

ARTICLES

The New Perspective on Paul — 120 Years Before: John William Colenso's Commentary on Romans

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Abstract

John William Colenso's Commentary on Romans, written during his time as Bishop of Natal and published in 1861, remains neglected in the field of New Testament studies, as does Colenso's work more generally, despite some notable recent attention. The commentary is, however, of considerable interest. It displays some significant similarities with the much later New Perspective on Paul, and offers an early example of a participationist reading of Paul, seen through the lens of Colenso's inclusive and universalist theology. It also shares some of the problems of the New Perspective, particularly in terms of its critique of Judaism. The commentary is also significant and relevant to current debates about decolonisation, because of the ways in which the African context shaped Colenso's reading of the letter and because of the powerful critique of (English) ethnic and (Christian) religious superiority that Colenso finds in Romans.

Keywords: John William Colenso; Romans; African biblical interpretation

1. Introduction

Unlike some other older commentaries on Romans, the commentary published in 1861 by John William Colenso, Bishop of Natal in South Africa, is largely ignored in the history of New Testament scholarship. Indeed, Colenso himself remains more or less invisible in the standard histories of the discipline – and is neglected too in the field of Old Testament studies, where he published more substantial work.¹ There may be a number of reasons for this, including Colenso's controversial views, which some at the time deemed heretical, and a related dismissal of his scholarship. But one significant reason may simply be that

¹ There is no mention of him, for example, in Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (trans. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee; London: SCM, 1973), nor in Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). In the massive multi-volume project of William Baird, the only two index references to his name refer to citations of an article on Colenso and Jowett, where Baird's interest is in Jowett; see William Baird, *History of New Testament Research. Volume One: From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 354 n. 85, 432. On his neglect in the field of 'Old Testament criticism', see John Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (London: SPCK, 1984) 220 n. 2. A. L. Rowse may somewhat exaggerate when he describes Colenso as 'a foremost figure in Biblical Criticism in the [nineteenth] century, in England its leading exponent', but his broader point that Colenso's contributions are both important and unjustly neglected in Britain and Europe stands (A. L. Rowse, *The Controversial Colensos* (Redruth: Dyllansow Truran, 1989) 3). As Rogerson comments, 'Colenso's *Pentateuch* was one of the most original British contributions to biblical criticism in the nineteenth century. It was also not without importance for the history of biblical criticism as a whole' (Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, 220).

his work was written in Africa and was (explicitly) shaped by the experience of an African situation rather than a European one, indeed an experience in which Colenso's sympathies increasingly lay more on the side of the African than that of the coloniser. But whatever the reasons, I hope to show that the neglect of his work is unfortunate and unwarranted.

In more recent years, there have been a few attempts to raise Colenso's profile, through both appreciative and critical engagement with his work.² Yet his Commentary on Romans remains neglected, despite, as I hope to show, its significance and interest in various respects. Indeed, one of its striking features is the way in which it anticipates some of the themes of the New Perspective reading of Paul, many years before. More broadly, it exhibits a form of contextual cultural engagement that has considerable contemporary relevance, given current debates about methods within the discipline and, more broadly, about decolonisation in the university context.

In the following essay, I will first contextualise Colenso's commentary in the wider setting of his life and work, then examine some of the characteristics and proposals of the commentary itself, comparing these with themes in New Perspective interpretation, before finally reflecting on the methodological significance of the reading that Colenso presents.

2. Colenso's Life and Work

John William Colenso (1814–1883) was born in St Austell, Cornwall, and raised in a non-Conformist family, though he subsequently joined the Anglican Church, and later, through his wife, Sarah Frances Bunyon (known as Frances), came under the influence of F. D. Maurice and his brand of Christian universalism and socialism (and also the thought of S. T. Coleridge). He was a brilliant mathematician, appointed to a fellowship at St John's College, Cambridge, later entering the Anglican priesthood and serving in Norfolk.³ In 1853, he was invited to become Bishop of Natal, a position he took up, after an initial ten-week visit in 1854, in 1855.⁴ Apart from some time in England in the early 1860s, he spent the rest of his life in Natal, where he died in 1883. During this time he published an enormous range of work, much of it from his mission base at Ekukhanyeni, including many sermons and shorter leaflets, some on mathematical topics, but notably (between 1862 and 1879) a seven-volume work on the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua 'critically examined', a number of important works on the Zulu language, and, our focus here, his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans (1861).⁵

² For a wide-ranging, nuanced, but generally sympathetic appraisal of Colenso's legacy, see Jonathan A. Draper, ed., *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation* (JSOT Sup 386; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2003). Draper also introduced a republished version of the commentary: Jonathan A. Draper, ed., *Commentary on Romans by Bishop John William Colenso, Edited, with an Introduction* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2003). A more critical but also appreciative discussion is found in Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 119–68.

