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The epistemological irony of postcolonialism: A perspective from Paul's flesh-Spirit dichotomy

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Among other things, postcolonialism claims to react against western epistemology. Although postcolonial approaches react to the traditional tendency in colonialism to silence the Other by political, social and economic structures and ideologies, non-western identity is often categorised in a way in which identity formation is argued to be based on a naturalistic process of social construction and myth-making. The way in which identity is perceived in western epistemology, including the in-Christ identity, is largely influenced by a naturalistic stance, which is a prominent tendency in western epistemology. In contrast, non-western epistemologies often perceive spiritual beings and powers to be real, which are considered to intervene in human affairs. The irony within most postcolonial approaches is thus that they critique western power structures but continue to utilise western, naturalistic epistemologies to deconstruct religious experience. In this contribution, this discrepancy is explored and evaluated against the often-misunderstood flesh-Spirit dichotomy in the Pauline corpus.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: In respect of epistemology, this research overlaps with the field of philosophy, and in respect of identity theory it overlaps with the field of social sciences. The discussion of postcolonial biblical criticism itself is interdisciplinary in that it involves New Testament exegesis, its underlying epistemology as well as its interpretative methodologies.

Keywords: postcolonialism; flesh; spirit; epistemology; Paul; naturalism; supernaturalism; identity; emic.

Introduction

Postcolonial biblical criticism has become a prominent approach in biblical studies. Although not constituting a specific methodology but rather a certain kind of ideology criticism (Davies 2013:21; Punt 2015:2, 11, 13, 22), in practice, it inevitably involves certain epistemological assumptions. In this article, the nature of postcolonial biblical criticism will briefly be described, after which its main epistemological underpinnings will be identified, including the epistemological presuppositions of identity formation theory. As a main aim, an emic reading of Paul's often-misunderstood flesh-Spirit dichotomy will be conducted in respect of its relevance to the revaluation of the operative epistemologies that typically underlie postcolonial biblical criticism. It may be asked if a true emic reading of Paul is possible. Admittedly, to conduct a study of the Pauline literature in English and rely on Western scholarship to do so, are already a few steps away from a true emic reading. The idea is, however, to stay as close to the Greek text as possible and refrain from imposing external, Western interpretative models onto the text.

The nature of postcolonial biblical criticism

In postcolonial biblical criticism, one of the main aims is to address the silencing of the Other via 'the colonial strategy of posing the colonized as the inverse of the colonizer' (Punt 2015:13–14). It promotes the betterment of people that were historically marginalised and colonised based on geopolitical hierarchies (Spencer 2012:56; cf. Moore 2006:14–16; Pears 2010:133). Importantly, postcolonial biblical criticism also involves a kind of epistemological critique of western civilisation, universalism and Eurocentrism, sharing common ground with poststructuralism and Marxism (Punt 2015:18). In recent theories of decoloniality, the apparent universality of knowledge and meaning-making has been questioned, associating it with a colonial history in which the hegemony of Europe has been established. According to these theories, knowledge that was produced elsewhere might have been recognised, but would have limited worth (Menezes de Souza 2021:xiv).

Naturally, all academic disciplines rest on the foundation of an episteme, which can be described as the network that surrounds and connects different discourses from different cultures into one system, indicating what knowledge is during a historical period (Runesson 2010:33–35, 38). Yet, postcolonial biblical criticism specifically resists imperial assumptions and ideologies by seeking the interdependence between nations, races, genders, economics and cultures, which is also the reason why it embraces the construction of hybrid and liminal identities. The latter are directed against totalisms, essentialisms and dichotomies that are akin to colonialism (Punt 2015:19, 27–28; Sugirtharajah 2012:46–47, 542–543).

Postcolonial biblical criticism endeavours in the rethinking of traditional biblical interpretation, especially in as far as it is influenced by colonialism, globalism, forms of neocolonialism and the like. It aims to give a voice to the marginalised and thus is a process to 'rewrite and correct' (Punt 2015:1, 5). In many postcolonial approaches, the Bible itself is critiqued as being a colonial document in that it is asserted that 'colonialism dominates and determines the interest of biblical texts' (Sugirtharajah 1998:19). The formation of both the biblical texts and the canon is perceived by many as imperialist constructs (Punt 2015:33–34). Inevitably, within postcolonial approaches, the authoritative status of the Bible and even its usefulness in non-western countries such as Africa is thus reconsidered (Punt 2015:34; Sugirtharajah 2012:82).

However, according to Anna Runesson (2010:23), from a postcolonial perspective, the methodologies used in New Testament studies can still be considered as 'part of an epistemological colonialism and neocolonialism', rooted in western rationalistic enlightenment, belonging to 'the episteme-embedded discourses that were part of [*the cultural aspects of*] the colonial enterprise'. Neocolonialism can be considered as a form of 'economic colonialism' that received its structure from colonialism, constituting an ongoing colonial reality, for example, to have huge international loans to sustain an economy (Runesson 2010:25–26). Although neocolonialism goes beyond colonialism in many respects, it does not transcend its colonial underpinnings. It could also be argued that western scholars who engage in postcolonial studies might (unconsciously) still be acting within the structures of coloniality.

