

BACK UNDER AUTHORITY TOWARDS AN EVANGELICAL POSTCOLONIAL HERMENEUTIC¹

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Summary

A postcolonial approach is gaining acceptance by many scholars as a fruitful way of interpreting the Bible. Yet a postcolonial approach raises issues for those who hold a 'high' view of Scripture. Five issues will be demonstrated through an analysis of Mary Donaldson's reading of the book of Ruth, with the outcome being that the authority of Scripture is decentred. Nonetheless, a postcolonial approach can still be usefully adapted by those with a 'high' view of Scripture. This article will present an alternative postcolonial reading of the book of Ruth that uses biblical theology to help maintain the central authority of the biblical text.

1. Introduction

Essentially 'a style of inquiry' or perspective,² postcolonialism is gaining acceptance by many scholars as a fruitful way of interpreting the Bible. Although it received its initial impetus from those in the Two-Thirds World and minorities in the West, it is now practised by others without minority backgrounds.³ Postcolonialism takes as its

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² R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 12.

³ See, e.g. Pui-lan Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000);

starting point the reality of empire, of imperialism and colonialism, as an ever-present, inescapable and overwhelming reality in the world. At its core, a postcolonial hermeneutic is one of resistance, used to rail against all forms of hegemonic power, but especially political, cultural, economic, and ideological.

Yet a postcolonial approach raises problems for those who hold a 'high view' of Scripture. The problems derive from the role of the biblical text in postcolonial interpretation, and include: other texts and historical contexts are used to reinterpret the biblical text; readers are viewed on an equal footing with the text; and it tends to read against the grain of the text. In short, the biblical text is marginalised and the authority of Scripture undermined.

Nonetheless, I will maintain that evangelicals can benefit from engaging with, and adopting a postcolonial approach, but only with significant modification. I will present my case in three parts. First, I will use Mary Donaldson's postcolonial reading of the book of Ruth as a test case both to highlight the benefits of and problems with the approach. Second, I will make some suggestions for adapting the postcolonial approach. Finally, I will present an alternative postcolonial reading of the book of Ruth, sensitive to evangelical concerns, and based on biblical theological underpinnings.

Donaldson will be my dialogue partner because her work has been influential in the application of postcolonialism to biblical studies. She has written or edited a number of articles and books,⁴ including a 1996 *Semeia* volume, *Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading*. Most pointedly, Gale Yee recently designated the chapter I will interact with

R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (rev. and expanded 3rd edn; Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006).

⁴ These include Laura E. Donaldson, 'American Samson: Biblical Reading and National Origins' in *Theorizing Scriptures*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008): 195-205; Laura E. Donaldson, 'Are We All Multiculturalists Now? Biblical Reading as Cultural Contact', *Semeia* 82 (1998): 79-97; Laura E. Donaldson, '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, 2007): 97-113; Laura E. Donaldson, 'Joshua in America: On Cowboys, Canaanites, and Indians' in *The Calling of the Nation: Exegesis, Ethnography, and Empire in a Biblical-Historic Present*, ed. Etal Vessey et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010): 273-90; Laura E. Donaldson, 'Native Women's Double Cross: Christology from the Contact Zone', *Feminist Theology* 10 (2002): 96-117; Laura E. Donaldson and Pui-lan Kwok, eds., *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

‘a significant ... essay adopting Postcolonial methods in Hebrew Bible’.⁵ The chapter’s importance is underlined by its republication in two edited volumes since its first publication.⁶

2. A Summary of Donaldson’s Essay

In ‘The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes’, Donaldson reads the book of Ruth as a ‘contact zone’—an interaction between the biblical narrative, Anglo-European imperialism and the tradition of Cherokee women involving severe inequality and intractable conflict.⁷ Her central argument is that the book of Ruth ‘foregrounds the use of intermarriage as an assimilationist strategy’.⁸ She essentially adopts a stance of resistance to the imperialist agenda in the Ruth narrative through two female characters: Ruth and Orpah.

