Decolonisation as Challenge and Opportunity for New Testament Studies

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I am well aware that the term 'decolonisation' evokes a range of reactions, from eager anticipation to supressed groans or suspicion of wokery. But despite the sometimes polarised opinions, I hope to make the case that this is something we can all get on board with, something that is important for us all.

When I came to the end of a previous project in New Testament studies I found myself, as always, not with as many answers as I'd hoped, but certainly with new and pressing questions. In particular, I found myself thinking about the extent to which my orientation was framed by scholarly discussion from the US context, and more broadly from what we might call a Euro-American perspective. How, I found myself wondering, might a scholar in Nigeria, or Colombia, or India, or Myanmar look at all this? More fundamentally, I found myself wondering how such scholars would view the aims and tasks of New Testament studies. It is a simple observation, but one I have frequently found myself thinking about, that academic disciplines do not have any legal or written constitution that determines what they should do, or what they are for. Who decides what 'New Testament studies' – or biblical studies more generally – is meant to do, and what kinds of methods are ruled in or out? These are established by tradition and convention, and by the ways in which scholarship continues conversations over time, engaging with – often challenging and correcting – the esteemed scholars of the near or distant past.

As I began to think about these questions, my friend and colleague Louise Lawrence put me onto Raewyn Connell's marvellous book *Southern Theory*. In this book, Connell examines some of the major established ('Northern') perspectives in the field of social theory, subjecting them to critique, and then explores, through close engagement with specific examples, intellectual traditions from the Global South that have been largely ignored in this academic field. What Connell was attempting to do for social theory gave me a model for trying to think about New Testament studies. Here, the challenge is perhaps even more pressing, given the ongoing shift of Christianity to the Global South, and hence the location of people who have a religious stake in the New Testament.

What, on this model, might decolonisation look like? It seems to me to imply two key tasks. The first is to assess critically how the discipline's aims, methods, traditions, and epistemologies have been shaped by its origins in western Europe at a time concurrent with the colonial expansion of European power around the world. The second facet, the flip side of the first, is to attend seriously to the ways in which the discipline has been, and continues to be, practised in the Global South, in formerly colonised countries still shaped by the legacies and global inequities of the colonial era, in order to consider how this work might challenge and reshape the discipline moving forwards. We might also broaden that remit to include scholars located in the Global North, but who represent groups generally excluded from the formative history of the discipline. In other words, the specifically decolonising challenge, as I see it, is both critically to assess the enduring impact of the colonial era on the tradition and shape of the discipline, and constructively to consider how, moving beyond the power structures and Eurocentricism of that era, scholars working in other contexts might be given a more central place in defining the discipline's tasks and methods.

Let me give some illustrations of what this might look like in practice. Let's turn first to the established discipline of New Testament studies and the presentation of its history, which delineates the traditions and conventions that shape the modern academic discipline. Werner Georg Kümmel's *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*, published in German in 1958 and in English translation in 1972, offers a standard early survey, covering the period from discipline's post-Enlightenment origins in the eighteenth century up to1930. Kümmel's survey emphasises the importance of a consistently historical, 'scientific' approach, without dogmatic or credal bias, yet also stresses the theological importance of the task of such scientific enquiry. His survey moves through what, to those trained in the discipline, are standard issues and figures: Strauss and Baur, Schweitzer and Deissmann, Dibelius and Bultmann, to name but a few. The 'problems' of the New Testament that occupied these scholars and are highlighted by Kümmel include historical questions about the Gospels and their presentation of Jesus, the authenticity of the Pauline epistles, the parallels between New Testament material and Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions. A few observations

might highlight why this is a particular tradition, rooted in its particular socio-historical context, and open to significant critique.

First, in terms of issues, it is striking, in a work that covers New Testament scholarship from the 1800s up to 1930 that there is no mention whatsoever of slavery, despite this being a prominent topic in the New Testament texts, as well as in the ancient world more generally, and, of course, a topic of massive consequence in the colonial history of Europe. That is just one example, albeit an egregious one, of the ways in which certain questions are pursued, in certain ways, while others are left entirely out of view.

