed *against* unequal power relations and injustice, and *for* their justice or liberation. Punt asserts that it is “a form of ideology criticism, which considers the socio-political context and one’s stand within it of primary importance.”³⁰ In the same vein, Gorman affirms that it is an ideological criticism used by those affected by or sensitized to colonization’s effects for analyzing the biblical texts.³¹ Its primary concern is to balance affirmations and critiques of empire and imperialism in the biblical books. The reading will expose forms of empire and colonialism and, at the same time, criticizing the dominant colonizer’s interpretation of biblical texts.³² Therefore, this interpretive process attempts to give space and hear from those who are marginalized and silenced.

This kind of biblical criticism further evaluates all forms of cultural domination embedded in the biblical texts and their interpretations, mainly from western perspectives. It explains people’s movement from the margin or periphery to the center—the marginalized (known as “others”) who have moved and now have become the subjects of interpretation.³³ As an academic discipline, postcolonial biblical criticism questions and challenges power structures, dominant systems, and embedded ideologies to facilitate social transformations that recognize and validate the marginalized’s perspectives, cultures, and identities.

Moreover, the postcolonial biblical criticism examines biblical involvement in supporting expansionism, militarism, discrimination, and

expression, and God. To understand it at this level, one must read it existentially. Cf. Robert Morgan, “Existential(ist) Interpretation of the New Testament,” in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. J. Riches (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 233-248. It then implies that the Bible may become the word of God to the reader. Thiselton called it “self-involving” because the readers do not treat the text as a historical or literary artifact but something to engage experientially. See Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 272-307, 564-566, 615-618. Here, the existential readers are consented to partake in broadening the contexts within which the biblical text is read.

³⁰ Jeremy Punt, “Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa,” 62.

³¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Elements in Biblical Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 22.

³² *Ibid.*, 22. Cf. Shawn Zelig Aster, *Reflections of Empire in Isaiah 1–39: Responses to Assyrian Ideology*, ANE Monographs 19 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2017); and Drew E. Billings, *Acts of the Apostles and the Rhetoric of Roman Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³³ Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism*, 16. Cf. Johanna Stiebert and Musa W. Dube, eds., *The Bible, Centres and Margins: Dialogues between Postcolonial African and British Biblical Scholars* (New York: T&T Clark, 2018).

exclusion. It serves to criticize the biblical texts and their interpretations influenced by western colonial motifs and agendas. In this lieu, postcolonial biblical hermeneutic does not concern finding out the text's single meaning but examining implicit and specific colonial elements found within the documents.³⁴ Thus, one may associate this postcolonial biblical reading with the hermeneutics of suspicion. The reader is doubtful of the given text and its interpretation, considering it subject to criticism and potentially dangerous.³⁵

Postcolonial biblical interpretation engages postcolonialism as a reading strategy. Sugirtharajah explains how to apply it for interrogating colonial influences in biblical reading.³⁶ He affirms that its primary concern is "to situate empire and imperial concerns at the center of the Bible and biblical studies."³⁷ This strategy focuses on the importance of biblical empires and being vigilant about the representation of the empire. Besides, it retrieves the sidelined, silenced, written-out, and often accused biblical figures and incidents and their response to the domains (including the missionary hermeneutical impositions) and restores their voices and dignity by being able to read the Bible on their own and for their concerns.³⁸ The approach thus appeals to learning and uprooting colonial ideologies and practices, explicit and implicit in biblical texts and their interpretations.³⁹

One of the typical applications of postcolonial biblical reading is a reading on the mission (evangelistic) texts. Sugirtharajah gave an example of using a postcolonial optic to read Matthew 28:19 (Christ's great commission) and Acts 13-14; 15:40-18:22; 21:16 (Paul's missionary

³⁴ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism*, 8.

³⁵ Typical questions raised are: "How does this text and/or its interpretation in history condone or promote oppression? Is there some way to retrieve or salvage this text so that it can liberate the very people that it was written to oppress or the people who have been oppressed by later interpretations?" (See. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 142). Punt uses the terms "re-reading the text" by proficiently discovering the marginalised or suppressed voices in, behind and below the text and subversively rereading the traditional reading and understanding of the biblical texts (See. Punt, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa," 74).