Donaldson identifies Ruth as the indigene in the text—those who occupied the promised land before the Israelites—who in the end vanishes into the literary and social text. By the end of the narrative Ruth marries Boaz and bears a son, Obed. His transfer to Naomi’s care, according to Donaldson, symbolises Ruth’s complete assimilation. Ruth’s situation is compared to that of Rahab, another indigene who converts to Israelite religion and is absorbed ‘into the genealogy of her husband and son’.⁹ Donaldson parallels Ruth and Rahab’s situation with modern American Indian women—those who occupied the land before the English colonists—through ‘the Pocahontas Perplex’. This master narrative promotes American Indian women as ones who ‘must save or give aid to white men’. Furthermore, ‘giving aid’ includes sexual favours, just like, as Donaldson avers, Rahab and Ruth performed.¹⁰ For American Indian women, this reading of the Ruth

⁵ Gale A. Yee, ‘Postcolonial Biblical Criticism’ in *Methods for Exodus*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 204, fn. 39.

⁶ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 159-70, and most recently, Pui-lan Kwok, *Hope Abundant* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010): 138-51.

⁷ Laura E. Donaldson, ‘The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes’ in *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999): 132.

⁸ Donaldson, ‘Orpah’, 138.

⁹ Donaldson, ‘Orpah’, 139.

¹⁰ Donaldson, ‘Orpah’, 140.

narrative triggers mourning for another native woman who has been effaced by a hegemonic culture.¹¹

However, Donaldson does retrieve some hope for the indigenous reader—through her reading of Orpah. Most scholars view Orpah’s decision to return to Moab negatively or at best neutrally (abandoner or prudent), but Donaldson views her positively. Orpah connotes hope because she ‘does not reject her traditions or her sacred ancestors’.¹² Orpah’s decision to return to ‘her mother’s house’ (Ruth 1:8) resonates with the customs of Cherokee women, in which they dominated in the domestic sphere: women owned landed property, husbands left to live with their wives, and the woman’s family were the primary caretakers of children.¹³ In choosing to return home to Moab, Orpah affirms her ethnic and cultural identity. As such, she becomes a role model for indigenous women around the world.

3. The Benefits of a Postcolonial Approach

This brief synopsis of Donaldson’s essay highlights some benefits of a postcolonial approach.

1. Reading the Bible from cultural contexts different from our own can provide new insights. Since all interpreters have certain blind spots because of their location in particular social and cultural situations, reading from the ‘margins’—the colonised and oppressed—can illuminate previously hidden aspects of the biblical text.¹⁴
2. The postcolonial approach thus provides a voice for those outside mainstream interpretation. Donaldson’s essay presents the voice of two marginal groups: female and American Indian, but more broadly, also speaks for native peoples everywhere.
3. With specific groups in mind, a postcolonial approach can deliver an eminently practical and relevant message for the target reader(s). Deliberately shunning the empiricism of historical-critical exegesis, a postcolonial hermeneutic has the potential to speak to the felt needs of minority groups.

¹¹ Donaldson, ‘Orpah’, 141.

¹² Donaldson, ‘Orpah’, 143.

¹³ Donaldson, ‘Orpah’, 143.

¹⁴ Cf. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 7; Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006): 39.

4. An underlying aim of the postcolonial approach is deconstructing abuses of power that serve to marginalise and exclude people based on class, race, gender, culture and ethnicity. This aim can be helpful in identifying the relevant biblical texts, and assisting in drawing out meaning from those texts.

5. Postcolonial approaches are centrally concerned with identity, whether the identity that the coloniser imposes onto the colonised or the various means the colonised use to preserve their identity and freedom.¹⁵ Since identity is a concern found in the biblical text, identity can be a useful hermeneutical lens through which to interpret the biblical text.¹⁶

4. The Problems with a Postcolonial Approach

Nonetheless, for those who hold a ‘high view’ of Scripture, Donaldson’s postcolonial approach raises many problems. Her starting point is her own social and cultural context—as a Cherokee woman. She presupposes an ‘intractable conflict’ between the biblical narrative, Euramerican imperialism and the traditions of Cherokee women.¹⁷ Her aim is to ‘enable Native people both to understand more thoroughly how biblical interpretation has impacted us, and to assert our own perspectives more strongly’.¹⁸ While, granted, there are no purely disinterested readings of the Bible, Donaldson’s presuppositions and stated purpose condition her reading to the point of distorting the meaning of the biblical text. This is revealed in a number of hermeneutical decisions.