³ For these biographical details, see Rowse, *Controversial Colensos*, 3–16; Jeff Guy, *The Heretic: A Study of the Life of John William Colenso 1814–1883* (Johannesburg/Pietermaritzburg: Ravan/University of Natal, 1983) 3–35, who provides the most detailed modern biography of Colenso.

⁴ For the date of his arrival (20 May 1855), see John William Colenso, *Remarks upon the Recent Proceedings and Charge of Robert Lord Bishop of Capetown and Metropolitan at his Primary Metropolitan Visitation of the Diocese of Natal* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green, 1864) 45. See also Guy, *The Heretic*, 46 (on the initial visit from 30 January–10 April 1854) and 54.

⁵ For a full bibliography of Colenso's works, see Fiona Bell et al., 'Colenso Bibliography', *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; JSOT Sup 386; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2003) 365–91 (367–77).

Colenso became subject to a considerable degree of controversy through his publications, particularly due to his critical rejection of the historicity (and Mosaic authorship) of much of the Pentateuch and also his doctrines (particularly as expressed in his Romans commentary).⁶ Related to these doctrinal convictions, the way in which he viewed and related to the Zulus among whom he worked was also, as we shall see, a cause of controversy. In 1863, he was charged with heresy by Robert Gray, metropolitan bishop of Cape Town, and excommunicated following his trial there – despite Colenso’s refusal to participate in the trial and his insistence that only the British Crown, and not another bishop, could legitimately remove a bishop from his seat. Colenso’s appeal was upheld by the Privy Council in England, but, with Gray’s appointment of another bishop, Colenso’s position remained difficult.⁷ Although he continued until his death as Bishop of Natal, after his trial, after the critical reaction to his works on the Pentateuch and Romans, and after what he saw as unjust treatment of some of the Zulu people, in particular Chief Langalibalele, he spent his time increasingly advocating on behalf of the Zulu people and defending them against trial, accusation and colonial violence – work that was continued by his wife and daughters.⁸ As Willie James Jennings notes, Colenso’s decision to side with Langalibalele against his long-time friend Theophilus Shepstone, colonial ruler of Natal, ‘turned him from colonialist collaborator to colonialist enemy’, hence his being remembered and honoured among Zulu people as *Sobantu*, father of the people.⁹

3. Colenso’s Commentary on Romans

Colenso’s Commentary on Romans, published in 1861 from his mission station at Ekukhanyeni, is explicitly described as an explanation of Romans ‘from a missionary point of view’, and as a product of ‘seven years of Missionary experience, as well as many years of previous close study of this Epistle’.¹⁰ How this experience might shape a reading of

⁶ In his response to Gray’s charges listing essential doctrines Colenso is held to reject, Colenso notes two – ‘that the Bible is the Word of God’ and ‘that the wicked perish everlastingly’ – neither of which, Colenso insists, are required of Church of England clergy (see Colenso, *Remarks*, 34).

⁷ For Colenso’s riposte to the charges, see Colenso, *Remarks*. For analysis of the trial (and its injustice), see Jonathan A. Draper, ‘The Trial of Bishop John William Colenso’, *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; JSOT Sup 386; London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2003) 306–25. A sense of the wider implications for ecclesial polity, and of the interest in the case, is shown, e.g., in Ralph Barnes, *Remarks on the Judgment of the Judicial Committee in the Case of the Bishop of Natal* (Exeter: William Roberts, 1866), who comments that ‘the general tendency of the judgment [of Robert Gray] is, to disunite the colonial church from the crown, and consequently, in a large sense, to dis sever it from the church of England’ (1, cf. 17).

⁸ On their activity, see Mandy Goedhals, ‘“The Bravest Woman I Have Ever Known”: Frances Colenso (1816–93)’, *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; JSOT Sup 386; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2003) 326–44, and Jeff Guy, ‘The Colenso Daughters: Three Women Confront Imperialism’, *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; JSOT Sup 386; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2003) 345–63. On Colenso’s stance, see further n. 70 below.