³⁶ Robertus Wijanarko, "Poskolonialisme dan Studi Teologi," *Studia Philosophia et Theologica* 8 (2008): 130.

³⁷ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 46.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 46-51.

³⁹ Models of biblical interpretation influenced by western and anti-western tensions, such as Orientalist (using parallelism between South Asian cultural and Biblical Texts), Anglicist (opposed to Orientalist, using western methodology to interpret biblical texts) and Nativist (using local and traditional conscience in interpreting biblical texts). See Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism*, 3-15.

journeys). He assumed that the history of colonialism had influenced interpretations done on these passages. In the eighteenth to twentieth-century South Asian context, these passages' analysis used to point out the traditional mandate for every Christian to do missions and convert the heathens.⁴⁰ This obligation comes from a missionary's interpretation of the text(s) and the influence of western colonialism or imperialism. Thus, postcolonial biblical criticism suspiciously identifies, exposes, and encounters the colonial discourse(s) that influences both the texts and their interpretation(s).

A Potential Inclusion of Postcolonial Reading of the Bible

Postcolonial biblical reading can be one of the ways to read the scripture. The reading theoretically provides a new and critical way of reading the scripture. It examined all forms of cultural domination embedded in the biblical texts and their interpretations and emerged from western perspectives. Keller et al. explain that the criticism facilitates new readings of and history of the scripture's understanding to uncover their complicated ties to the empire.⁴¹ This reading may critically question biblical texts' meaning and be suspicious of their hegemonic (imperialistic) intentions. A biblical reader may subsequently be aware of the ambiguity or ambivalence *of* and *within* the biblical texts, for they carry out both problem and solution, the weakening and strengthening. In Punt's words, it is at once "oppressive texts of terror and liberating and empowering discourses for many."⁴²

Further, the reading strategy helps an evangelical biblical reader be critical to his or her theological-hermeneutical biases and conjectures. The main question focuses on the reading subjects, who are dominating the interpretation. They are typically the western experts who have dominated biblical interpretation under the rubric of objectivity and scientific inquiry. Rukundwa argues, "the Bible provides the texts—the western biblical experts produce hermeneutics—the rest of the world reads them."⁴³ It is a case of how colonization in biblical interpretation takes place. The interpreters and ordinary people from the tri-continent

⁴⁰ As seen in the writing of William Carey, "An Enquiry into Obligations of Christian to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen" where missionary texts in Matthew were used as a biblical mandate for converting the heathens (Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations*, 17). Cf. Jae Hyung Cho, "A Postcolonial Interpretation of Matthew 28:18-20," *Korean Journal of Christian Studies* 150 (2017): 19-25.

⁴¹ Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, 10.

⁴² Jeremy Punt, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa," 70.

⁴³ Lazare S. Rukundwa, "Postcolonial Theory as a Hermeneutical Tool for Biblical Reading," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 64, no. 1 (2008): 344.

(Asia-Africa-[Latin] America) have no direct access to encounter and interpret the biblical texts directly.⁴⁴

This reading scheme reversely counters the above situation. Keller et al. define it as “a discourse of resistance to any subsequent related projects of dominance.”⁴⁵ Postcolonial criticism encourages a Bible’s reader in the two-thirds world (the tri-continent) to critically query the biblical texts and their interpretation. Such a discourse intends to decolonize the governing empire method of interpreting the Bible handed down and developed in the West. Sugirtharajah affirms that postcolonialism helps a reader to do “active interrogations of the hegemonic systems of thought, textual codes, and symbolic practices which the West constructed in its domination of colonial subjects.”⁴⁶ It fundamentally seeks to be sensitive and subversive to the hegemony, particularly the established dominating discourse.

An evangelical biblical reader may critically accept the postcolonial biblical reading method and benefit from it. Such a reading can be a new way to understand other biblical themes, specifically the empire’s presence and its impacts on the believers’ community in the biblical texts. Reading these materials from the readers’ tri-continent socio-cultural contexts may provide new insights into the impacts of focal points such as identity, hybridity, and the diaspora.⁴⁷ Reading from the margins, mainly the colonized and oppressed, can illuminate the reader(s) of the biblical texts’ hidden aspects. These are the “other voices” that have been neglected and silenced for a long time.⁴⁸

If liberation theology has successfully brought biblical themes on the campaigns against poverty and social injustices into places affected by colonialism (including imperialism and capitalism), postcolonial criticism has gone beyond it.⁴⁹ With its liberationist counterpart, the postcolonial approach had enlarged the scope of justice and freedom toward recovering the identity and dignity of the marginalized. Postcolonial biblical reading facilitates a reader to hear two voices: first,

⁴⁴ Rukundwa, 344.