1. For Donaldson, the Pocahontas Perplex is the master narrative to which the Ruth narrative conforms. She states, ‘the scriptural stories proclaim ... the metamorphosis of ... Ruth into the Israelite version of the Pocahontas Perplex. In this scenario ... Boaz stand[s] in for John Smith.’¹⁹ Within this interpretive grid, Donaldson understands Ruth’s actions on the threshing floor as sexually immoral. But Donaldson provides no evidence from the Ruth narrative for her view. Although the scene is sexually charged, it does not follow that sexual impropriety took

¹⁵ Daniel C. Timmer, ‘The Intertextual Jonah *face à l’empire*: The Post-colonial Significance of the Book’s Cotexts and Purported Neo-Assyrian Context’, *JHS* 9 (2009): 8-9.

¹⁶ See the recent Old Testament studies focusing on social identity; Jan Bosman, *Social Identity in Nahum: A Theological-Ethical Enquiry* (Biblical Intersections 1; Piscataway: Gorgias, 2009); Peter H. W. Lau, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach* (BZAW 416; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

¹⁷ Donaldson, ‘Orpah’, 130-32.

¹⁸ Donaldson, ‘Orpah’, 132-33.

¹⁹ Donaldson, ‘Orpah’, 140.

place. In fact, linguistic²⁰ and narratological²¹ evidence points to their continued sexual purity. The literary devices function to evoke the sexual tension and temptation felt by the characters.²² As virtuous characters (cf. 2:1; 3:11), they are able to overcome the sexual temptation on the threshing floor, and thus emerge as ‘the antithesis of the lawless characters’ common to their historical period.²³

2. Ruth’s assimilation into Israelite society is interpreted by Donaldson as complete effacement; Ruth relinquishes ‘her ethnic and cultural identity’.²⁴ But this is a simplistic understanding of identity. As I shall argue below, there is space for cultural negotiation between the coloniser and the colonised.

3. By superimposing the importance of the mother’s house in Cherokee society onto Orpah’s actions, Donaldson assigns to Orpah the role of the narrative’s central character. From a literary reading of the text, this is hard to justify. Orpah is only present in about half the verses of chapter 1 (at the most twelve out of twenty-two verses), and, as Donaldson herself concedes, Orpah is only mentioned explicitly twice (1:4, 14).²⁵ By contrast, both Naomi and Ruth are present in every chapter. Within the Ruth narrative Orpah functions as a foil for Ruth, setting Ruth’s virtuous actions into greater relief: Orpah chose her homeland—security and certainty; Ruth chose her mother-in-law—loyalty and uncertainty. As Adele Berlin correctly observes, Orpah is a minor character, aiding to characterise the major character, Ruth.²⁶ Berlin correctly identifies Naomi as the *central* character in the book: ‘All other characters stand in relation to her.’²⁷ Donaldson concedes that her reading ‘in the contact zone’ transforms ‘Orpah’s negative value into a positive’, but, to

²⁰ The phrasing of Boaz’s request for Ruth to ‘remain tonight’ (לִינִי הַלַּיְלָה) 3:13 cf. 1:16) rather than ‘lie down’ (שָׁכַב), is devoid of any sexual undertone. Cf. Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth* (AB 7; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975): 137-38; Yair Zakovitch, *Das Buch Rut: Ein jüdischer Kommentar* (tr. Andreas Lehnardt, SBS 177; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1999): 144.

²¹ Chapter 4 would be superfluous if the marriage was already consummated in chapter 3. The description, ‘So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went to her’ (4:13), would be out of order. See Ellen van Wolde, *Ruth and Naomi* (London: SCM, 1997): 84-85.

²² Moshe J. Bernstein, ‘Two Multivalent Readings in the Ruth Narrative’, *JSOT* 50 (1991): 17-20.

²³ Harry J. Harm, ‘The Function of Double Entendre in Ruth Three’, *JOTT* 7 (1995): 23; Schadrac Keita and Janet W. Dyk, ‘The Scene at the Threshing Floor: Suggestive Readings and Intercultural Considerations on Ruth 3’, *BT* 57 (2006): 17-32.

²⁴ Donaldson, ‘Orpah’, 144.

²⁵ Donaldson, ‘Orpah’, 141.