⁹ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 163; see further 161–6; also (in most detail) Guy, *The Heretic*, 193–349; Rowse, *Controversial Colensos*, 61–86; for a brief accessible overview see also <https://bishopstowe.co.za/history/> (accessed 5 December 2023).

¹⁰ John William Colenso, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: Newly Translated, and Explained from a Missionary Point of View*, available as a reprint from Hansebooks (New York: D. Appleton, 1863) iii–iv. It is this reprint that is cited in this essay. The original 1861 edition, published at Ekukhanyeni, was republished as Draper, *Commentary*. Draper offers a detailed and valuable assessment in his Introduction, much of which is also found, in adapted form, in Jonathan A. Draper, ‘Colenso’s Commentary on Romans: An Exegetical Assessment’, *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; JSOT Sup 386; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2003) 104–25.

Romans is, of course, not entirely predictable: it might be, for example, that the interpreter could draw on Paul's depictions of humanity's degradation (Rom 1.18–32) to emphasise the depravity and degeneracy of 'the heathen', the wrath that God directs towards them, the threat of eternal punishment and their consequent desperate need to put faith in Christ, their only hope of redemption. Colenso's approach is very different, in fact directed more or less wholly *against* such a reading of Romans,¹¹ and stems from a much more generous and compassionate cultural engagement. For example, commenting on 1.26, he points to both the virtues and the vices he observes among the Zulus, and, to counteract any complacent sense of English moral superiority, reminds the reader that witches were until recently burned in England, by people who believed they were doing God's will.¹² Elsewhere, commenting on the 'divided self' of Rom 7.22, he observes a comparable recognition of 'the double nature' of human beings among the Zulus.¹³ Similarly, commenting on 2.15, Colenso observes that 'among the ignorant heathen, many things are practised, which, however offensive in the eyes of a white man and a Christian, are not transgressions of God's known Law and are not reckoned as sins in the sight of Him' – a comment that reveals both Colenso's intrinsic sense of (English) Christian superiority and also his critical assessment of that perspective and attempts to assess cultural differences sympathetically. Indeed, he continues his comment on the verse by asking whether, among 'the reproofs that will be passed "in that day"' there will some that 'belong to us, Christians and Missionaries, for the harsh uncharitable, judgements which we have passed in our arrogant self-confidence upon our heathen fellow-men'.¹⁴ Colenso also indicates how the experience of conversing with the Africans among whom he worked – prominent among whom is his companion and translator, William Ngidi¹⁵ – has tested and shaped his opinions (here regarding questions over 'everlasting torment' and 'Divine vengeance', in an extended comment on 8.21):

Such questions as these have been brought again and again before my mind in the intimate converse which I have had, as a Missionary, with Christian converts and Heathens. To teach the truths of our holy religion to intelligent adult natives... is a sifting process for the opinions of any teacher, who feels the deep moral obligation of answering truly, and faithfully, and unreservedly, his fellow-man, looking up to him for light and guidance, and asking, 'Are you sure of this?' 'Do you know this to be true?' 'Do you really believe that?'¹⁶

Such candid reflection on the way in which the missionary encounter had shaped and 'sifted' his views contributed to the criticism of Colenso, and led to the mockery expressed in a popular limerick, which I quote and discuss below. Without ignoring the expressions of a colonial-religious sense of superiority here (the native 'looking up' to his teacher), we should also notice the commitment to serious, self-critical dialogue, in which the missionary may learn and change.

¹¹ Cf. Draper, 'Colenso's Commentary', 113–15.

¹² Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 56.

¹³ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 152.

¹⁴ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 98.

¹⁵ On this relationship and its importance, see Gordon Mitchell, 'A Moment in the "Long Conversation" between African Religion and Imperial Christianity: William Ngidi and John Colenso', *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; JSOT Sup 386; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2003) 255–63.

¹⁶ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 183. Colenso makes similar remarks about the impact of such questions regarding the historicity of the Pentateuch and the morality of Mosaic legislation (e.g., on the treatment of slaves in Exod 21.20–1); see John William Colenso, *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined, Part I* (5th ed.; London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green, 1863) vii, xxi, 9.