Second, in terms of people, the scholars mentioned by Kümmel (and listed in his biographical appendix) are all European (mostly German) and all men. In one sense this is unsurprising, merely reflecting a situation in which access to the world of scholarship was generally available only to men of sufficient means. But it is nonetheless an incomplete picture. One striking example is the absence of Jewish scholars like Abraham Geiger, despite the fact that they were following the same historical methods as their Christian contemporaries, and causing considerable debate through their publications. From a post-Holocaust perspective, we can see how Christian caricatures infected much of the supposedly scientific, historical biblical scholarship that Kümmel surveys, and we can also see how prescient were the comments of those Jewish scholars who insisted on Jesus' Jewishness.

Another striking thing about the scope of Kümmel's vision is that scholars outside Europe – even those in America at the time – are entirely ignored. Again, it is true that the majority of the scholarly energy invested in historical-critical study of the New Testament was located in European and especially German universities. But there are plenty of other figures and topics that might have been included. What about, as Musa Dube has highlighted, battles over the translation of the New Testament going on in Africa (and elsewhere)? Or the Indian intellectuals who debated with bishops and missionaries, drawing on New Testament texts, about Jesus and non-violence? Or, to pick one final example, the commentary on Romans published in 1861 by John Colenso, bishop of Natal, written from what Colenso calls 'a missionary point of view' and using Paul's letter to acknowledge the good in Zulu culture and to undermine any sense of English religious or ethnic superiority?

None of this features in Kümmel's survey, which serves to illustrate, I hope, what I mean by saying that the discipline is shaped by a particular tradition, by particular conversations and particular topics, when it could be narrated differently. However, to do so would take considerable labour, a reconfiguration of our established instincts and settled narrative, an engagement with work that has not previously been familiar, at least for those of us trained in western Europe or the USA. Given both the subconscious formation of our academic instincts — our integration into a tradition — and the practical demands on time (say, for teaching preparation), that reconfiguration is unlikely to happen easily or naturally.

Indeed, more recent surveys of the discipline continue this Euro-American focus, along with a concentration on the historical-critical enquiry set at the heart of the discipline. William Baird's massive three volume work (published between 1992 and 2013), for example, also offers no index entry on the subject of slavery, and no substantial discussion of the topic, despite his greater focus on American scholarship. Baird also makes explicit the restriction of his focus to European and American scholarship. In view of the enormity of his task, this is in a sense a reasonable and understandable limitation – but it perpetuates the problem I have been highlighting.

That, I hope illustrates something of the critical task in relation to the established traditions of the discipline. These traditions – reinscribed in surveys of their history and taught in introductory modules – reflect the particular concerns and specific methods developed in the context of post-Reformation, post-Enlightenment, colonially expanding Europe, and exclude perspectives and voices from elsewhere in the world, as well as voices from within Europe that did not fit into the white male Christian world of New Testament scholarship.

Let me turn, then, to the second facet of the decolonising task, that of attending to the work of scholars from the Global South, and more generally to the work of those who were excluded from the model of scholarship Kümmel and others place at the centre of the discipline.

The special issue of the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* may serve as an example here. It is indicative of the issues highlighted just now that I had to discover

potential contributors by asking people I knew, who often put me on to other people, in a lengthy network of communication that eventually enabled me to be in touch with scholars like Gesila, whom I'm honoured to have joining our conversation today and responding to this presentation. I wanted to hear from scholars who were both from, and working in, countries in the Global South, and also to hear a range of voices, Protestant and Catholic, evangelical and liberal, male and female. Of course, the ten scholars whose work is presented in the issue cannot adequately represent the vast range of work being done across many countries, but they do at least give us a range of perspectives to engage with.