²⁶ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983): 85. Schlomo Goitein even suggests that omitting Orpah from the narrative would do ‘no violence to the plot’; Shelomo D. Goitein, *Bible Studies* (3rd edn; Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1967): 53 [Hebrew], as quoted in Uriel Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997): 268.

²⁷ Berlin, *Poetics*, 83.

Donaldson, this is acceptable because this reading better reflects a Cherokee woman's reality.²⁸ Nonetheless, identifying Orpah as the main character reads against the grain of the text.

To summarise the problems with Donaldson's postcolonial approach:

1. Starting with a contemporary context, the approach presents other cultural texts and situations as resources to reinterpret the biblical text. Donaldson concurs with Kwok Pui-lan's principle that biblical truth 'must be found in the actual interaction between text and context in the concrete historical situation'.²⁹ In practice, Donaldson privileges the contemporary context (and other texts) over the biblical text in deriving meaning.
2. Another outcome of foregrounding the contemporary context is that real readers, with their needs and concerns, are viewed on an equal footing. What actually happens in Donaldson's interaction between reader and biblical text is that the reader becomes the final arbiter of meaning.
3. With its focus on contemporary readers and their concerns, God is left out of Donaldson's analysis. It is social and political advocacy devoid of theological analysis. Both Jeremy Punt and Fernando Segovia have recently made similar critiques of postcolonial biblical approaches.³⁰
4. Similar to other hermeneutics of suspicion or resistance, meaning is gained by reading against the narrator's explicit statements, against the grain of the text.
5. As common to all approaches with a particular ideology as a driving force, it produces a flat reading, missing the subtleties found in the text. For example, as I shall detail below, Ruth's identity at the end of the narrative is best considered hybrid instead of completely expunged by the colonising culture.

In short, in all these ways the biblical text is marginalised, and the authority of Scripture is undermined.

Yet Donaldson is not alone in her decentring of Scripture; it is endemic to the postcolonial approach. The postcolonial biblical

²⁸ Donaldson, 'Orpah', 143-44.

²⁹ Donaldson, 'Orpah', 144, quoting Pui-lan Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995): 11.

³⁰ Segovia primarily argues on the basis that he is 'a student ... of the Christian religion', while Jeremy Punt argues on pragmatic or utilitarian grounds: '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 [sic], in Africa, but also elsewhere'; Jeremy Punt, 'Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa: Some Mind and Road Mapping', *Neot* 37 (2003): 72-73.

enterprise is highly diverse and even conflicted,³¹ almost defying categorisation. However, Bradley Crowell, in his 2009 *Currents in Biblical Research* article, ‘Postcolonial Studies and the Hebrew Bible’, concludes that, within Hebrew Bible (HB) studies, postcolonialism is applied in three main ways.

1. The role of empires and reactions to them in the composition of HB texts.
2. How colonial empires interpreted the HB and how indigenous populations reacted to colonial interpretations.
3. Interpretations from previously colonised populations.³²

In other words, in relation to the biblical text, most postcolonial approaches focus on the world behind the text or in front of the text. Both of these foci are found in Donaldson’s essay, but her especial focus is on the world in front of the text. Once again, Crowell’s survey confirms my analysis of the decentring of the biblical text in the process of determining meaning in postcolonial approaches. An exploration of all three worlds of the text is necessary for a full-orbed interpretation; neglect of one world—especially the world of the text—leads to an impairment of meaning.³³ It thus seems a postcolonial approach conflicts with a ‘high view’ of Scripture.

5. Adapting the Postcolonial Approach

So can evangelicals adopt a postcolonial approach to read and apply Scripture? I suggest that we can—via biblical theology—for three reasons. First, postcolonialism, as a field of enquiry, thrives on methodological inclusiveness, catering to ‘a variety of concerns,

³¹ See e.g. the three clusters of postcolonial biblical criticism observed in Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia, ‘Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Beginnings, Trajectories, Intersections’ in *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia (London: T&T Clark, 2005): 5-10, which are similar to the three applications identified by Bradley Crowell, below.

³² Bradley L. Crowell, ‘Postcolonial Studies and the Hebrew Bible’, *Currents in Biblical Research* 7 (2009): 217-44.