Colenso regards Romans as a strongly occasional letter with a distinctive purpose.¹⁷ He sees it as addressed to Jews (and Jewish proselytes) who believed in Christ at Rome, since there is no evidence for a separate or organised Christian community in Rome at this time (the address to ‘gentiles’, ἔθνη, in 11.13 is taken to be directed to ‘believers from among the Jewish proselytes at Rome’).¹⁸ With this sense of its address, one of Colenso’s main themes is what he sees as Paul’s efforts to remove any sense of Jewish privilege or special status as God’s elect, something he considers to be a key aim of the letter.¹⁹ Paul seeks to break down ‘the *three* great Jewish privileges’, viz., salvation as a right, specifically for the Jews and confirmed by ‘ceremonial observances, or acts of legal obedience’. In contrast, Paul insists that ‘salvation is wholly of God, bestowed by His Love, of His own free grace’, ‘is meant for Jew and Gentile alike... without any special favour or distinction’, and ‘is to be received by faith alone’.²⁰ It is no surprise, then, that he interprets Rom 11.26 – καὶ οὕτως πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται (‘and so all Israel will be saved’) – as a reference to ‘the whole believing Family, whether originally Jews or Heathens’.²¹ The significance of this interpretative emphasis, its problems and its similarity to the New Perspective on Paul, will be discussed below.

Another of Colenso’s prominent concerns is with the interpretation of the achievement of Christ’s death. He strongly opposes the penal substitutionary view of the atonement,²² arguing instead that Christ’s death marks his identification with humanity, a death in which all people participate and thus, though they still die, may be freed from the curse of sin. Commenting on 3.24, for example, he describes Christ’s death in the following terms: ‘that He, at His Father’s bidding, took our nature wholly upon Him without our sin, and in that nature, though spotless and innocent, was given over to share that death, which we must suffer because of our sin, that so He might be wholly one with us...’.²³ Baptism, as depicted in Rom 6.1–4, is thus seen as ‘a sign and symbol of their being united to Him, that his Death became theirs, that, because He had died unto sin, they had died also’.²⁴

Colenso’s particular interpretation of this participatory view of Christ’s death is also significant, not least in terms of another broader theme in his theology. It is, for Colenso, not only those who are baptised who have shared in Christ’s death. Rather, ‘[a]ll men [*sic*] have thus a share in the precious Death of Christ their Lord; though the mass of human kind do not yet know the Love wherewith they are loved’.²⁵ In other words – and this is something Colenso repeatedly stresses in various ways through his exegesis – all humanity is (already) included within the scope of the redemption God has brought in Christ. This ‘universal’ reading is found, unsurprisingly, in Rom 5.15–19, where Colenso argues that ‘the many (οἱ πολλοί)’, both under sin and in being made righteous, ‘must be the whole race, the whole family of man’.²⁶ Similarly, Colenso presents an ‘inclusive’ (though anthropocentric) reading of Romans 8, where ἡ κτίσις is taken (questionably) to refer not to the whole of creation but to the whole of humanity,²⁷ such that 8.21, for example, indicates that ‘there is

¹⁷ Cf. Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 30–4.

¹⁸ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 8–12; and on the identity of the ἔθνη of 11.13, see 214.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 33–4.

²⁰ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 41 (italics original); cf. also 41–3, 46, 95.

²¹ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 216.

²² See esp. Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 105.

²³ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 84; see 84–6.

²⁴ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 120.

²⁵ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 120.

²⁶ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 112; cf. also 82. On the exegetical issues, see also Richard H. Bell, ‘Rom 5.18–19 and Universal Salvation’, *NTS* 48 (2002) 417–32.

²⁷ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 165. On the interpretation of κτίσις here, see David G. Horrell, Cheryl Hunt and Christopher Southgate, *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010) 65–73. Interpreting κτίσις as referring to the whole creation, rather than just humanity, does not however undermine Colenso’s ‘inclusive’ approach to the passage.

hope in the counsels of Infinite Wisdom and Love, for *all*, for all “the creature,” for the whole human race, that fell in Adam and has been graciously redeemed in Christ’.²⁸ Christian faith, then, and the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, are for Colenso not the points at which redemption is secured or affirmed for the elect, but rather acts by which those who accept and participate in them signal their realisation, their recognition, of what God has already done for the whole human race.²⁹

This interpretation has two further implications, which again are expressed in the commentary, and are significant for understanding Colenso’s perspective. From his reading of Romans 1–2 onwards, Colenso is clear that all humans – Christians included – will be judged according to the good and bad they have done, and how they have responded to the intimations of God and God’s goodness evident to them.³⁰ There is no special favouritism by which Christians will evade this judgement, nor any reason to deny the good that is found among all people, including those who have never encountered, or never accepted, the Christian religion. Commenting on 3.30, for example, Colenso considers the case of those ‘who have no opportunity of hearing and receiving “the faith”’:

