

## **‘Decolonising New Testament Studies’ (BNTC Panel, Manchester 2025)**

David G. Horrell, University of Exeter

I’m very grateful for the invitation to participate in this panel. I’m going to focus my brief remarks on the experience of putting together the special issue of *JSNT* on decolonising New Testament studies – including identifying some of the dilemmas and challenges it left me with. But first a brief definition of what, for me, the challenge of decolonisation entails: First, grappling critically with the legacies of the formation of our modern academic discipline in a particular period of Western European history, coincident with Europe’s colonial expansion. Second, thinking about how to reshape that discipline in a global context, specifically by incorporating into the centre of the discipline the voices, perspectives, and knowledge of the kinds of people who were excluded from the discipline’s early formation. Raewyn Connell’s *Southern Theory* was an especially significant stimulus to thinking about how an academic discipline might be reshaped via this twin-headed strategy.<sup>1</sup> Coming to see this as an important challenge was provoked by many things, but two points of realisation have been especially significant. One was coming to see how much the framing of my research interests, questions, agenda, was set by the intellectual context of ‘the West’, the USA in particular. The other was the rather simple thought that the aims and methods of an academic discipline like ours are not set down in some legally binding constitution, but are established by tradition, by history, and by scholarly conversations that extend across the centuries. In light of these two thoughts, I found myself wondering more and more what a New Testament scholar in, say, Nigeria, or the Philippines, or India, or Myanmar would see as the key challenges for the discipline, what they would take as the tasks of New Testament scholarship, or the methods appropriate to those tasks.

That brings me to the *JSNT* special issue... and I’m particularly grateful to Jane Heath and Jennifer Strawbridge, former editors of the Journal, for supporting the idea from the outset. I wanted to invite contributors who were from, and working in, a range of contexts in the Global South. And here is my first dilemma: in selecting, inviting, and

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<sup>1</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2007).

editing the work of contributors, I am of course in a position of power, of gatekeeping – and that at least needs to be acknowledged such that it can be subjected to critical reflection. It is indicative of my Euro-American education and focus that among the ten scholars who ended up writing for the volume, I knew the names of only one or possibly two of them at the outset. Identifying others entailed contacting people I did know, who put me onto others, and so on, until I had assembled what seemed a good range of scholars from a wide range of locations.

I tried to give contributors a fairly open invitation, part of which went like this:

“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? 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 ‘decolonizing’ our discipline, but that is up to you: I do not want to prescribe the perspective you should adopt!”

Preparing the submissions for publication involved considerable editorial input, and a lot of to-and-fro between editor and contributor. That raised another dilemma: how far to conform submissions to the established expectations of a (western) academic journal without erasing the distinctive voices and perspectives of the authors? Put differently, and more broadly, are there criteria for gauging scholarly quality other than those that emerged from the post-Enlightenment European academy? How might other epistemologies be respected and represented, but still subjected to critical scrutiny and academic rigour?

Finally, some characteristics that emerged from the collection as a whole, and which also raise plenty of issues for discussion:

1. Contributors do engage with, draw and build upon the kinds of historical-critical work characteristic of the Euro-American mainstream, though they can also be critical of the omissions, prejudices, and epistemology of this mainstream.

There's much to discuss here, but it suggests to me that decolonisation in our field will not mean some kind of 'delinking' from the established mainstream, nor the rejection – or even extinction – of established modes of historical-critical enquiry, even if it does mean considerable critical re-evaluation and repositioning of this mode of scholarship.

2. In various ways, contributors relate their reading of New Testament texts to specific features and challenges of their contemporary context. Fruitful interpretation often involves some kind of juxtaposition or analogy between the text in its ancient setting and the interpreter in their contemporary location, similar to the 'associative hermeneutics' presented by Love Sechrest in her recent *Race and Rhyme*. That kind of explicit acknowledgment of contemporary context stands in contrast to the kind of detachment that is the established if somewhat illusory norm in historical scholarship. How do these two modes of scholarly interpretation stand alongside one another? What are the implicit values of each, and how is each best evaluated, without simply reimposing the superiority of the western 'scientific' method?
3. Along with their contextuality, contributors also make explicit various kinds of theological, ecclesial, ethical and political engagement – in ways that bump awkwardly into any expectation that scholarship will be non-confessional, or will keep theological, ethical, or political commitments politely out of sight. A tension between history and theology – to put it in its most compact form – runs throughout the modern history of our discipline, so in one sense this issue is nothing new. But it does have new dimensions and raise new challenges. Since Global South scholarship often seeks to be theologically, ecclesially, politically and ethically engaged, there seems to me a fresh imperative to ensure that such approaches can be validated at the centre of our discipline, and not merely at the margins. The key question, for me, is perhaps something like this: How can approaches and interpretations that reflect genuinely different perspectives, worldviews, and epistemologies find a place at the centre of our discipline, and what kinds of critical appraisal can operate across such boundaries of difference? Working at an answer to that question would, I think, lead us in the

direction of Raewyn Connell's vision for a decolonised sociology, one which aims at 'correcting the distortions and exclusions produced by empire and global inequality and reshaping the discipline in a democratic direction *on a world scale*',<sup>2</sup> where 'different formations of knowledge are respected but enter into educational relations with each other'.<sup>3</sup>

## References

- Connell, Raewyn. "Decolonizing Sociology." *Contemporary Sociology* 47, no. 4 (2018): 399-407.
- . "Meeting at the Edge of Fear: Theory on a World Scale." *Feminist Theory* 16, no. 1 (2015): 49-66.
- . *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2007.

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<sup>2</sup> Raewyn Connell, "Decolonizing Sociology," *Contemporary Sociology* 47, no. 4 (2018): 399-407 (402, italics original).

<sup>3</sup> Raewyn Connell, "Meeting at the Edge of Fear: Theory on a World Scale," *Feminist Theory* 16, no. 1 (2015): 49-66 (59).