³³ Cf. W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (3rd edn; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008): 5-7.

oppositional stances, and even contradictory positions'.³⁴ It is thus broad enough to accommodate methods, like biblical theology, that maintain the authority of Scripture. Second, unlike other postmodern approaches that dispose of grand narratives, postcolonialism holds to a live metanarrative—liberation, which 'still has to play out its full potential'.³⁵ This metanarrative spine of postcolonialism dovetails nicely with the redemptive-historical story of biblical theology; although, in biblical theology, liberation goes beyond economic, social or political aspects to encompass spiritual also. Third, as seen in Donaldson's essay above, postcolonial studies are receptive to the interaction that various 'texts' have with one another, both written and non-written. This opens the door for the use of intertextuality with canonical texts.

In adapting the postcolonial approach, the underlying principles and methods of biblical theology are central. Brian Rosner defines biblical theology as 'theological interpretation of Scripture ... [that] seeks to analyse and synthesise the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms'.³⁶ The important point is that biblical theology aims to derive meaning and application from the biblical text *on its own terms*. In other words, it seeks to uphold the authority of Scripture. In interpreting a text using biblical theology, the processes behind, of and in front of the text are all explored.

1. The world behind the text: this step considers the historical, social and cultural backgrounds in which a text was written, and which might have motivated its composition. This step also analyses the linguistic and syntactical elements of a text. The aim is to best deduce the meaning for an original reader.
2. The world of the text: the events and characters of the text are analysed to discern what response the implied author might have desired from his/her implied reader. Genre, structure and literary aspects are important in this step, because these assist in discerning the rhetorical impact of the text. In narrative, the narrator's explicit comments or judgements point to the desired response from the reader.
3. The world in front of the text: this step is concerned with the application of a text to real readers, and the interplay between the text

³⁴ Sugirtharajah, *Criticism*, 11. Cf. Fernando F. Segovia, 'Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Postcolonial Optic' in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998): 63.

³⁵ Sugirtharajah, *Third World*, 266.

³⁶ Brian S. Rosner, 'Biblical Theology' in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2000): 10.

and readers in particular historico-social contexts. In applying the text to a contemporary Christian reader, the text is situated within the storyline of the Bible—the single, unified narrative culminating in the gospel about Jesus Christ. Within this unified narrative, biblical themes can also be distilled from the text and then traced through the whole canon—from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

Although these three steps are performed separately, they should be viewed as complementary, rather than independent or alternative steps.³⁷ Indeed, there is interplay between the steps, with a two-way direction of influence from step 1. to 3. and vice versa.³⁸

Within this framework, a postcolonial approach can be applied in at least two ways. One, by using postcolonial sensibilities to illuminate and fill out the meaning of the text. Begin by ascertaining the central message of the text. Does it rail against injustice or bondage, does it call for justice for the marginalised or oppressed (especially prevalent in the Prophetic Writings, e.g. Isa. 1:12-17; Jer. 7:1-7)? Does the text portray people living under oppression or under the control of a foreign empire (e.g. Daniel; Ezra-Nehemiah)? If protest or resistance is found in the biblical text by reading with the grain of the text, postcolonialism can be applied. After filling out the meaning of the text, the specific message of resistance can be applied to contemporary readers (step 3.).

The other way to apply the postcolonial approach is through common themes. Stephen Moore lists some overlapping phenomena:

Imperialism, Orientalism, universalism, expansionism, exploration, invasion, enslavement, settlement, resistance, revolt, terrorism, nationalism, nativism, negritude, assimilation, creolization, hybridization, colonial mimicry, the subaltern, marginalization, migration, diasporization, decolonization, globalization and neo-colonialism—all intersected by the ubiquitous determinants of language, gender, race, ethnicity, and class.³⁹

In particular, the concepts more specific to postcolonialism, with potential to be fruitfully applied to the biblical text, include identity,

³⁷ Cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, ““Behind” and “In Front of” the Text: Language, Reference and Indeterminacy’ in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller (Scripture and Hermeneutics 2; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001): 116.

³⁸ Cf. Al Wolters, ‘Confessional Criticism and the Night Visions of Zechariah’ in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Green, and Karl Möller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000): 90-117.

³⁹ Stephen D. Moore, ‘Postcolonialism’ in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Andrew K. M. Adam (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000): 185-86, as quoted in Yee, ‘Postcolonial Biblical Criticism’, 196.

hybridity, mimicry, and stereotyping. In the following section I shall now illustrate how the postcolonial concept of hybridity can be fruitfully applied within a biblical theology framework.

