

Perdue, Leo G., and Warren Carter. *Israel and Empire: A Postcolonial History of Israel and Early Judaism*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015. \$39.95 ISBN 0567243281

Reviewed by Gerald I. Parks II

Postcolonial biblical criticism, while not a new endeavor, has very few book length treatments outside of the New Testament Text. Leo Purdue's work takes postcolonialist thought and surveys the history of Judah and Israel as they are conquered by larger nations as recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Purdue is interested in looking closer at the ancient story informed by postmodern historiography. Because there are no 'pure' lines of postcolonial literary critique to draw from, Purdue uses the 'cafeteria style' approach and chooses several different thinkers and concepts to undergird his work. In this review I will highlight the Introduction/ theoretical framing of Purdue's writing, then I will review several pieces of the remaining chapters where the author has used his postcolonial lens to re-read the history of the nations of Judah and Israel as they were ruled by larger nations.

*Israel and Empire* is organized into an introduction and six sections (chapters, each section is separated into smaller pieces labeled with roman numerals). The introduction explores the dynamics of 'power' and how power is acquired and used by both people who are privileged and those who are marginalized. The first chapter presents the many 'considerations' of both imperial rule and postcolonial criticism. Chapters two, three, four, five, and six each explore the history of the nations Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome as they conquered and ruled Judah and Israel. Key features of each chapter include a historical introduction of each dominant nation leading up to, during, and at the decline of their imperial rule, the dominant group's conquest metanarrative, and examples of resistance from the colonized nations of Judah and Israel.

In the introduction the term empire is explained as systems of international domination based on power, ideology, and control. While the concept of 'empire' may seem a thing of the past, this form of political and economic rule is still in existence today, according to Purdue. Purdue states, the capitals of empires, grow economically and militarily strong and launch efforts to conquer and rule not only their own but also foreign peoples and centers (1). The strength of an empire is founded on its economic policies and its military force. However,

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“martial law alone cannot maintain the sovereignty of an empire” (1). Therefore, empires indoctrinate their citizens through civic, educational, and religious rhetoric, all different products of social power. All used to mold social character. Purdue follows the work of sociologist Michael Mann and argues that there are four sources of social power; ideology, military strength, economic resources, and socio-political administration. It is here that Purdue builds a platform for the use of ‘discourse’ as the mediator of the relationships between knowledge and power, using the work of Michel Foucault (2). Purdue concludes the introduction providing information on what he considers the discourse of resistance. Here Purdue lifts the work of James Scott. Scott believes there are two types of discourse between the ruler and the ruled, this discourse is ‘public transcript’ most utilized by the dominant group, and hidden transcript, this is utilized by the oppressed group; the latter is considered a form of resistance. “In resistance to hegemonic rulers, marginalized people engage in a criticism of power in the variety of public and private discourse and activities at their disposal (3).”

In the first chapter the author gives his definition of postcolonial criticism. Purdue’s definition is a combination of the thoughts of Stephen Slemon, R. S. Sugirtharajah, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhaba. Purdue pens:

[The] critical undermining of imperial culture and rule [that] seeks to detect stereotypical and colonial elements and then to eliminate them from both the writings of scholars and the colonized mind of the former colonials. The postcolonial evaluation of history, official documents, and missionary reports strives to expose the significant levels of bias in Western writings and scholarship, including historiography, in their portrayal of the colonized (6).

Purdue then goes on to lay the foundation for his historical survey, first by using the work of Gayatri Spivak and the term ‘subaltern’, inferior or subordinated rank. The subaltern could also be understood as the ‘other’, the people who are unfamiliar to and unknown by the subjective knowledge of the conqueror (7). Another significant part of Purdue’s lens is its understanding of ‘racism’ as a major part of the practice of imperialism. The writing of Frantz Fanon is used to support Purdue’s

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findings, Fanon regarded race as an intrinsic part of the colonial project (8).

Using the work of Said and his term 'orientalism', Purdue explains how the western mind has been imposed upon the east (10). Said argues that imperialism is not solely enforced by military conquest, but also by epistemic violence of spoken and written discourse done to the defining cultural traditions of the conquered (11). Bhabha supports this claim then adds, "The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origins in order to justify both conquest and the establishment of systems of administration and instruction (15)." Purdue highlights three particular terms that are commonly used by Bhabha, that Purdue will also make use in his readings. Ambivalence is when the colonized is conflicted with the desire to be the ruler and the repulsiveness of domination (15). Hybridity is the reality that "cultures are mixtures and not discreet entities (16)." And finally mimicry, this is the colonized "adopting, adapting, and altering the culture of the colonizer (18)."

Purdue's work is based upon Historiography, this involves three major concerns:

- 1) To discover the material and cultural data of past civilizations and to reconstruct the human thought and behavior that produced them in particular times and places.
- 2) To examine the ways the various pasts of these civilizations have been reconstructed and interpreted by later historians from antiquity to the present.
- 3) The informed attempt of the modern historian to interpret the peoples and events of civilizations in order to comprehend their past experiences and preeminent understandings and events by using theories that shape the histories of the contemporary period (26).

Purdue seeks to recover the reality of life in captivity for the nations of Judah and Israel. The premises of this work are based on the post colonialist objectives of Sugirtharajah. These objectives are:

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1) post colonialist seek to deconstruct the grand narrative of the colonizing and neo-colonizing Western empires (22). Post colonialist argue for the value of their own cultural heritage and seek to resist efforts to present and define the conquered as cultural and intellectual inferiors (22). And 2) Post colonialist often realize that multiple interpretations of culture, civilization, and history exist, not only the global community of culture, past and present, but also in their own nations regions. Post colonialist stress readings that are both dialogical and pluralistic in the construal of meanings. Dialogue should not only occur between colonizer and colonized, colonialist and post colonialist, rich and poor, powerful and impotent, those in the center and those on the margins, but also between different genders, races, and ethnicities (24).

The remaining five chapters share Purdue's findings from different points of captivity for the nations of Judah and Israel at various times in antiquity. Each chapter opens the nation building history of the colonizing nation, a history marked by violence, successive leadership, and a divine right of domination. Purdue is careful to reconstruct the metanarrative of domination for each conquering nation, and the metanarrative of resistance for both the nations of Judah and Israel during their captivities. In most places Purdue attempts to use the biblical text to support his historiography.

As a graduate student of the Hebrew Bible, with particular interests in both gender and race, I can see both the benefits and limitations of Leo Purdue's work. First, I agree that approaching history, using postmodern thought frees the researcher of the absolutism demanded by the enlightenment period. This approach allows for more creativity and honors the voices of the marginalized historian that has been so often silenced. I can imagine Purdue's work providing a much needed starting point of exegesis, for both the seasoned biblical scholar and the novice Bible reader; Purdue does this historical work well. However, in my opinion, Purdue's work limits us to history alone, particularly for African- American biblical scholarship that has always attempted to make the biblical experience relevant to their contemporary

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context, Purdue might have chosen a marginalized group of today and compared and contrasted their histories of oppression and their metanarratives. While this may have added some extra work, the benefit of such examples could change some privileged approaches to reading the biblical text. I commend Purdue on this undertaking and I recommend this text for those interested in Postcolonial biblical scholarship.