
Postcolonial readings of the Pauline corpus that focus on the role played by empire and imperialism have proliferated considerably in recent years. What troubles Joseph Marchal about the direction of this scholarship is its general neglect of gender as an essential consideration in postcolonial analysis. Such scholarship, Marchal argues at the outset of his book, ignores the fact that colonialist and imperialist discourse relies upon gendered rhetoric and associations. In an effort to rectify this neglect, and to set the stage for further interpretive work, Marchal discusses theories useful to a feminist, postcolonial analysis of Paul and applies them to the letter to the Philippians as a case study.

Marchal’s focus on the interstices of gender, nation, race, and class arises from his own personal and political experiences, something which he makes clear in the preface and throughout the book. For a “feminist teacher, scholar, and activist” (ix), the motivation for this work is to confront oppressive and exploitative interpretations of Paul (within and without academia) that have been applied with devastating consequences. Marchal makes clear that he does not subscribe to the idea of a “pure” method (p. 20), but at times his impassioned critique of “malestream” scholarship seems to implicate all work which does not make issues of gender, imperialism, and oppression its focus.

In an overview of postcolonial interpretations of Paul in Chapter 1, “Histories of Interpretation and ‘People’s History’ in Pauline Studies,” Marchal cites Kwok Pui-lan and Musa Dube as two scholars who have not neglected feminist analysis in postcolonial critique or vice versa. Kwok’s exhortation that scholars examine gendered power dynamics in “contact zones” and create “reconstructive readings as counternarrative” (quoted p. 22), along with Dube’s four programmatic questions for the analysis of ancient texts (quoted p. 23, 44), serve as points of departure for Marchal, especially in Chapters 2 and 4 (see below). For those unfamiliar with Dube’s work, Marchal’s use of her questions requires further justification and explication. For example, question 2, “Does this text encourage travel to distant and inhabited lands and how does it justify itself?” is used without explanation in Chapter 2. Given Marchal’s discussion of Paul’s travels in answer, Dube’s underlying definition of “travel” and its imperialist implications become clear, but these should be laid out beforehand.

Also in Chapter 1, Marchal includes a discussion of “people’s history,” a recent approach to historiographical work in biblical studies (championed by Richard Horsley). Marchal sees in people’s history, as a method that seeks to read history “against the grain” and focus on non-elites, a potential ally of feminist and postcolonial approaches. At the same time, he raises critical questions, such as whether a “history from below” would only reinforce harmful dichotomies of above/below, elite/people. Additionally, the term “people” is problematic: Does it include women? The subaltern? And does its use imply univocity for all such oppressed and silenced peoples? Adapting the approaches of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha, Marchal insightfully examines related historiographical works to expose the pitfalls and fissures of people’s history.

“A Hymn Within and a Heavenly Politeuma” (Ch 2), examines two passages from Philippians often cited in discussions of Paul’s use of imperial imagery and language: the
Christ hymn (Phil 2:6-11) and the verses surrounding the term *politeuma* (3:18-21). Marchal reviews interpretations of these passages that claim Paul is anti-imperialist (Horsley), is anti-Roman imperialist (Richard Cassidy, Erik Heene), or is relegating the Roman Empire to a secondary position under God’s empire (N. T. Wright, Efraín Agosto, Peter Oakes). In Marchal’s view, all of these analyses are lacking in that they do not include feminist readings or considerations of gender. Marchal sees a general inclination towards categorizing Paul as anti-imperialist, a symptom of neglect of issues of gender, since there is “a tension between a mostly malestream confidence and a feminist, postcolonial suspicion” (p. 45).

By applying Dube’s programmatic questions, Marchal rereads Paul as an upholder of imperialist, hierarchical thinking, who styles himself as an authority figure (like a governor) exercising power delegated him by the supreme emperor (God) over a feminized territory/colony, the community of Philippi. Difference within this community is to be excluded and consigned to destruction. The appeal to Euodia and Syntyche (female representatives of a feminized group) to “think the same thing” (4:2-3) is “not only a patriarchal gesture, but it is also an attempt to prove his imperial manhood” (p. 55). Marchal should say more, however, to support his claim that “Paul strains to code the community as colonized and feminine” (p. 55). That Paul characterizes himself and strengthens his claims in masculine/androcentric authoritative language is certain. But, given the lack of feminine language and rhetorical tropes (unless one counts the exhortation to the two women), it is not obvious how the Philippian community is actually feminized. That is, does masculine, imperialist, patriarchal rhetoric necessitate a feminized counterpart?

In “Rhetorics of Imitation and Postcolonial Theories of Mimicry” (Ch 3), Marchal analyzes the language of imitation in Philippians (and in Paul in general) using—but also critiquing—Elizabeth Castelli’s description of imitation rhetoric (the model is superior, the imitators forever inferior), Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial theory of mimicry (mimicry by those colonized as ambivalent and subversive), and Rey Chow’s definition of “coercive mimeticism,” the demand that an ethnic “perform or mime what is most recognizable as ethnic” (p. 75). Marchal’s most intriguing proposal in this discussion of mimicry is that Euodia and Syntyche may have been imitators of Paul or participants in coercive mimeticism in ways that were subversive or resistant to an erasure of difference.

Consideration of Euodia and Syntyche’s roles and identities continues in “Women in the Contact Zone” (Ch 4), which discusses the city of Philippi as a “contact zone,” a locale of multifarious cultures and interactions between groups of “different ethnic, cultic, geographic, political, and gendered origins” (p. 104). At this point, Marchal includes a brief historical contextualization of Philippi as a colony of Roman veterans settled in the aftermath of the Roman civil wars (there is a mention of the veterans in Ch 3). His foregoing material, however, would have benefited from an earlier placement of the history of Philippi, since, up to this point, there is no specific description of it in the context of the Roman Empire other than its classification as a *colonia*.

This rather brief consideration of Philippi detracts from some of Marchal’s readings. For example, as a territory partly given over to Roman veterans, the city does have a legacy of military presence, as Marchal points out several times. However, given that the last military conflict and settlement of veterans in the area occurred at least two generations before