Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s latest book opens with a metacritical survey of the emergent field of postcolonial biblical criticism and a reflection on the challenge of reading scripture in the context of global empire (Chapters 1-2); continues with exegetical analyses of 1 Cor. 11:2-16, Revelation (especially chs. 17-18) and 1 Peter (especially 2:11-3:12) in their respective relations to empire (Chapters 3-5); and concludes with discussion of imperial God language, the problematic dualism monotheism/polytheism, and the professional education of biblical scholars (Chapters 6-7). The book’s theoretical and methodological framework rather than its exegetical conclusions (which will surprise few familiar with Schüssler Fiorenza’s previous work) will be the main focus of this review.

The most valuable feature of this important book is its unrelenting and compelling insistence that postcolonial (Schüssler Fiorenza herself prefers the term “decolonizing”) criticism should not be separated from feminist criticism. She repeatedly raises the question of “whether a dual-systems analysis which understands imperialism and patriarchy as two independent social systems is able to comprehend the intersecting multiplicative kyriarchal structures of domination” (28). She sees herself as having long been engaged in the kind of critique for which she is calling. She takes me to task (119; cf. 130 n. 64) for not identifying feminist biblical criticism as an important source for postcolonial biblical criticism in my recent attempt to map the latter field ([Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament](Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006)). My view of her work in relation to that field had been shaped by Musa Dube ([Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible](St. Louis: Chalice, 2000)), who charges Schüssler Fiorenza and other white Western feminists with systemic blindness to issues of imperialism and colonialism in the biblical texts and their interpretation. Schüssler Fiorenza now responds to Dube’s influential critique in ways that I find persuasive (124 n. 44; 126 n. 51; 128 n. 58), arguing that Dube has failed to recognize certain important features of her work. This occurs in the context of a larger questioning of what Schüssler Fiorenza sees as a tendency in feminist postcolonial biblical scholarship “to construct a Manichean dualism between wo/men in the Third World and wo/men in the First World, which homogenizes and essentializes wo/men in either world” (123).

Schüssler Fiorenza presents herself, not without justification, as having been engaged for decades in postcolonial/decolonizing biblical criticism *avant la lettre* (126-29). Her important concept of kyriarchy does deserve more attention from postcolonial biblical critics than it has received, and it does equip her to intervene effectively in certain of the debates around empire currently underway in New Testament studies. In Chapter 3, in particular, she succeeds in running rings around certain of the prominent contributors to the Paul and empire debate, showing how an empire-critical approach to Paul that is not also a feminist approach limps on one leg, and
successfully “navigat[ing] between a rejectionist and an apologetic reading of Paul” (105 n. 103).

But Schüssler Fiorenza also hobbles herself unnecessarily. Her longstanding antipathy to postmodern theory, epitomized by deconstruction, delimits in advance her capacity to engage with the extra-biblical field of postcolonial studies and use it as a catalyst to extend her familiar lines of approach to the New Testament. Her assertion that “postcolonialism and poststructuralism have been developed without taking feminist questions into account” (112) is more than two decades out of date. And her further charge that “postcolonial criticism has not sufficiently focused on global structures of exploitation and domination” (116) fails to recognize major shifts in the field in the past decade. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whom Schüssler Fiorenza cites at some length and with apparent approval (118-19), epitomizes the brand of postcolonial studies that is rooted in feminism and attuned to the global, but she is only the most visible exemplar of an increasingly large sector of this vast field.

What struck me, indeed, on reading this book is the surprising extent of the common ground between Schüssler Fiorenza and the deconstructive wing of postcolonial studies. Her frequently dense prose is riddled with neologisms (e.g. “wo/man” and “wo/men”; “the ekklēsia of wo/men”; “kyriarchy” and “the kyriarchal”; “the*logy” and “the*logical”; “G*d”); she is suspicious of binary oppositions and regularly deconstructs them (e.g., “feminist reading”/“political reading” [89-95]; “pro-imperial Paul”/“anti-imperial Paul” [95-101]; “First World wo/men”/“Third World wo/men” [123-24]; “monotheism”/“polytheism” [213-20]); she is no less suspicious of “essentialism” (those whose readings of feminine imagery in Revelation do not correspond with her own are consistently labeled “essentialists” [143; 143-44 n. 101; 145-47]); and she is acutely sensitized to the global nature of contemporary empire (e.g. 36-40, 114-19). Last but not least, she neglects to note that deconstruction has never lacked utopian political concepts, such as Derrida’s “the democracy to come,” and such concepts beg comparison with her own “utopian” (70-71) concept of an “ekklēsia of wo/men,” which among other things, is a “radical democratic theoretical space” (71).

What, specifically, might Schüssler Fiorenza have to gain by attempting to employ postcolonial theory, not just as a convenient rhetorical foil but as a congenial theoretical resource? Constraints of space prevent me from noting more than one possibility here. In Chapter 5, she reads 1 Peter’s household code (“submission code” in her parlance) in the context of empire, both ancient and contemporary. In a turning point in her analysis she states: “the submission-code section … could be entitled: Become Colonial Subjects/Subalterns” (174, her emphasis). Yet the term “subaltern,” here and in the remainder of the chapter, is curiously weightless, lacking precise specification. Is it Gramsci’s subaltern, or the Indian Subaltern Studies Group’s subaltern, or Spivak’s subaltern, or an entirely different conception of subalternity? Engagement with Spivak, particularly, at this juncture (however critical) might have served to add further interpretive richness to her already incisive discussion of the early Christian