⁴⁵ Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, 7.

⁴⁶ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfiguration*, 15.

⁴⁷ Cf. Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell, eds. *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts, and in Modern Biblical Interpretation* (New York: T&T Clark, 2018).

⁴⁸ Having analysed Donaldson’s work, Lau asserts that postcolonial approach can provide a voice of two marginal groups: female and American Indian, but more broadly, also speaks for native people everywhere. See Peter Lau, “Back under Authority: Evangelical Postcolonial Hermeneutic,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 63, no.1 (2012): 134.

⁴⁹ David Moe, “Postcolonial and Liberation Theologies as Partners in Praxis Against Sin and Suffering: A Hermeneutical Approach in Asian Perspective,” *Exchange* 45, no. 4 (2016): 321-343.

the voice of war against (neo-)colonialism and dictatorship, and second, the voice of social injustices in every aspect of society.⁵⁰ The objective is to hear the voice of those who once were oppressed and marginalized for transformation and restoration.

The reading itself practically connects faith—resulting from the scripture reading—and the realities and practices of life. Arguably, a postcolonial interpretation is profitable for delivering a practical and relevant message to the target reader(s),⁵¹ operative with and within the community's real life and faith. As a new way of biblical reading, its priority is not to find the meaning (the truth) of the text but to scrutinize colonial ideology embedded in the book,⁵² for example, deconstructing the text for promoting and experiencing transformations.

These accounts demonstrate that this reading mode can help a biblical reader realizes identity, interdependence, inclusiveness, and conviction. The postcolonial reading approach intends to liberate people from colonial elements (power dominance) while discovering their faith and life. Sugirtharajah adds that ordinary people look for two critical meanings in a biblical text: historical-explicit and implicit prophetic meanings.⁵³ They can tackle both the plain and hidden meaning(s) of the text. Failing to meet these may lead to (re/neo-) colonization. Thus, from a postcolonial biblical perspective, any hermeneutical tool is helpful as long as it imparts life, generates faith, and increases hope amidst oppression, domination, exploitation, and injustice committed toward the poor in the community.⁵⁴

Postcolonial biblical reading likewise concerns the issue of alterity and practical application.⁵⁵ It decenters the interpretive focus from “the center” (the westerners) to “the periphery” (the natives) and, in the end, synthesizes the two into a liberating or transformative condition. Sugirtharajah emphasizes that such a hybrid approach “tries to integrate and forge a new perspective by critically and profitably syncretizing ingredients from both vernacular and metropolitan focuses on the process of liberation.”⁵⁶ Such a reading allows dialogues with “the otherness” in an interpretive process, bringing together the colonial texts (and their interpretation) and the colonized and then centers them on

⁵⁰ Rukundwa, 45.

⁵¹ Peter Lau, “Back under Authority,” 134.

⁵² Jeremy Punt, “Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa,” 72. Cf. Jeremy Punt, “(Southern) African Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation: A White Perspective,” *Journal of Early Christian History* 7, no. 3 (2017): 4-24.

⁵³ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 218.

⁵⁴ Rukundwa, 47.

⁵⁵ Daniel J. Martino, “Postcolonial Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting with a Genuine Attunement to Otherness,” *Analecta Hermeneutica* 4 (2012): 7.

⁵⁶ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfiguration*, 16.

the document. John affirms that interpretation through dialogue enables an interpreter to dialog with other grassroots interpretative groups in cross-cultural settings. It further generates the result (interpretation) that provides material for the following dialogue with western professional biblical interpretations.⁵⁷ In the end, the hermeneutical process may transform the perceptions and morals on both sides.

A Critical Evaluation on Postcolonial Reading of the Bible

The postcolonial approach can be problematic. The very diverse postcolonial interpretative approaches, representatives, and goals may lead to diverse models or forms of postcolonial interpretations. In the era of globalization, people may hear different competing voices and ways to search for identities. However, it is not easy to hear and understand any when there are many. Each strives for and gains an equal opportunity to be heard and known. Besides, this plurality of voices implies that finding a consensus on the meaning of “postcolonial” can be problematic. It may mean something different from one another, depending on one’s different background or context,⁵⁸ including over-generalizing or stereotyping all westerners as colonizers and oppressors.