Defining the epistemologies behind postcolonialism and the theory of identity formation

A prominent aspect of traditional western epistemology is that it is based on *naturalistic presuppositions*. Naturalism can be described as the view that 'everything is a part of the world of nature and can be explained using the methodology of the natural sciences' and that the 'scientific method is the only way to secure our knowledge'. A link between naturalism and colonialism itself can also be pointed out in

that according to recent theories of decoloniality, Eurocentric knowledge has traditionally been considered as 'the sole source of valid scientific knowledge' (Menezes de Souza 2021:xiv). Naturalism is against supernaturalism in that it 'accepts explanatory monism rather than dualism or pluralism' (Bunnin & Yu 2004:458–459). In other words, in a supernaturalistic epistemology, it is not that knowledge is incomprehensible to the human intellect, it is rather that *both* the natural and the supernatural are considered as sources of knowledge. According to *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Audi 2015):

> [*S*]ince supernaturalism affirms that God is purely spiritual and causally independent of physical things, naturalists hold that either belief in God must be abandoned as rationally unsupported or the concept of God must be reconstituted consistently with naturalism. (p. 1057)

According to Jacob Sherman (2018:349), another aspect of western epistemology is the tendency to 'linguistify' the sacred, which is an after-effect of the so-called linguistic turn, and means that the sacred or the supernatural is evacuated of the transcendental authority that it once had. This is done by analysing, interpreting or critically deconstructing and reconstructing the textual, the linguistic and the symbolic. He argues that the method of linguistifying supernatural elements in cultures is to bring the legitimisation of the cognitive or normative claims of God 'down into the *purely human sphere*, the cultural, the intersubjective space constituted by communicative exchanges among rational human beings' (emphasis original).

In respect of religious studies, a naturalistic epistemology largely prevails, which is the reason why Sherman (2018:342) asks for 'a revaluation of the role of philosophy within religious studies'. He argues that philosophy of religion needs to 'deprovincialize', especially that there should be a 'postcolonial revaluation of emic epistemologies'. An emic approach is considered to be an 'insider's view', whereas an etic approach 'provides an observer's account of the subject's beliefs or practices, an account that generally purports to a certain universalizability or neutrality' (Sherman 2018:342–343). Sherman (2018:346–347) expresses the concern that 'the language and epistemic categories that emerge from modern western scientific and philosophical traditions may be inadequate and even destructive when it comes to the analysis of knowledge claims from other cultures'. However, in the academy, normative secularity in which 'naturalistic etic perspectives' are preferred, is still dominant (Sherman 2018:356). Harold Roth (2008) calls this tendency 'cognitive imperialism', which he argues involves subtle ethnocentrism. For Sherman (2018:347), emic epistemologies in which ontological entities such as gods, angels and demons are considered to be real[1] and to be constitutively involved in the production of religious knowledge, thus need to be revaluated. This does not imply that supernaturalism should be conflated with emic approaches *as such*. Neither does it

....
1.For example, both in African culture and the 1st-century Greco-Roman world (see Darko 2020:165–166, 210).

mean that postcolonial studies *do not generally allow for emic approaches*. The point is rather that the cultures that are studied by western (postcolonial) scholars are often embedded within epistemologies that radically differ from that of the researcher, and that the danger is always that the researcher might impose his or her epistemology onto such a culture and in so doing silence the voice of the Other. Hence, the revaluation of emic epistemologies should more readily be an active part of postcolonial approaches in that the epistemologies of the Other are not only acknowledged but seriously considered (Sherman 2018:361).

The irony in western postcolonial approaches is thus that western naturalistic epistemologies are generally the norm, even if left unacknowledged. A good example of this tendency is the notion within initial postcolonial scholarship to demythologise empire. In these kind of approaches, on the one hand, the aim was to unveil voices and resistances that are suppressed by 'the vectors of imperial power that make empire and its organising mythologies possible' (Runesson 2010:188). On the other hand, however, the notion of demythologisation was often carried forth into the interpretation (or deconstruction) of stories involving exorcisms such as in Mark's Gerasene demoniac, in that the demons were viewed not as actual spiritual entities but as symbolically representing political oppressors (Crossan 1994:90; Horsley 2001:121–148). Of course, much of western theory that wants to make sense of demons has a long history of demythologisation, going back to Rudolf Bultmann (Runesson 2010:200). Another example is the approach of Gerhard van den Heever (2001:4, 5, 16), who, on the one hand criticised the fact that in the past, indigenous people in Africa 'were described and understood in European-derived categories' but on the other hand saw identity formation as 'a social fantasy' and a process of myth-making in which religion is socially constructed in a continually changing manner. Somewhat more recently, Caroline Johnson Hodge (2007:5) considered Paul to be 'constructing a myth of origins for gentile followers of Christ' just as other ethnic groups 'reconstructed histories, lineages, and the collective myths of whole peoples'. Together with Bruce Lincoln (1999:207), Hodge (2007:5) sees the process of myth-making as 'ideology in narrative form'. The view of religion as a social construction of myths for ideological purposes (cf. Fitzgerald 2000:12, 245, 2007:8, 14; McCutcheon 2001; Weibe 2000) is akin to a naturalistic, western, etic approach to cultures, as is explained by Kevin Schilbrack. He reasons that 'the modern western scholar who uses "religion" for premodern or non-western examples *is* imposing a foreign, etic concept' (emphasis original) on such cultures (Schilbrack 2012:103). He maintains that western scholars' 'goal is to exclude theology as a way of thinking from the academy, so that the academy will be wholly naturalistic' (Schilbrack 2012:114). Of course, Schilbrack's comment in this regard can be seen as somewhat of a generalisation, but at least Schilbrack draws attention to the *prevailing naturalistic epistemology* of western scholarly enterprise and the need to recognise it and critically engage with it.

Another area in which naturalistic epistemologies prevail, which often relates to postcolonial studies, is the area of identity formation. In western scholarship, identity formation within any given culture is normally described in an etic manner as a socially directed process of negotiation between group norms and boundaries, cultural phenomena such as ethnicity, honour and shame, patron and client relationship and kinship language and relations (cf. Buell 2005; Campbell 2008; Hodge 2007; Tucker 2010, 2011). In theory, social categorisation takes place, based on intergroup behaviour in which there exists a process of discrimination against the outgroup and favouring the ingroup (Esler 2014:14–15). While this social reality of identity formation is undeniable, it could be asked, for example, if there is also a transcendental dimension to identity formation within a religious community. In other words, is identity formation within a community of faith a purely socially directed process or is there also an aspect of identity formation that is derived from divine intervention? Obviously, the latter possibility is dependent on one's epistemology and the room one leaves for the supernatural or that which is transcendent. This possibility will further be explored within the discussion of the flesh-Spirit dichotomy in Paul with a specific focus of the operative epistemology that is at work beneath his flesh-Spirit dichotomy.

The σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy in the Pauline corpus

It might be asked at this point how Paul's σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy relates to postcolonial approaches and epistemology. As will become clearer later on, a certain understanding of Paul's σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy is often used as point of reference to perceive marginalised Others. Yet, while the juxtaposition of σάρξ ['*flesh*'] and πνεῦμα ['*Spirit*'] is a prominent feature of the Pauline discourse, it is a contrast that is easily misunderstood and arguably often misunderstood in postcolonial discourse. One of the challenges in interpreting this dichotomy is the fact that the lexemes σάρξ and πνεῦμα are used in varying contexts, and thus have a wide range of meaning.

Lexical definitions

According to Bauer Lexicon et al. (2021:813–814), σάρξ in the Pauline corpus can denote (1) 'the material that covers the bones of a human or animal body' (e.g., 2 Cor 12:7; Gl 6:13); (2) 'the physical body as a functioning entity' (e.g., 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 7:1); (3) 'one who is or becomes a physical being' (1 Cor 1:29; Gl 2:16); (4) a 'human/ancestral connection' (e.g., Rm 1:3; 4:1) and (5) 'the outward side of life' (e.g., 1 Cor 1:26; 2 Cor 11:18). Πνεῦμα can mean (1) 'air in movement' (e.g., Th 2 2:8); (2) 'that which animates or gives life to the body' (e.g., Rm 1:3); (3) 'a part of human personality' (e.g., 1 Cor 5:3–7; 7:1); (4) 'an independent noncorporeal being, in contrast to a being that can be perceived by the physical senses' (e.g., Tm 1 4:1); (5) 'God's being as controlling influence, with focus on association with humans' (e.g., 1 Cor 2:14; 3:16); (6) 'the Spirit of God as exhibited in the character or activity of God's

people or selected agents' (e.g., 1 Cor 2:4; Th 1 1:5); (7) 'an activating spirit that is not fr. God' (e.g., 1 Cor 12:10; 2 Cor 11:4) and (8) 'an independent transcendent personality' (e.g., 2 Cor 13:13; Bauer et al. 2021:738–742).

In respect of σάρξ, Louw and Nida's (1988:94, 102, 105) definitions of domains 8.63 ('the flesh of both animals and human beings'), 8.4 ('a living body') and 9.11 ('humans as physical beings') correspond with the first three meanings of Bauer et al. (2021) respectively. According to Louw and Nida (1988:105, 112, 262, 322–323, 587), other possible meanings of σάρξ include the following: 'human nature, with emphasis upon the physical aspects' (domain 9.12); 'a relatively large group of persons regarded as being biologically related' (domain 10.1, e.g., Rm 11:14); 'the psychological aspect of human nature which contrasts with the spiritual nature; in other words that aspect of human nature which is characterised by, or reflects typical human reasoning and desires in contrast with those aspects of human thought and behaviour which relate to God and the spiritual life' (domain 26.7, e.g., 1 Cor 1:26; Gl 6:8); 'human nature, particularly in reference to the physical aspect of human life' (domain 58.10, e.g., Gl 4:23) and 'physical life' (domain 23.90). As regards πνεῦμα, the definitions of Louw and Nida (1988:141, 145–147, 167, 274, 323, 350) are as follows: 'a title for the third person of the Trinity, literally "spirit"' (domain 12.18); 'a supernatural non-material being' (domain 12.33); 'an evil supernatural being or spirit' (domain 12.37); 'an apparition' (domain 12.42); 'the non-material psychological faculty which is potentially sensitive and responsive to God' (domain 26.9, e.g., 1 Cor 2:11; 5:5); 'an attitude of disposition reflecting the way in which a person thinks about or deals with some matter' (domain 30.6, e.g., Gl 6:1); 'air in relatively rapid movement, but without specification as to the force of the movement' (domain 14.4) and 'a breath of air coming from the lungs' (domain 23.186, e.g., Th 2 2:8).

Most, if not all, of the above listed usages of σάρξ and πνεῦμα arguably occur in the Pauline corpus. As can be seen from the various definitions of Bauer et al. (2021) and Louw and Nida (1988) of σάρξ and πνεῦμα, it is clear that σάρξ consistently points to natural, purely human or physical aspects of life. While most of the meanings of πνεῦμα denote that which is supernatural or divine, there are aspects of humanity that are also indicated by πνεῦμα. Louw and Nida's (1988:323) definition of domain 26.9 is particularly insightful in this regard, indicating that πνεῦμα could denote a faculty of humanity that potentially responds to God. It can also be observed that the possible meanings of σάρξ vary from that which is more literal (e.g. human and/or animal flesh, body, human being) to that which is more figurative or symbolic (e.g., the outward side of life, human nature). The latter uses of σάρξ can be considered as *extended* meanings of σάρξ (Fee 1994:818), which is typical of the Pauline discourse. From this quagmire of possible meanings, it is indeed difficult to make sense of the σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy in Paul. But more importantly, the exact meaning of σάρξ and πνεῦμα in any given context remains open for interpretation, especially when Paul uses these concepts in a figurative way or in

contexts in which he extends their basic meaning, as is demonstrated by the fact that the array of definitions of Bauer et al. (2021) and Louw and Nida (1988) do not perfectly correspond in all respects.