As with any edited collection, I needed to give the contributors some orientation as to what I was looking for – but I wanted to do this without overly influencing or shaping their perspective. (As you might gather from the formulation of that sentence, issues of power are inevitably at work here, however we try to navigate them.) I posed one basic question for contributors: What do you see as the tasks, methods, and aims of New Testament studies, given the demands and priorities of the context in which you work? This key question was expanded as follows: 'Can you illustrate how this particular kind of quest for knowledge might proceed, for example, by presenting a reading of a specific New Testament passage; or a critique of dominant scholarly interpretation, to which you might offer an alternative; or by illustrating how different methods might offer a new perspective, or generate a different kind of knowledge? You may wish to relate this directly to discussions about "decolonising" our discipline, but that is up to you: I do not want to prescribe the perspective you should adopt!'

The essays in the volume are varied, reflecting diverse approaches and concerns, and engaging with a range of NT texts: reading the Gospels and the figure of Jesus in the context of military oppression in Myanmar; reading Matthew's story of the Canaanite woman through the lens of Maori identity and experience; reading Mark's exorcism stories in the context of African Pentecostalism; reading Luke 1-2 in the context of teenage pregnancies in the Philippines; reading Philemon in light of African cosmologies, hierarchies of power and slave dynamics. These are just examples from a longer list. Without downplaying the variety among the essays, several shared features

seem to me significant, especially as we try to consider what decolonising the discipline might entail.

The first feature is that the essays, in their various ways, do draw on 'northern' or Euro-American historical scholarship – as captured in standard commentaries and other scholarly works – to aid in the interpretation of NT texts, or to establish features of their historical context. This may be done in an explicit attempt to bring together 'traditional "Western" methods' and the cultural insights of '"contextual" indigenous reading' (so Fatilua Fatilua, from Samoa), or may include a critique of the ways in which the discipline – and specifically these traditional methods – devalues or excludes other epistemologies and perspectives (so Wayne Te Kaawa). This kind of engagement is no doubt fostered – required, even – when, as is often the case, Global South scholars undertake their doctoral work at universities in the Global North. But the interaction, I want to suggest, remains a significant feature to be accounted for in our model of a decolonised discipline.

The second feature, shared to greater or lesser extent by all the essays, is a concern to relate the interpretation of NT texts to the challenges of a specific contemporary context. Many of the essays use some kind of analogical method that seeks parallels between the NT text in its context and a specific modern context. Fatilua suggests that this kind of method seeks to provide illumination in both directions: shining fresh light on a New Testament text by bringing some new cultural dynamic to bear upon it, and offering fruitful insights into a contemporary challenge, and possible modes of action, via engagement with the New Testament.

This contextual emphasis is closely linked with a third feature, again exhibited to greater or lesser extent, and that is the way in which the essays represent a stance of *engagement* – in contrast to the kind of detachment that has long been the aspiration of historical analysis. In relating the NT texts to contemporary contexts and challenges, the authors are evidently concerned with contemporary political, ethical and theological issues, and interpret the NT from an explicitly theological, ecclesial, Christian perspective. This raises a spectre that has haunted NT studies throughout its modern history, beginning as it did – as Kümmel emphasises – with a concern for scientific, historical enquiry loosed from any credal or ecclesial control, though also

with a concern for theological relevance. However difficult the issue, it is one that requires our consideration in the specific context of the challenge to decolonise the discipline.