The main issue is whether one voice may not be recognized, heard, respected, and accepted by the other. One of the cases was where some Jewish feminists have complained about many majority world postcolonialists’ appropriation of western anti-Semitism. They perceived ancient Jews as religious colonizers.⁵⁹ Such prejudice is worsened by romanticizing oppression by the unauthentic postcolonial scholars. Those are the people who speak against oppression but enjoy being self-exiled, wealthy, and socially advantaged. In their hands, as Keener asserts, “postcolonialism has become another opportunity for an educated elite to speak in the underclass’s name and sometimes profit in academic status by so speaking without relinquishing personal privilege or helping the oppressed.”⁶⁰

Further, since the reading emphasizes the reader’s socio-political context, some postcolonial biblical scholars do not value studying texts

⁵⁷ Helen C. John, “Conversations in Context: Cross-Cultural (Grassroots) Biblical Interpretation Groups Challenging Western-centric (Professional) Biblical Interpretation,” *Biblical Interpretation* 27, no. 1 (2019): 36-68.

⁵⁸ Rukundwa, 347.

⁵⁹ According to A. J. Levine, as quoted in Craig S. Keener, “Scripture and Context,” 32.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 32. Gerald O. West insists that an authentic postcolonial biblical criticism should be done at home, a place where a scholar lives and encounters the misery of the oppressed. See his “Doing Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation @Home: Ten Years of (South) African Ambivalence,” *Neotestamentica* 42, no.1 (2008): 147-164.

in their ancient historical context.⁶¹ They put excessive weight on the world *before* the text. Therefore, the tendency is to neglect the other essential sides—the *behind* and *of* the text. A careful biblical hermeneutic involves an interplay between the world *behind*, *of/within*, and *in front of* the text. Neglecting one or two elements—for example, world the “*behind*” and/or “*of/within*”—will make “the real readers with their needs and concerns” the final arbiter of meaning.⁶² With the influence of postmodern hermeneutics, postcolonial interpretation becomes in favor of the reader-response approach. This interpretation focuses more on the contemporary context (and other texts) than the biblical text in deriving its meaning. Besides, it prioritizes more on socio-political advocacy than (biblical) theological analysis.⁶³ Therefore, it potentially turns to an *eisegesis*, injecting one’s socio-political/cultural agenda into the text, rather than *exegesis*, discovering meaning intended by the biblical author(s).

Postcolonial biblical reading is prone to ethnocentrism. The postcolonial approach may produce various possible documents and meanings through deconstructing biblical texts.⁶⁴ The higher the variety of possible reading contexts, the more unlimited possible meanings these texts can generate. The interpretive community may use an ideological optic to draw from and impose the text’s meaning to advocate their nationalistic or ethnocentric agenda and propaganda. It can lead to a new dominant norm, returning to ethnocentrism, nationalism, racism, sexism, and the like. Keener asserts, “Western readings have been so long privileged that western readers who want to hear other voices now must wear hearing aids or to provide non-western voices with superior sound systems.”⁶⁵ A postcolonial biblical criticism may be vulnerable to superiority and ethnocentrism.

A more severe problem with postcolonial biblical criticism is its low view of the Bible/Scripture. It perceives the Bible as predominantly a literary document produced by human beings that inherently implies hegemonic practices. The western empires subsequently used the Bible as an ideological weapon to subjugate colonized peoples and validate their control tactics.⁶⁶ Sugirtharajah points out that colonialism would dominate and determine the Bible’s interest if it contained colonial

⁶¹ Craig S. Keener, “Scripture and Context,” 32.