Interpreting the σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy in Paul

In an emic reading of Paul's σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy, he has to be read on his own terms. The question whether a true emic reading of Paul is possible arises. The bulk research that has been conducted on Paul is implemented in the form of western scholarship, which in itself poses its own set of challenges. While I will rely on the available research on Paul in respect of the σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy, the aim is to read Paul without imposing a pre-understanding or external model unto the text.

The interpretations of the σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy in the Pauline corpus are diverse. The intention here is not to survey all possible interpretations, but to describe two main views and attempt to find a basic frame of reference that could help the reader make sense of the σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy in Paul's letters. One of the more prevailing views is that when Paul uses σάρξ in an extended sense, it generally has a pejorative connotation. This tendency can especially be derived from certain translations that translate σάρξ as 'sinful nature' in certain contexts.[2] In his entry in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Richard J. Erickson (1993) argues that about half of Paul's usage of σάρξ is associated with the morally negative sphere and rebellious human nature, which includes rebellion to indulge in fleshly desires (cf. Isherwood & Stuart 1998:12). This is also the kind of connotations that are often attributed to Augustine's body-soul dualism (Sipe 2005). In these kinds of connotations, the tendency is to see the σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy as between that which is sinful or amoral versus that which is good or moral. Kai D. Moore (2021:137) reasons that Paul provided the framework that would 'define "flesh" as the lusty, uncontrolled, shameful aspect of bodies, in contrast to the ethereal qualities of "spirit" which suddenly emerged as a future for bodies themselves'. Moore especially criticises the tendency in 'mainstream Christian theology' of having a tradition of 'projecting fleshiness onto marginalised Others, coding flesh as feminised and racialised' and pleads for a re-evaluation and reclamation of flesh, a notion that is also advanced by other feminist theologians (e.g., Isherwood & Stuart 1998:82–85; Sipe 2005:3, 18–19).

A helpful traditional perspective on Paul's σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy is the eschatological perspective. In this understanding, in contexts such as Romans 7:5–6; 8:1–16 and Galatians 5:16–25, σάρξ and πνεῦμα are interpreted as corresponding to two exclusive eschatological realities on either side of salvation history. This kind of contrast can especially be derived from Romans 7:5–6 in which being 'in' (ἐν) σάρξ is referred to in the imperfect tense (ἦμεν) in which

sinful passions were aroused by the law, to bear fruit for death (v. 5). Verse 6 starts with 'but now' (νυνὶ δέ), constituting a temporal contrast with the situation that is described in verse 5. *Now*, people are released from the law, having died to that which held them captive and *now* serve in 'the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the letter' (v. 6, own translation). Here, σάρξ thus corresponds to an old way of existence under the law, sin and death, whereas πνεῦμα corresponds to a new, eschatological way of existence free from the law in which people are animated by the life-giving Spirit (Cranfield 1975:337, 340; Fee 1994:504–508; Jewett 2007:436–437; Käsemann 1980:190, 210; Longenecker 2016:636–637; Moo 2018:439–448; Ridderbos 1959:145–147; Schweizer 1968:419, 424, 428; 1971:133–135). According to Gordon Fee (1994:504), 'both the Law and the flesh belong to the past, on the pre-Christ, pre-Spirit side of eschatological realities'. In the old way of existence, people rely on themselves and their own, fallible ability (σάρξ) to fulfil God's demands, whereas in the new way of existence (πνεῦμα), people are reliant on the work of the Spirit to fulfil God's demands in them and through them (Balz & Schneider 1993:231). Apart from representing two ways of existence, σάρξ and πνεῦμα also cohere with *two exclusive identities* in which the identity outside of Christ is defined by external markers of identity based on human ability, cohering with 'flesh' (e.g., ethnicity, circumcision, Sabbath observance, adhering to food laws) whereas the in-Christ identity is defined by the reception of the Spirit that works in and through believers (Du Toit 2019:192).

The same basic contrast can be applied to Romans 8:1–16 and Galatians 5:16–25. The new, eschatological era in the Spirit is indicated by the 'now' (νῦν) in Romans 8:1 (Du Toit 2019:199; Moo 2018:495; Longenecker 2016:684). If 'flesh' indicates a way of existence under the eschatologically old era under the law and 'Spirit' a way of existence under the reign of the Spirit and freedom, then the contrast between 'flesh' and 'Spirit' in Romans 8:1–16 is not so much between two opposite inclinations within the believer, but rather a contrast between two mutually exclusive ways of existence. So, for example, not being in the flesh (v. 9) means that believers are now in Christ, led by the Spirit, and not under the old age in which their existence is characterised by their own performance to adhere to the law (Fee 1994:545–547; Moo 2018:511–513; cf. Käsemann 1980:222–223). In Fee's (1994) words:

> [*T*]he struggle is not between "flesh" and "Spirit", but between present weaknesses and suffering (evidenced by bodies that are destined for "death because of sin") and future glory (evidenced by the resurrection of those same "dead [*mortal*] bodies"). (p. 546)

The tension is thus between the 'already' and the 'not yet'. Additionally, the indwelling Spirit serves as an *identity marker* for a *new identity* that believers receive in Christ (esp. v. 16; Du Toit 2019:203; Fee 1994:469–470) whereas 'flesh' can be seen as an identity marker for someone that is not in Christ (esp. v. 9; Du Toit 2019:203; Fee 1994:553–554).

In Galatians 5:16–25, the 'works of the flesh' (ἔργα τῆς σαρκός, (v. 19) are described in terms of not inheriting the kingdom (v. 21) and believers are portrayed as having 'crucified the flesh with its passions and desires' (τὴν σάρκα ἐσταύρωσαν σὺν τοῖς παθήμασιν καὶ ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις, v. 24). The flesh-existence can thus be understood as a pre-Christian reality whereas the Spirit as constituting the new reality in which the fruit of the Spirit can work in and through people. The salvation-historical contrast between the eras of 'flesh' and 'Spirit' is thus ultimately absolute (Schreiner 2001:145) and constitute two mutually exclusive ways of existence on either side of salvation history (Das 2014:591–594; Fee 1994:431, 455–456; Ridderbos 1966:298–299). The tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' can again be detected here (Fee 1994:432). The juxtaposition of 'flesh' and 'Spirit' thus coheres with a 'contrast of two competing ages' (Das 2014:592). The eschatological interpretation of the σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy as described here generally stands opposed to viewing σάρξ as 'sinful nature' (so Das 2014:594; Fee 1994:819; contra Longenecker 2016:697).