Many, indeed, of these latter [‘Heathens’], walking faithfully according to their light, may enjoy some sense of the gift of righteousness, may be “consciously justified,” may have some measure of peace within the heart, “in consequence of faith” in the Right and True and Good. And all of them, as St. Paul plainly teaches afterwards, are counted as righteous creatures, though they may not know it, through the Grace of God, bestowed upon the whole human race in His own dear Son, whom He has given to be their Head, and whose members they are. And all will be judged alike. Jews, Christians, and Heathens, by the same righteous rule, according to their works, and according to the light vouchsafed to them...³¹

This is another theme on which Colenso presents an inclusive reading of Romans 8: ‘the Spirit of Life’ (8.2) and ‘the Spirit of Christ’ (8.9) are not seen as the exclusive possession or blessing of Christians, but may be found in others, ‘who have not been blessed with the full revelation of it in the Gospel’:

If any heathen, such as Socrates or Cicero, has felt a cheerful, child-like confidence in the Divine Goodness and Mercy, while following, though imperfectly, yet sincerely and with a single eye, the Law of his mind, as a redeemed creature – that which he knew to be the good and the true, – that joy must have been the fruit of the same Good Spirit in his heart...³²

²⁸ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 166.

²⁹ Cf., e.g., Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 123: ‘Just so our Heavenly Father’s Love towards us does not depend upon our being baptized or not. Our baptism does but declare it, and assure it to us’; 259 (a sermon on the eucharist, appended to the end of the Commentary [though not included in the 2003 edition]): ‘all men [*sic*], the whole human race, are receiving even now the blessings of life, of life for the body, and of life, spiritual life, for the soul, from Him... all men are sharing even now in the blessings of the Great Redemption – are made partakers of Christ’s Humanity, of His Life and of His Death – are deriving life and strength from him.’

³⁰ Cf. Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 56, 196.

³¹ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 91; cf. 60, 98, 196.

³² Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 155. As Morwenna Ludlow has suggested to me, Colenso’s choice of Socrates and Cicero as examples here may be rhetorically astute, given that Christian tradition had long (since the time of Justin Martyr) seen such figures as grasping some of the truth which was fully revealed in Christ. Though such figures predated Christ, similar insight into the good might be found, Colenso suggests, among those who had not heard of Christ.

Thus, while Colenso accepts the possibility that someone might conceivably be found, 'so utterly depraved, as to have no spark of spiritual life remaining in him, not a single good thought, nor desire to do what is right', such that the Spirit of Christ could not be said to be in such a person, he clearly regards this as an unlikely scenario, and not by any means the norm. In any case, 'we cannot dare to judge our brother-man [*sic*] in this way'.³³

This inclusive, universal interpretation of the redemption that God has wrought in Christ also, then, leads Colenso to envision, or at least to hope for, the inclusion of all people in salvation, rather than the inclusion of only a faithful elect. He includes within the commentary a lengthy note on 8.21,³⁴ in which he presents arguments against the notion of 'endless punishment', explaining his own shift of perspective on the topic during his seven years in Natal.³⁵ Because of his sense both of the good (as well as the bad) that exists outside the church, and of the mix of good and bad found among Christians too, he cannot contemplate or accept the idea that death divides people irreversibly and permanently into two categories, the saved and the damned. Rather, he is convinced by the need for some opportunity for progression, some remedial and temporary processes, essentially the doctrine of Purgatory,³⁶ which may in the end, as Colenso sees Paul affirming here (in 8.21), lead to the deliverance from corruption of 'the whole human race'.³⁷ Colenso condemns as 'little short of blasphemy' the emphasis in missionary proclamation on the threat of such endless punishment, seeing it as 'utterly contrary to the whole spirit of the Gospel'.³⁸ He is also clear – and herein lies part of his motivation for the commentary – 'that the whole Epistle to the Romans is one of the strongest possible protests against such a notion'.³⁹ Elsewhere, defending himself against charges brought by Robert Gray, bishop of Cape Town, Colenso insists that he has not dogmatically rejected the notion of endless punishment but holds, as is abundantly and repeatedly clear in the commentary, to a different hope.⁴⁰

Colenso's reading of Romans, including Rom 9–11, may thus be summarised as an argument against any group's claim to security and privilege on the basis of divine election. This is seen as Paul's key argument against the Jews to whom he writes, and one that applies to Christians – to Calvinists in particular – in Colenso's own time: 'the whole tenor and object of the Apostle's words is expressly to do away with this notion of an arbitrary election'.⁴¹

³³ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 159–60.