6. Applying a Biblical Theological Postcolonial Approach to the Ruth Narrative

Although a disputed term in postcolonial studies, hybridity commonly refers to ‘the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone created by colonisation’.⁴⁰ In relation to identity, hybridity describes the intermingling of identities between coloniser and colonised, which undermines and destabilises the status quo of the colonisers.⁴¹ The sweep of the Old Testament attests that formation of Israelite identity was ‘a complex, on-going negotiation’.⁴² Identity negotiation was present right from the patriarchal narratives.⁴³ It continued with the formation of Israel as a nation in Egypt. Although the plagues reinforced ‘the distinction between Egypt and Israel’ (Exod. 11:7), foreign elements (עַרְבֵי רַב; ‘a mixed multitude’) joined Israel in leaving Egypt (Exod. 12:38). Yet Israel is often commanded in the Law to differentiate itself from other nations. For example, the Holiness Code (Lev. 17–26) mandates separation from Canaanite religious practices. But although Deuteronomy 23:3-4 places an enduring ban from the assembly for Ammonites and Moabites, it still allows the foreign sojourner (גֵר) to participate in its major religious events (e.g. Deut. 16:11, 14; 31:12). And as Israel wandered in the wilderness it still contained the group of mixed origin (הָאֶסְפָּסָפִי; translated ‘riffraff’ or ‘rabble’; Num. 11:4). The biblical record also suggests that foreigners continued to intermingle with Israel during the monarchy; e.g. foreigners assisted in the construction of the temple (1 Kgs 5:18); and ‘the whole earth’ came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom (1 Kgs 10:24). This intermingling of Israelite and non-Israelite

⁴⁰ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2nd edn; London: Routledge, 2007): 108.

⁴¹ Thomas B. Dozeman, *Methods for Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 237.

⁴² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 2.

⁴³ See, from two different approaches, Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000); Robert L. Cohn, ‘Negotiating (with) the Natives: Ancestors and Identity in Genesis’, *HTR* 96 (2003).

identity intensified in the exilic period as Israelites were deported to foreign lands. As Israelite repatriates returned to their homeland, the contestation of identity continued, as especially recounted in Ezra-Nehemiah.

The postcolonial concept of ‘hybridity’ is helpful in understanding the interaction and negotiation between Israel and non-Israelite in the formation of identity. Donaldson suggests that Ruth is completely assimilated into Israelite society; Ruth’s cultural and ethnic identities are completely expunged. But textual and cross-cultural evidence suggest elements of her foreignness persisted. Textually, the repetition of ‘the Moabitess’ (הַמּוֹאֲבִיטָה) in the narrative indicates her status as an ‘other’. This title is mostly found upon her first interaction with Israelite society (1:22; 2:1, 6, 21). Yet Boaz’s continued use of this designation in the last chapter suggests an element of her foreignness remained, even upon her integration into Israelite society (4:5, 10). Although the last two references to Ruth are simply ‘Ruth’ or Naomi’s ‘daughter-in-law’ (4:13, 15), the double use of ‘the Moabitess’ earlier in the chapter indicates some ambivalence towards her final identity.⁴⁴

This ambivalence is reinforced by cross-cultural studies, which suggest that incorporation into a new society is largely a dynamic state. The process of acculturation is a long-term process, perhaps extending beyond an individual’s lifetime.⁴⁵ For although Ruth takes on core elements of Israelite identity, she cannot remove all vestiges of her foreignness. For instance, her complexion or physical attributes may distinguish her immediately, then her mannerisms and use of the Hebrew language (e.g. pronunciation and grammar)⁴⁶ would betray her Moabite origin. Even with maximal cultural adaptation, she can never completely assimilate into Israelite society. Hence, Ruth’s foreignness cannot be completely expunged; she is, in fact, a hybrid identity.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ As Berlin observes, there remains an underlying tension ‘between foreignness and familiarity’, Berlin, *Poetics*, 88.

⁴⁵ John W. Berry, ‘Acculturation: Living Successfully in Two Cultures’, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 29 (2005): 699.

⁴⁶ Ironically, Ruth’s speech does not display any linguistic particularities, in contrast to the speeches of the native Hebrew speakers Boaz and Naomi. Cf. Campbell, *Ruth*, 25.