⁶² Peter Lau, “Back under Authority,” 137.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁶⁴ Craig S. Keener, “Scripture and Context,” 33-34.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁶ Bradley L. Crowell, “Postcolonial Studies and the Hebrew Bible,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 7, no. 2 (2009): 238.

documents or texts.⁶⁷ With this in mind, the Bible is *merely* an object of postcolonial interpreter's suspicion and interrogation, and one never gives to it the benefit of the doubt. It is a search for the text's meaning through reading against the narrator's explicit statements.⁶⁸

Lau's Postcolonial Reading on Ruth's Narrative: An Evangelical Attempt

The postcolonial approach attracts very few evangelical biblical scholars.⁶⁹ They have been open and try to handle it with extra care due to its vulnerabilities. One of the evangelical attempts to seriously engage with a postcolonial approach is the work of Peter Lau, "Back under Authority: Toward an Evangelical Postcolonial Hermeneutic."⁷⁰ Using biblical theology as a "theological interpretation of Scripture," the article seeks to derive meaning and application from the biblical text *on its own terms*.⁷¹ It is an orthodox way of dealing with postcolonial reading strategy while maintaining and upholding the authority of the scripture.

According to Lau, one can apply the approach in two ways: first, through postcolonial sensibilities illuminating and filling out the text's meaning. He or she should ascertain the central message that rails against injustice or bondage and find the protest or resistance by reading with the text's grain, and apply the text's meaning to contemporary readers; and, second, by emphasizing conventional and overlapped themes between postcolonial and biblical ones, such as identity, hybridity, mimicry and stereotyping.⁷² A biblical reader, thus, may utilize a postcolonial approach with one condition. He or she has to keep "the three biblical worlds" interplaying proportionally or in a more balanced

⁶⁷ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism*, 19-20.

⁶⁸ Peter Lau, "Back under Authority," 137-138.

⁶⁹ There are two main questions related to "unfinished evangelical tasks:" "How might postcolonial perspectives deepen our understanding as we engage Scripture?" Moreover, "how can they move beyond suspicion of the text we receive and provide fruitful understanding that will assist us as followers of Christ?" (Smith, Lalitha, and Hawk, *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations*, 21-2).

⁷⁰ Peter Lau, "Back under Authority," 131-144.

⁷¹ Lau's own emphasis (*Ibid.* 139). Lau did not really propose a hermeneutical construction. It is true that biblical theology is "a theological interpretation of the Scripture," however, a biblical theology is not a biblical hermeneutics *per se*. Although both of them are interdependent, biblical theology should be a result of a biblical hermeneutics or exegesis. The former provides the categories and overall scriptural unity behind one's interpretation of individual passages, while exegesis provides the data collated into a biblical theology. Cf. Grant Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 264-265; cf. Graeme Goldsworthy, "Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 2 (2006): 4-21.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 140.

way. By doing it, postcolonial elements and themes may constructively shape the meaning of the biblical text(s) read.

More concretely, Lau applies a biblical-theological postcolonial approach to the reading of Ruth's narrative. He infers that such a narrative contains a search for Ruth's identity through "hybridity," a Moabite woman in Israelite society. Ruth's status is shaped by interaction and negotiation between Israel and non-Israelite in the long-term acculturation process. It creates some ambivalence towards her final identity, a hybrid character. As a Moabite origin, she can never assimilate herself into society. The emphasis on Ruth's new hybrid identity intends to question the Israelites' status, where one's identity exclusively is based solely on ethnicity and held firmly in their typical ethnocentrism. Therefore, the postcolonial reading of the narrative affirms that a foreigner can be a part of Israel's house.⁷³

Conclusion

Answering the main question, "Is the postcolonial reading of the Bible an evangelical friend or foe?" the article conclusively affirms that it can be both friend and foe for the evangelical biblical scholarship. It is a "middle way," through being open to the positive aspects of postcolonial biblical reading but cautious to its negative features. An evangelical biblical reader may share the same concern and sensitivity toward social-political-cultural contexts with its postcolonial counterpart. This reading mode allows the reader to question and criticize power structures, dominant systems, and embedded ideologies. The main objective is to attain transformations that recognize and validate marginalized peoples, cultures, and identities. It embraces differences and allows the multiplicity of voices to create a reciprocal exchange of views from all voices. Postcolonial biblical reading can encourage and guide evangelical biblical scholars to be more sensitive and authentic toward marginalized and oppressed identities. The postcolonial optic, thus, is somehow needed by the evangelicals in reading the biblical texts. Further critical discussions on these issues within the evangelical circles are still wide open and unfinished.

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⁷³ Peter Lau, "Back under Authority," 141-143.

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