³⁴ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 166–83.

³⁵ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 167–8. Although Colenso's views were shaped before his departure for Natal by the theological perspectives of F. D. Maurice and by the Romanticism associated with S. T. Coleridge, as he shows here, he earlier disagreed with Maurice on the subject of 'the endlessness of future punishments' but has since changed his mind. The influence of the African context, and conversations with Africans, on this shift of perspective is underestimated by Timothy Larsen, who sees Colenso's views as entirely the product of the discussions and debates in Victorian England (Timothy Larsen, 'Bishop Colenso and His Critics: The Strange Emergence of Biblical Criticism in Victorian Britain', *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; JSOT Sup 386; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2003) 42–63). Certainly Larsen richly documents the vigorous discussion and criticism of Colenso's work in England, but see the critical responses by David Jobling, 'Colenso on Myth or Colenso as Myth: A Response to Timothy Larsen', *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; JSOT Sup 386; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2003) 64–75 and Draper, 'Colenso's Commentary', 109–10.

³⁶ Cf. Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 168–9, 183.

³⁷ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 175.

³⁸ Phrases respectively from Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 178 and 179 (cf. also 183).

³⁹ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 177.

⁴⁰ Colenso, *Remarks*, 34, quoting from Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 168 and 182. Colenso's refusal to 'dogmatize... on the latter', while holding a 'hope' for universal redemption – a common motif among nineteenth century universalists – may, as Morwenna Ludlow has suggested to me, indicate a sensitivity to avoid the kind of 'dogmatic universalism' often associated with Origen and the dogmatic rejection of everlasting punishment, anathematised at the Synod of Constantinople of 543.

⁴¹ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 197.

Colenso's interpretation of 9.20–3 (the image of the potter and the pot) is that it does not refer to God's ability to make two different kinds of pot, 'one for honour, and the other for dishonour (so as to support the Calvinistic view)' but rather, on the basis of the use of Jer 18.3–6 here, to the idea that God can refashion and remould to serve God's purpose.⁴² Far from God guaranteeing salvation to any one people on grounds of their specific identity or elect status, God will judge all people justly and impartially. In Christ, who has entered and shared the human condition, God has graciously acted to redeem the whole human race, including those who do not realise or recognise this – but among whom there may nonetheless be intuitions of goodness and grace.

4. Colenso's Commentary, Judaism, and the New Perspective on Paul

In his interpretation of Paul's attack on Jewish notions of privilege and special elect status, Colenso discusses the figure of the Jew, and ancient Judaism generally, in ways that would now widely be seen as problematic.⁴³ Jennings, for example, is critical of Colenso's dismissal of 'Jewish priority and election', in a way that, for Jennings, undermines the 'scandalous particularity' of Jesus in whom Israel's particularity is bound up and is thus 'the means through which Christian faith acquires its social and political materiality'.⁴⁴ More broadly – on an issue to which we shall return – Jennings offers a critique of what he calls Colenso's 'whiteness hermeneutic', 'the interpretative practice of dislodging particular identities from particular places by means of a soteriological vision that discerns all people on the horizon of theological identities', with the specific problem being 'the racialization of that soteriological vision'.⁴⁵

Colenso writes, for example, of the Jewish converts to Christ addressed in the letter as needing to abandon 'their Jewish prejudices', and of 'the three great pre-possessing errors of the Jewish mind... lying deep in every Jew's heart', which reflect 'the Jew's pride, his self-conceit'.⁴⁶ All this creates a negative and stereotypical construction of the Jew. When Colenso describes Paul as having 'struck a death-blow at the whole corrupt system of Judaism', he presumes not only a negative view of Judaism's religious practice but also a supersessionist perspective in which this old and flawed 'system' is surpassed.⁴⁷ None of this is unusual in Christian Commentary on Romans before the Holocaust, and even up until (and sometimes after) the paradigm-shifting work of E.P. Sanders.