While the eschatological understanding of the σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy indeed throws light on how Paul uses these concepts in an extended sense, this understanding cannot encompass all uses of σάρξ and πνεῦμα in his letters. The question is if there is another principle that can serve as more of an over-arching frame of reference to understand the σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy in Paul. While Paul certainly extends or stretches the meaning of σάρξ and πνεῦμα, even in their extended application, Paul arguably does not completely veer away from its basic, Semitic meaning. According to Friedrich Baumgärtel, the Hebrew בָּשָׂר can point to 'flesh in the strict sense' (e.g., Gn 41:2; Lv 13:10), to a body (e.g, Gn 2:23; Lv 6:3) or a person (Lv 13:18). The expression כָּל־בָּשָׂר ['all flesh'] can point to all people (e.g., Is 40:5), all animals (e.g., Gn 6:19) or all living creatures (Gn 6:17). Yet בָּשָׂר can also be used in terms of blood relationship (e.g., Gn 2:23), as a euphemistic term that indicates private parts (e.g., Ex 28:42), as indicating human external life (e.g., Ps 16:9), inner attitude (Ps 63:1), human frailty and impotence (e.g., Gn 6:3; Jr 17:5). The term is rarely used metaphorically, indicating 'a living heart' (Ezk 11:19), 'might and prosperity' (Is 17:4) or 'root and branch' (Is 10:18; Baumgärtel 1971:105–107). The Hebrew רוּח in turn can mainly point to breath or wind (e.g., Ps 33:6; Is 11:4), the spirit of a person (e.g., Gn 6:17; 41:8; Is 42:5) or the Spirit of God (e.g., Gn 1:2; Nm 11:25; 27:18; 1 Ki 22:1; Is 31:3; Baumgärtel 1968:360–364). Craig Keener (2019:494) observes that in Genesis 6:3, the contrast is between mortal people בָּשָׂר and God's Spirit (רוּחַ). In the Hebrew Bible, 'flesh' never becomes associated with evil desires, but rather indicates mortality and weakness (Keener 2019:495; cf. Baumgärtel 1971).

In Rudolph Meyer's (1971:114) discussion of the concept of 'flesh' in the Dead Sea Scrolls, he reasons that it is bound up with a person's 'creatureliness, his [*sic*] sinfulness, and his [*sic*] defective understanding of God's saving acts and plan of election'. He states that 'nowhere [in the Dead Sea Scrolls] is

it even probable that the flesh is in conflict with the spirit' and argues that it is not justified to infer that 'the flesh belongs in principle to the ungodly sphere' or 'that the flesh or the body is a prison for the human soul which keeps man [*sic*] back from true knowledge of God or ecstatic experience'. Rather, the Qumran community followed 'ancient paths', implying that their references of flesh and Spirit are traditional and thus akin to that of the Hebrew Bible. Other than the Hebrew Bible in which 'flesh' denotes weakness and mortality, the Dead Sea Scrolls also accentuate the moral aspect of the weakness of the 'flesh', namely, its 'vulnerability to sin' (e.g., 1QS 3:8; 4:20–21; 9:9; 1QM 4:3; 12:12; Keener 2019:495).

It is a question whether Paul ever uses σάρξ in a way that denotes a certain *part* of the human constitution that is at war with another part of the human constitution (spirit). Paul rather tends to use σάρξ as indicating the whole of a person's bodily existence (e.g., 1 Cor 7:28; 15:39; Schweizer 1971:125). Paul often uses σάρξ in a traditional way in indicating human finiteness (e.g., Rm 3:20; 1 Cor 1:29; Gl 1:16), weakness (e.g., Rm 6:19; 8:3; 1 Cor 7:28; 2 Cor 1:17; 5:16; 7:5; Gl 4:13–14) or mortality (e.g., 1 Cor 15:50; 2 Cor 4:11; Phlp 1:22, 24; Keener 2019:495). Insightfully, in Galatians 2:19–20, Paul writes that 'I' (ἐγώ) have been crucified with Christ, that it is no longer 'I' (ἐγώ) who lives, but Christ who lives in him. The life that he 'now' (νῦν) lives 'in the flesh' (ἐν σαρκί), he lives by faith in the Son of God. Here, σάρξ points to 'simple physical life on earth' in the body (Moo 2013:171; cf. Das 2014:271; DeSilva 2018:248; Keener 2019:196). In context, Paul has his whole existence and his whole *identity* (Du Toit 2019:128–129; Hays 2000:244; cf. Das 2014:270) in mind, not just an aspect or part of his life. In Paul's perspective, the identity change that Paul has undergone, is not a mere social construction, but a *new identity created by the indwelling Christ*. In combination with ἐγώ, σάρξ thus indicates Paul's whole existence in the body, here on earth. According to Paul's logic, as he himself has died with Christ, it is not Paul himself ('I') who lives, but Christ that lives in him. His natural bodily life is thus animated by Christ in him, which is closely related to the idea of living by the Spirit, an idea that is confirmed shortly afterwards when Paul's reprimands the Galatians about starting in the Spirit but ending up in the flesh (Gl 3:3).

