

Response to ‘The Ethical Challenge of Decolonisation and the Future of New Testament Studies’

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sce**Hannah Malcolm** 

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David Horrell’s paper ‘The Ethical Challenge of Decolonisation and the Future of New Testament Studies’ proposes that both the public-facing and internal ethics of New Testament studies require close attention to the ‘who’ and ‘what’ of biblical interpretation—who is doing the interpreting that shapes academic and popular discourse concerning Scripture? And to what end is that interpretation being carried out?

In response, Horrell pushes beyond the now relatively mainstream observation that academic reading lists are homogenous and could be diversified. He proposes that we must provincialise—or ‘weird’—the Western traditions that have trained many of us, and, relatedly, pay close enough attention to our companions in the majority world that we might be equipped to ask again what the discipline itself is for. It is not that the work of making reading lists more diverse is old news, but that the reason for doing so ought not to be simply to add a little variety to a predominantly male, pale and stale, agenda. We could summarise Horrell’s framing as follows: genuine decolonisation of biblical scholarship does not welcome presumed outsiders in, but rather helps transform assumptions about the very idea that there is an inside (and thus academically rigorous) track, and an outside which is provocative but not normative.

Horrell goes on to offer an overview of how we might see the provincial nature of contemporary European biblical studies for ourselves: largely concerned with philological and historical-critical approaches to Scripture and related debates concerning authorship, dating, intertextual influence, and so on. While Horrell observes that this tradition has often tended to assume a Christian audience, participants in the tradition rarely make explicit reference to the particular context in which the reading has emerged. A primarily historical-critical approach to Scripture is of course not even representative of the history of European Christian readings of the Bible; it is a relentlessly modern mode. An anecdotal aside comes to mind here: I am training for ordained ministry, and in our ‘Further Biblical Studies’ class we read a range of interpretations of the Parable of the Good Samaritan from a variety of geographic and historical contexts. My fellow classmates were interested in and gently challenged by a couple of ‘non-Western’ or ‘postcolonial’ readings. But they seemed most disturbed by—and ready to outright reject—Augustine’s highly allegorical reading. We do not offer a ‘view from nowhere’, and such a reminder is

not a rejection of historical-critical approaches, or 'Western thought' more generally, but rather a welcome dose of humility in our sweeping application of them.

To help us imagine a decolonised future for biblical interpretation and Christian ethics, Horrell follows his overview of the historical-critical field by introducing *An Asian Introduction to the New Testament*, drawing out some of the ways this edited volume points to a different approach to both the ethics of biblical interpretation and what we imagine biblical ethics to be. Horrell points out that a key theme of the *Introduction* is making explicit the connection between the scriptural text and contemporary Asian experiences, finding points of identification for the contemporary reader and the world of the New Testament. This is a good example of a different framing for how we read the ethics of Scripture. Modern historical-critical readings of New Testament ethics—whether they are concerned with wealth, family, war, or the Church's worship—often operate with the assumption of distance from the text and its cultural world, using the historical-critical method to demonstrate how alien the first-century Middle East is to us. Instead, many of the contributors to this collection assume that it is possible to find experiential intimacy with the cultural world of the text and thus hear what it has to say to the contemporary Church. An underlying assumption here is that at least part of the work of interpreting scriptures ought to be theological and ethical, not merely socio-historical analysis. Horrell proposes that the collection, and works like it, offers us this 'extra step' to our reading of Scripture; articulating our own context and inviting the text to meet it. It is worth pausing to observe that this step sounds a lot like what many of us call 'homiletics'—and that one of the parochialisms of contemporary Western academia is to assume that biblical studies and exhorting the Church can be easily separated.

Horrell's paper opens a rich series of reflections for us to probe together in relation to the who and what of biblical interpretation, and what it would look like to genuinely decolonise New Testament studies. In what follows I offer two of my own.

The first reflection is concerned with the cross-pollination of scriptural readings in our hyper-connected world. If I might return to reading the Good Samaritan in theological college for a moment: it was not actually the postcolonial scholars we read which appeared most weird to my classmates, but Augustine's fifth-century allegorical imagination. Are the varieties of contemporary biblical scholarship as 'weird' to each other as we might like to think? Or do our global economic Empires still iron out genuinely culturally distinctive readings of Scripture? Honesty about the influences of supposedly 'Western' academic norms on 'non-Western' scholarship—and vice versa—does not detract from the urgency of decolonisation, but simply prompts us to recognise that the distinctions between approaches in a hyper-connected world are not as wildly different as we might be tempted to imagine. Most of the contributors to *An Asian Introduction to the New Testament*, for example, did their postgraduate study at a Western university. And, as Horrell points out, many of them still begin with some basic questions which emerge out of historical-critical approaches to text. This does not make their contributions less 'Asian', but rather means that we need to abandon a purist imagination which prevents us from seeing the overlaps and blurred lines between supposedly distinct modes of academic enquiry.

One of the more critical questions we might raise about these overlaps is concerned with English as the academic language—can we genuinely talk about decolonising a discipline while the expectation is that participants must be fluent in English? This is both a question of narrowing participation but also of the ways that language shapes thought.

The English language carries with it certain provincial assumptions, and these are also absorbed and rehearsed in the process of participating in the discipline in English. This is not an easy problem to solve, but it is a vitally important one.

The second (related) reflection I offer is concerned with the kinds of decolonised interventions into the discipline which we are willing to accept—and whether our decolonised curricula actually reflect the contemporary diversity of approaches to Scripture, or whether they are more likely to reflect those non-Western readings which have been deemed permissible in small doses to a liberal Western mainstream. To give one small example: the twentieth-century Liberation Theology tradition is now a go-to ‘diversity’ intervention in many biblical studies’ reading lists. It has begun to take on a certain level of Western academic respectability, even if still regularly treated with suspicion. But as Singaporean theologian Simon Chan has pointed out, the liberation theological tradition as articulated in academia (or, as he puts it, ‘the intelligentsia’) is not necessarily a reflection of what he calls the ‘grassroots’ of Asian Christian communities, despite it being treated as such by many Western academic institutions.¹ If we were looking for some genuinely ‘provincial’ modes of biblical study, Chan and others have proposed—to give one example—that many oppressed Christian communities are far more closely aligned with Pentecostal modes of thought,² which are still radically underrepresented in the academy.

What kinds of provincial readings of Scripture have we placed outside the frame of our ethical enquiry, and is our reasoning more substantial than simply finding some approaches too alien to our own assumptions that their modes of thought make us uncomfortable? There are of course good reasons to exclude certain approaches to the ethics of Scripture and scriptural ethics. From within my own Western context, the cynicism of hyper-scientistic analysis and prosperity gospel readings come to mind. But discerning our reasons for exclusion and inclusion—and for whose flourishing we have made those decisions—plays a vital role in stripping away some of colonialism’s imaginative power.

One of the anxieties I have encountered amongst those who resist decolonising proposals is that in doing so we might also abandon the shared intellectual basis upon which the discipline has operated for the last several hundred years, and thus find ourselves unable to talk meaningfully to each other. But Horrell’s paper points us in the direction of a more hopeful future for the discipline. Provincialising our readings of Scripture may help us to see the past and present of the Church more clearly; better anticipating her shared and diverse calling in the world, drawn into closer communion, and knowing whose body she truly is—not ours, but Christ’s.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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1. Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), pp. 26–27. See pp. 23–27 for an extended discussion of the Western academic reception of Asian theology.
 2. Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, p. 27.

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