That leads me to some concluding thoughts on possible models for a decolonised discipline of NT (or biblical) studies. Connell's vision for a renewed social science includes reflections on precisely this issue, related in particular to different models of epistemology, or ways of knowing. One such model is what she terms the 'pyramidal model implicit in the mainstream economy of knowledge', in which knowledge and theory is generated in the metropole, 'trickling down' to the periphery. She rejects this model, since '[i]t discards much of the actual wealth of knowledge formation, it forces Southern experience into Northern moulds, and it legitimises stark inequalities within the world's intellectual workforce'. In short, it remains problematically hierarchical and colonial. [Such a model may seem already somewhat passé, but it has not disappeared, and is arguably implicit in the common distinction between contextually marked scholarship that is most often produced in Global South or otherwise minoritised scholarship, and the unmarked and often explicitly 'international' scholarship that is produced in the North.] As an alternative, many, she suggests, 'have opted for a mosaic epistemology', in which 'separate knowledge systems sit beside each other like tiles in a mosaic, each based on a specific culture of historical experience'. (Something like this, it seems to me, often pertains more or less implicitly in contemporary biblical studies.) But this model, Connell argues, does not adequately recognise the interactions and connections between cultures and regions, not least in the operations of colonial and imperial power. Nor does it sufficiently recognise the need for the development of knowledge 'on a world scale', or the importance of a quest for truth, with the basic principle that knowledge about society is 'corrigible by research'. Connell therefore proposes a third model, a 'solidarity-based epistemology' which aims for 'mutual learning on a world scale, in which different formations of knowledge are respected but enter into educational relations with each other' — including critique. In summary, '[w]hat "decolonizing sociology" means, then, is correcting the distortions and exclusions produced by empire and global inequality and reshaping the discipline in a democratic direction *on a world scale*'.

What might such a model look like in the world of biblical studies? One thing it rightly incorporates is the ongoing interaction, as I noted earlier, between different types of scholarship, Northern and Southern: decolonisation in the field of New Testament studies need not and cannot mean a complete rejection of the historical scholarship mostly produced in the North. But decolonisation should, I think, mean that learning and exchange of knowledge move in both directions, along with critical reflection and appraisal. We might suggest here a mutual learning to be exchanged between historical and contextual interpretation. The former valuably emphasises the 'otherness' of the text, and recognises the risk of making the text simply a mirror of our own context and concerns. The latter valuably emphasises the ways in which all our reading is done from somewhere, and is shaped by that location in all its various dimensions. Such mutual learning, on Connell's model, might indicate fruitful possibilities for a decolonised global discipline, but only if the discipline's power-structures have been changed such that these two facets of the discipline, historical and contextual, no longer stand in the hierarchical relationship of centre and margin, core and periphery, essential and optional.

Another way of putting that demand is to insist on a more egalitarian model of knowledge exchange. As Musa Dube puts it: 'someone must tell me why African theological programs and institutions feel that we need to study western theological works and scholars while the West does not feel a reciprocal need toward our theological contributions?' The *JSNT* special issue may again illustrate the challenge: we may or may not be specifically interested in Myanmar, Colombia, Rwanda, or the Philippines, and we may or may not agree with the case made in any particular essay. But each essay warrants our attention, offers us food for thought, new perspectives and distinctive concerns, that can and should shape our sense – whoever and wherever we are – of what the discipline is collaborating to achieve. For those of us trained in the tradition I outlined earlier, used, perhaps, to the pyramidal model of knowledge production, listening and attending carefully may be a major part of the present challenge.

That kind of generosity of attention will also have to span the tensions between what are sometimes called confessional and non-confessional approaches, approaches that are

theologically and ecclesially engaged, and those that aim to be purely historical, or are shaped by other sets of non-theological values. As I indicated earlier with reference to Jewish scholars, often excluded from the early history of the discipline, the discipline is impoverished – and more liable to do damage through prejudice and caricature – if it excludes interpreters who do not fit a certain mould, whether that mould be Christian, white, or male, or whatever.

As the evidence from other contexts suggests, our discipline is likely to be enriched and fruitful if it embraces both diversity and democracy, seeking a 'solidarity-based epistemology' based on dialogue and critique across traditions, contexts, and perspectives. Making the discipline more inclusive and equitable on a global scale will require a critical recognition of the extent to which the 'mainstream' discipline is the product of a specific historical context, through which a tradition of enquiry has been established. It will require that we retell the history of the discipline and reshape its future, setting it in global perspective, and recognising the various epistemologies, aims, and methods practised around the world as constitutive of 'New Testament studies' and equally demanding of our attention, whatever our own context. Such a polycentric model of the discipline will not, of course, lessen the need for rigorous debate and robust critical engagement, but those would take place within a discipline the tasks and methods of which are no longer determined by its European colonial origins.