Another Pauline statement that throws light on Paul's σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy is 1 Corinthians 15:44. Here, Paul contrasts the 'natural' (ψυχικός) body with the 'spiritual' (πνευματικός) body. Fee (2014:869) argues that the contrast here is not between that which is material versus that which is immaterial but rather between that which is natural versus that which is supernatural. The spiritual body is the resurrected, eschatological body that is dominated and animated by the Spirit. When Paul in verse 50 states that 'flesh and blood' (σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα) cannot inherit God's kingdom, he has this same basic contrast in mind. In other words, the current natural body in its present physical form cannot inherit God's kingdom (Fee 2014:884; Gardner 2018:722; cf. Ciampa & Rosner 2010; Thiselton 2000:1279). In Joachim Jeremias' (1956:152) words, 'flesh and blood' denotes

'the natural man [*sic*] as a frail creature in opposition to God'. While in Paul's reference to 'flesh and blood' he might have more in mind than human 'weakness and vulnerability' and also imply eventual 'full deliverance from sin' in the eschaton (Thiselton 2000:1291), Paul arguably does not completely transcend the basic reference to human fallibility and weakness either. In fact, Thomas Schreiner (2018a:321) points out that it is not that Paul implies that the body is 'intrinsically evil', but dishonourable because of its corruptibility and weakness', a contrast that is also indicated by Philippians 3:21, which refers to 'our lowly bodies' (τὸ σῶμα τῆς ταπεινώσεως ἡμῶν) that will be replaced with bodies that will be 'like his glorious body' (σύμμορφον τῷ σώματι τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ).

In conclusion, the underlying frame of reference of Paul's σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy is arguably a contrast between natural human beings who are animated by their *natural*, fallible selves, versus human beings who are *supernaturally* animated and led by God's Spirit. In other words, the basic contrast between the *human* and the *divine* or even the *immanent* and the *transcendent* lies beneath the σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy. The question is, however, how the σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy in the Pauline material speaks to western, naturalistic epistemology, a question to which I now turn.

The epistemology of Paul's σάρξ-πνεῦμα dichotomy

When writing to the Corinthians, Paul states in 1 Corinthians 1:26–31 that they have to consider their calling: 'that not many [*were*] wise according to the flesh' (ὅτι οὐ πολλοὶ σοφοὶ κατὰ σάρκα, v. 26). In verses 28–29, he argues that God chose the things that were low and despised in the world to bring to nothing the things that are, 'so that no flesh might boast in the presence of God' (ὅπως μὴ καυχήσηται πᾶσα σὰρξ ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ, vv. 28–29). Paul ends off by stating that God is the source of believers' life in Christ, and that Christ became for believers wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification and redemption, so that the one who boasts, boasts in the Lord (v. 30). Here, being 'wise according to the flesh' (σοφοὶ κατὰ σάρκα, v. 26) points to 'natural', human wisdom (cf. Brookins & Longenecker 2016:39; Ciampa & Rosner 2010; Fee 2014:83) or 'a purely human viewpoint' (Fitzmyer 2008:162), and thus to knowledge that people can naturally obtain without any 'supernatural' revelation. According to Thomas Schreiner (2018a:72), Paul here has 'the norms of human society' in mind (cf. Gardner 2018:111). Paul's use of πᾶσα σάρξ ['all flesh'] in verse 29 is traditional, indicating humanity in general רָשָׂב-לׇּכ (Brookins & Longenecker 2016:39; Fitzmyer 2008:163). In this context, Paul's references to σάρξ thus clearly belong to the natural human sphere. According to Gardner, Paul contrasts 'the spirit of this world' with the 'Spirit of God' (cf. 1 Cor 2:6, 8; Gardner 2018:112; cf. Thiselton 2000:179). In epistemological terms, knowledge about God and the spiritual realm is infused by Christ who became for believers the 'wisdom of God' (v. 30). In other words, a naturalistic epistemology has been replaced by a supernaturalistic epistemology, which is informed by both natural and supernatural sources of knowledge.

In 1 Corinthians 2:13–16, Paul states that the things that he speaks are not based on 'human wisdom' (ἀνθρωπίνης σοφίας) but are 'taught by the Spirit' (διδακτοῖς πνεύματος). Part of his ministry is 'interpreting/comparing spiritual things with [those that are] spiritual' (πνευματικοῖς πνευματικὰ συγκρίνοντες, v. 13). Then, in verse 14, he argues that the 'natural person' (ψυχικὸς ἄνθρωπος) does not accept the things of God's Spirit. They are folly or foolishness (μωρία) to him or her, not being able to know or understand (γινώσκω) them, for they are 'spiritually discerned' (πνευματικῶς ἀνακρίνεται). In verse 15, Paul states that a spiritual person judges all things but is judged by no one. He ends off in verse 16 by asking who has understood the mind of the Lord to instruct him, and concludes that believers have 'the mind of Christ' (νοῦν Χριστοῦ). The basic contrast in this passage echoes that of 1:26–29 in which σάρξ was mentioned. It is also noteworthy that in 3:1, while still within the same train of thought, Paul seamlessly transposes to a contrast between σάρξ and πνεῦμα when he reprimands the Corinthians. The σάρξ-πνεῦμα contrast in 3:1 thus essentially echoes the ψυχικός-πνευματικός contrast of 2:13–16.[3] The basic contrast in 1 Corinthians 2:13–16 is between that which is within the natural human sphere versus that which is enacted by God through his Spirit. The 'natural person' (ψυχικὸς ἄνθρωπος) can be understood as a combination of 'any human being without the Divine Spirit', 'humanity in its natural, physical existence' (Fee 2014:123–124; cf. Brookins & Longenecker 2016:60; Collins 1999:135; Schreiner 2018a:84) and a 'person who lives on an entirely human level' (Thiselton 2000:268). In its basic form, the contrast is between *human* and *divine* agency. The implication for Paul's epistemology is that natural human knowledge cannot accommodate that which is spiritual. People have to be supernaturally enabled by God's Spirit (cf. Schreiner 2018a:86) and given the 'mind of Christ' in order to obtain knowledge of spiritual things. A naturalist epistemology thus does *not have the capacity* (Schreiner 2018a:86) or is *inadequate* to obtain divine or spiritual knowledge. Some interpreters also connect the natural or unspiritual person to someone who does not belong to the eschatological age in contrast to those who belong to the eschatological age, to whom the Spirit is given (Collins 1999:135; Fee 2014:124).

