Postcolonial Clashing with Empire in 1 Thessalonians 4–5

In interpreting ancient texts like the Pauline letters in their socio-historical settings, amidst and as part of the Roman imperial context, a postcolonial approach allows for a proper accounting of influences, impact and reciprocity between Imperium, communities and text, and is therefore valuable for showing up interpretive facets not necessarily catered or even allowed for by other approaches or methods. A postcolonial focus can also consider prevailing contemporary global contexts inscribed by postcolonialism and neocolonialism, and these are taken as recurring frames of reference. But the focus here is nevertheless on the heuristic value of a postcolonial optic for interpreting the Pauline letters in the New Testament. The very fibre of life, in its various its forms, was in the first century CE Mediterranean context determined by the seemingly omnipresent and omnipotent Roman Empire in its various guises. True to imperial ideology, the Empire was ubiquitous in tangible and visible ways. In the mass media of the day, through statues, coins, monuments and temples, the imperial families of times past and present and the reigning emperor and immediate family, made their presence felt, and at the same time made it clear what their presence stood for: power and control (see Crossan 2008: 59–73; Wright 2005: 64). The material reality of imperial imposition either constituted or largely determined the social fabric, the reality of life for first-century people. And this imperial-informed context was constantly reinforced by visual images and verbal and written decrees, through military presence and social systems such as patronage.

Postcolonial Kinds of Approaches to Paul

Not oblivious to the dangers and attraction of Empire, a postcolonial approach is not tantamount however to an anti-imperial reading, but extends its reach

to investigate and consider the imperial context in broader scope, incorporating but also going beyond the perceptions and workings of a state apparatus in its multilayered and complex ways. The political systems and mechanisms of Empire were ably assisted by various social constructs, some of which were in existence for a long time\(^1\) and were now portrayed as aligned with Empire,\(^2\) and others which were newly invented to carry the imperial ideology.\(^3\) Many of these social constructs, underwritten as they were by tradition, custom and convention, carrying social buy-in, tacit support and even overt promotion, functioned in subtle and sublime, public and confrontational ways to sustain uneven power relationships across the spectrum of first-century life. A post-colonial approach does not deny the reality of the victims whether in terms of their identity or status, or of the marginalised, of the disadvantaged, but goes beyond the binaries of oppressor and oppressed. It enquires both into the sustaining power of the imperial venture and its operations as well as the nature of life, structural and relational, of those living on the down side of power—and in that way, exposing and rewriting.

As noted above, the context for the creation and circulation of Pauline literature was determined by the Roman Empire. While on face value some of these texts appear to be “pro-imperial” (like Rom. 13:1–7), a wide range of them can be understood as reflecting power concerns in society broadly and the Jesus movement-communities in particular. Texts such as Romans 1:16–17 may echo and even parody concerns about imperial ideology and the emerging imperial cult (Elliott 1994). The reversals presented in 1 Corinthians 1:18–31 probably suggest that the current powers and their accompanying conventions, the normalised and domesticated imperial world, are overturned (Punt 2008c: 261–290). The hymn to Christ in Philippians 2:6–11 seems to make claims about the power of another lord (besides the emperor) for a community that has now

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\(^1\) Various conceptions, structures and conventions based on e.g. patriarchy and hierarchy springs to mind, as mechanisms with which the social control and dominion of males was ensured; family life was structured and regulated; friendships in their intersection with patronage were impacted upon, etc.

\(^2\) Not only was the household hierarchically seen as seedbed of the state, but even the body was understood as microcosmic, with the result that the control of both household and body were not considered as negligible within the imperial context. See Hollingshead (1998: 213); Martin (1995: 15–21); Punt (2010d: 76–91).

\(^3\) The imperial cult is one element which straddles the distinction between old and new, since ruler cults were not a new phenomenon in the East, but imperial Rome soon realised the ideological and socio-political value of promoting and supporting the Roman emperor cult. See Crossan (2008: 59–73), Friesen (2001), Price (1984).