⁴⁷ Pace Donaldson, Obed’s transfer to Naomi does not complete Ruth’s assimilation, because Naomi’s care for Obed after his birth does not necessarily imply his transfer ‘to a proper Jewish woman’; Donaldson, ‘Orpah’, 138. A more plausible explanation derives from a narratological analysis: earlier in the narrative Naomi lost her two sons; Obed now brings fullness to Naomi by ‘replacing’ her two sons. This understanding is

As such, not only is she influenced by her host culture, she also influences her host culture. Primarily, her presence leads to soul searching about the essence of Israelite identity. Ruth challenges the idea that Israelite identity is based solely on ethnicity or descent. A foreigner who turns to YHWH and who lives out a life of *hesed* (3:10) can be valued as an important member of Israel, contributing to the building up of the house of Israel.

This hybrid concept with its inherent challenge to the particularist tendency in Israel can be applied as a biblical theological theme (step 3. from above). An eschatological intermingling of Israelite and foreigner, all worshipping God together can be found in Psalms and Isaiah (e.g. Ps. 102:12-22; Isa. 60:1-7). After the historical narrative context of the book of Ruth is the book of Jonah, which similarly resists ethnocentrism. Although the centrifugal aspect of Israel's mission in the book is debated, the central idea is clear: God is concerned for the whole world, not just Israel (Jonah 4:11).⁴⁸ Further beyond the historical narrative context of the book of Ruth, this particularist challenge is especially germane to the early post-exilic period, as narrated in Ezra-Nehemiah. As the repatriates returned to their homeland, they faced a situation of extreme threat to Israelite identity, not only from Persian imperialism but also from 'the people of the land'. Indeed, in noting the participation of non-Israelites in Israelite worship, the author of Ezra-Nehemiah may be presenting a subtle protest against ethnocentrism.⁴⁹ Along with others, I would suggest that the Ruth narrative resists a particularist reading of the Law, applied to intermarriage with foreigners.⁵⁰

reinforced by the womenfolk of the town, who proclaim: 'A son has been born to Naomi' (4:17).

⁴⁸ For a recent discussion, see Daniel C. Timmer, *A Gracious and Compassionate God: Mission, Salvation and Spirituality in the Book of Jonah* (NSBT; Nottingham: Apollos, 2011): 21-46.

⁴⁹ See Peter H. W. Lau, 'Gentile Incorporation into Israel in Ezra-Nehemiah?', *Biblica* 90 (2009): 356-73.

⁵⁰ The hybrid theme can also be drawn through to the New Testament. The Christian church is hybrid in nature, both Jew and Gentile. In the midst of divisions and tensions caused by hybridity, the apostle Paul presents a clear response resisting the particularist position: Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility; all Christians are one in Christ (Eph. 2:11-22; cf. Gal. 3:26-29; Col. 3:11). And the final heavenly vision depicts true unity amid hybridity: all nations, tribes, people and languages together worshipping God and the Lamb (Rev. 7:9-10).

7. Conclusion

It has been argued that elements of postcolonialism can be profitably used to read and apply Scripture. Although there are drawbacks with postcolonial criticism, it can be adapted by reorienting and modifying it according to biblical theological principles and methods.

Of course, some would object that confining the postcolonial approach to the boundaries of the biblical text neuters its energy and vitality, and restricts the creative interplay between text and reader. Granted; but I still maintain that the biblical text must be central for two reasons. First, superimposing a postcolonial ideology over and against the biblical text is a self-deconstructing move. By imposing a dominating reading strategy onto the text, the strategy becomes its own oppression; the voice of the text is suppressed by the grip of postcolonial ideology. The essential impulse of postcolonialism is thus undermined. Second, applying postcolonialism in its entirety, including casting aside the authority of Scripture, is to pay too high a price for hermeneutical vitality and creativity. One of the fundamental urges of a postcolonial approach is to oppose imperialising powers, to be liberated from authority—including the authority of Scripture. But for those who hold to Scripture as God's authoritative truth, any reading approach that marginalises the biblical text is eviscerated of any instructive power for faith and life. Hence, for evangelicals the biblical text must be central; if it is marginalised, we will find the emperor has no clothes.