Another passage in the Pauline corpus that has epistemological significance is 2 Corinthians 5:16, in which Paul writes that believers do not know (οἶδα) anyone 'according to the flesh' (κατὰ σάρκα). He continues that even though believers once knew (γινώσκω)[4] Christ 'according to the flesh', they do not know him as such any longer, which is followed by the statement in verse 17 that someone who is in Christ is a 'new creation' (καινὴ κτίσις). The phrase κατὰ σάρκα is interpreted in various ways. According to Bauer et al. (2021:814), it points to knowing Christ 'from a human point of view'. George Guthrie (2015:306) and Murray Harris (2005:426) interpret the phrase as knowledge 'from a worldly perspective' and Mark Seifrid (2014:247) as knowing

3.Collins (1999:136) argues that 'both *psychikos* and *sarkinos* might be appropriately rendered "unspiritual"'.

4.The verbs οἶδα and γινώσκω are used as synonyms here (Harris 2005:427).

'according to the practical judgements of human reasoning'. In respect of knowing Christ 'according to the flesh', Seifrid argues that in a certain sense, Bultmann was right that Paul would have no interest in an earthly Jesus (1976:155). Seifrid (2014:250) objects to the notion that all that can be known about Jesus is 'what modern, historical-critical investigation could discover about him', being 'conditioned both by our limited perspective and also, more fundamentally, by our perverted self-interest'. He points out that Albert Schweitzer recognised that the 19th-century research into the historical Jesus were 'mere reflections of their authors'. Seifrid argues that Paul's point is that Christ must be known in terms of being the risen Lord and Christ. To pinpoint exactly what knowing Christ 'according to the flesh' means, remains somewhat elusive, but it could include knowing him in terms of physical descent (cf. Rm 1:3; 4:1), in terms of his humanity, but most probably, knowing him in a worldly way (so Guthrie 2015:307). The reference to the new creation in verse 17 certainly throws light on the meaning of κατὰ σάρκα in that knowing 'according to the flesh' denotes an eschatologically old way of thinking, deprived from the new creation in Christ. As a result of the new creation, people receive a *new identity* (Du Toit 2019:158; cf. Keener 2005:184) and a *new perspective* on life in which Christ is both the source of life (implied by ἵνα οἱ ζῶντες) and the goal of life (τῷ ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν, v. 15; Du Toit 2019:158). The implication is that the new creation fundamentally *alters a believer's epistemology*. Now, believers do not merely have a natural, worldly estimation of Christ, but know him on the basis of the God's revelation in Christ, according to the Spirit (Barnett 1997:295–296), who *enables believers* to know Christ on a different level.

Although Romans 8:1–16 was already discussed in broad terms, a specific passage in which Paul elaborates on the kind of epistemology that those who are led by the Spirit obtain, is Romans 8:5–9. According to these verses, those who live 'according to the flesh' (κατὰ σάρκα) 'think' or 'set their minds' (φρονέω) on the things of the flesh whereas those who live 'according to the Spirit' (κατὰ πνεῦμα) set their minds on the Spirit. James Dunn (1988:425) contends that φρονέω 'means not merely to think, but to have a settled way of understanding, to hold an opinion, to maintain an attitude'. In verse 7, Paul states that setting the mind on the flesh is 'hostile' (ἔχθρα) to God and in verse 8 that those who are 'in the flesh' (ἐν σαρκί) are 'not able to' (οὐ δύνανται) (Middendorf 2013:622) please God. Yet in verse 9, Paul maintains that when the Spirit dwells within someone, such a person is not 'in the flesh'. As can be seen from this passage, especially the reference to being hostile to God (v. 7), the basic contrast remains between the natural human and the divine. There is a sense in which living according to the flesh implies living on the basis of fallible, human possibility, including a limited epistemology, which is unable to please God, whereas living according to the Spirit implies living on the basis of God's power and enablement in the Spirit, including a widened epistemology. Also, the two modes of existence, being either in the flesh or in the Spirit, are presented as two mutually exclusive positions, especially if verse 9 is considered in

which Paul reasons that those who are in the Spirit and set their minds on the Spirit are not in the flesh. As already argued, those who live according to the flesh are unconverted whereas those who live according to the Spirit are converted, or, those who live naturally according to the flesh live in the eschatologically old age whereas those who live according to Spirit live in the new eschatological age under the control of the Spirit (Fee 1994:540–548; Moo 2018:509, 512; cf. Jewett 2007:486). While the person living according to the flesh can point to any natural person, Paul probably implies that such a person is 'in the grip of the power of sin' (Moo 2018:511; cf. Jewett 2007:488), not that σάρξ is equated with sin, but that a person living under the eschatologically old age is living under the ruling principles of law, sin and death. In terms of epistemology, those who live according to the flesh do *not have the capacity or capability* to have a spiritual way of understanding or to set their minds on the things of the Spirit. Those in the flesh can only have a natural, human way of understanding and thus have a limited epistemology. Their epistemology has to be transformed or expanded in order to obtain the capacity to set the mind on the Spirit.

Finally, another passage that arguably contributes in understanding Paul's σάρξ-πνεῦμα epistemology is Romans 12:1–2. In this passage, Paul urges believers on the basis of God's mercies to present their bodies (σώματα) as a living sacrifice unto God, and not to be conformed to 'this world' (αἰῶνι τούτῳ) but be transformed by the renewal of their mind (νοῦς) so that they can test or examine [δοκιμάζω] God's will, what is good, acceptable and perfect. The νοῦς might include a person's 'practical reason' or even 'moral consciousness' (Moo 2018:775). While most commentators hold that the body here refers to the entire human person (e.g., Moo 2018:769; Schreiner 2018b:626; Thielman 2018:568), Paul almost certainly uses σῶμα here to indicate a person's bodily connectedness to this natural world (cf. Moo 2018:769; Wright 2002:704). The body is within the domain of that which is natural, human and worldly, which has to be sacrificed unto God in order to know and understand God's will. The same basic contrast between human fallibility and divine enablement can be detected here. In terms of epistemology, it can be inferred that the *natural human mind* is susceptible to being conformed to the schemes and patterns of thought of the natural word, and unable to know God's perfect will in and of itself. The natural mind has to be transformed and thus be *made capable* of knowing God's will.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that there exists an irony in the epistemological underpinnings of postcolonial biblical criticism. On the one hand, biblical postcolonial studies intend to give a voice to the Other, which includes the marginalised and the oppressed. Part of the definition of postcolonial biblical criticism is to critique western episteme-based knowledge systems. Theoretically, a postcolonial optic would thus include a reappreciation and reconsideration of non-western cultures in an emic way, that is, to study them in a way in which they speak for themselves and are studied on

their own terms. The irony is, however, that the normative or prevailing operative epistemology within postcolonial studies is a western, naturalistic, etic epistemology. In this sense, many postcolonial studies can be considered as a form of neocolonialism rather than being truly postcolonial, in that they remain to impose a western epistemology onto the Other. That is not to say that all postcolonial studies should be emic and not etic, or that epistemologies should be devoid of influences, but rather that in postcolonialism, the voice of the Other should also be heard in terms of epistemology.

I have argued that an emic reading of Paul's flesh-Spirit dichotomy, as far as such an endeavour is possible, precisely addresses a naturalistic epistemology. Caution is advised here, however. To argue that Paul addresses western epistemology would be anachronistic. Rather, Paul addresses the 'naturalistic' epistemologies that were prevalent in the Hellenistic world.[5] However, Paul's flesh-Spirit dichotomy has arguably been misunderstood in much of western scholarship, including postcolonial discourse, even to the point that some postcolonial interpreters take offence at this dichotomy, arguing that Paul provides the vocabulary to oppress marginalised groups, including women. The argument is that fleshiness has been projected onto marginalised others and flesh has been coded as feminised and racialised. Yet, in this essay I have proposed that Paul never directly connects 'flesh' (σάρξ) with 'sinful nature' as is found in some translations, or to that which is inherently evil or sinful as such. Rather, Paul's references to 'flesh' tend to be more Semitic, either pointing to the whole human person, not only a part of him or her, or pointing to human fallibility and weakness and to bodily human life on this earth. While Paul's use of 'Spirit' [πνεῦμα] could indicate the human faculty that is potentially sensitive to God's Spirit, it mainly points to God's Spirit that transcendently work in and through people. In passages such as Romans 7:5-6; 8:1–16 and Galatians 5:16–25, the flesh-Spirit dichotomy mainly points to two exclusive *ways of existence* and *identities*: the flesh-existence and identity cohere with a natural bodily existence under the eschatologically old rule of law, sin and death, whereas the Spirit-existence and identity cohere with a new eschatological existence under the rule of the Spirit who was bestowed on believers. The basic contrast between flesh and Spirit is thus rather between *human* and *divine* than between evil or good or between morally inferior and morally superior. When σάρξ in the Pauline corpus does cohere with sinfulness it rather points to susceptibility to sin than to an evil part of the human constitution that is at war with another, spiritual part.

The main trait of the epistemology that Paul describes in his flesh-Spirit dichotomy is an *incapacity and inability* to accommodate or understand the things of the Spirit, restrained by an existence in 'flesh', which points to natural, unregenerate, human, bodily existence under the power of law, sin and death. For Paul, the natural human mind has to

5.Cf. Epicureanism and Stoicism (Ac 17:18).

be transformed by God's eschatological Spirit in order to accommodate and appreciate the things of God's Spirit. This transformation can only be accomplished by God's Spirit, which is bestowed on someone who is in Christ. The Spirit also serves as marker of identity in the new era in Christ. Yet, Paul universalises the existence in either the flesh or the Spirit in that he applies it to all of humanity (e.g., 2 Cor 5:16–19), not just to the people of his day by implication.

To transpose the epistemological principles that Paul lays down in his flesh-Spirit dichotomy in terms of contemporary language, it can be inferred that a *naturalistic epistemology*, which is largely characteristic of western epistemology *is inadequate* to appreciate spiritual things and one's epistemology has to be *supernaturally transformed* in order to appreciate the spiritual or the supernatural. Similarly, in terms of Paul's flesh-Spirit dichotomy, a believer's identity cannot merely be *confined to a socially constructed endeavour*, although identity inevitably has a socially or culturally conditioned dimension. But in terms of Paul's flesh-Spirit dichotomy, identity is supernaturally *bestowed* on people that have the Spirit. To take this principle further, if postcolonial studies really want to reappreciate the Other, let their voice be heard and appreciate non-western or ancient cultures in an emic way, such scholars have to be critical towards their own epistemology, rethink their epistemology or even be open to be epistemologically transformed by the very culture that is studied. Yet, even in this regard, caution is advised. No epistemology is devoid of origins or deplete of influences and neither would it be realistic to propose that postcolonial biblical criticism should be devoid of its epistemological origins. The point of this essay is not to propose that postcolonial studies should necessarily align with the culture's epistemology that is studied, but that an ethos of letting the voice of the Other be heard has to permeate all levels, including epistemology.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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