Yet without wishing to offer an apologetic or anachronistic reading of Colenso, there are nonetheless mitigating features of his reading that should be noted. One is that (unlike many other exegetes) Colenso is clear that Paul's negative depictions do not apply to all Jews, do not apply to contemporary Jews, and should not be used as the basis for a generic contrast between Judaism and the Church or between Jews and Christians.⁴⁸ For example, in his reading of 2.1 and 2.17, Colenso is clear that many Jews were not guilty of the kinds of sins Paul mentions here; the argument only requires the acceptance that a solitary Jew who

⁴² Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 201–2.

⁴³ Draper, 'Colenso's Commentary', 116: 'with our post-holocaust sensitivity, we would rightly detect here an essentialism with regard to the Jewish people on Colenso's part'.

⁴⁴ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 139 and 160.

⁴⁵ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 138.

⁴⁶ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 34, 41–2, 89, respectively.

⁴⁷ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 72.

⁴⁸ For one stark contrast, see, e.g., Adolf Schlatter's comments on 1 Pet 2.7–8: 'Zwischen der Judenschaft und der Christenheit hatte sich die Kluft gebildet, die niemand mehr schließen konnte... Denn auch in dieser Trennung, so schmerzhaft sie alle traf, geschieht Gottes Regierung und Jesu Werk. Nicht mehr die Judenschaft, sondern die im Namen Jesu Vereinten sind die Gemeinde Gottes...' (Adolf Schlatter, *Die Briefe des Petrus, Judas, Johannes, an die Hebräer, des Jakobus. Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (3 vols.; vol 3; *Erläuterungen zum Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1921, 2nd ed.) 22).

was guilty of such heinous transgressions could not simply rely on his favoured status as one of the elect people to guarantee his salvation.⁴⁹ If this is granted, then the argument that all people are judged impartially, apart from their identity as Jew or gentile – or, indeed, as Christian or ‘heathen’ – can be developed. With regard to contemporary Jews (commenting on 11.1–6), Colenso suggests that, while ‘the great mass of the Jewish people is self-willed, and obstinately fixed in unbelief, yet doubtless there are many among them, whether the Gospel Message has reached them as yet or not, whom the Lord approves in their daily lives of piety and faithfulness, and on whom the blessing of their God descends’.⁵⁰ We see here the mixture of anti-Jewish caricature and affirmation of Jewish piety and practice. It is striking, though, how Colenso can point the focus of criticism away from Jews themselves and onto Christians: commenting on 1.24, 26, Colenso judges that the reason the majority of contemporary Jews have rejected the message is *not* due to their having been ‘given over to a reprobate mind’. Rather:

It is far more likely that the acts of abominable cruelty, injustice, and contemptuous bigotry, with which, in Christian lands and by Christian people – too often, alas! by Christian ministers – they have been so frequently, and are even now, treated, have gone far to fix them in holy and righteous horror of a religion, which taught that such outrages were right.⁵¹

Insofar as he finds in Romans an emphatic rejection of Jewish privilege and assurance of salvation, and sees Christ as the one in whom God has acted to save all people, Jews as well as gentiles, Colenso is open to critique for his form of supersessionism – though he stands among many exegetes, past and present, in seeing Paul’s argument as a rejection of the idea that salvation is granted on the basis of ethnic identity, or any other marker of prior worth, seeing it instead as the gift of God in Christ.⁵² Yet at the same time, with his prominent conviction that the love of God embraces all humanity, all of whom will (he hopes) finally share in salvation, Colenso insists that Jews (as well as gentiles) will not be ‘lost’. Commenting on 11.23, he writes that ‘God will still regard them as His children, even in His severest chastisements. In cutting them off, he will not cast them away. They are still beloved...’.⁵³ Colenso’s is a Christianising vision, in the sense that it is (for all humanity, Jews and gentiles) in Christ that salvation is achieved; but it is also a vision that finds goodness and truth not only among a chosen elect, but among all peoples and religions.

⁴⁹ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 63–4, 72; cf. also 197: in referring to Paul’s aim to do away with the ‘notion of an arbitrary election’ Colenso asserts that ‘[i]t was just that which the Jew of his day relied on. He was one of the elect. The Jews were the Calvinists of those days, and believed themselves, as God’s chosen people, sure of the kingdom.’

⁵⁰ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 211.

⁵¹ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 59. Jennings sees this as ‘a passage astonishing for its level of insight, given the virulent forms of anti-Semitism of his era’ (Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 144). As noted above, Jennings is also critical of Colenso’s negation of the particularity of Israel’s existence, and sees his universalism as a reflex of his colonial whiteness, but also offers a nuanced depiction of Colenso that observes his remarkable achievements and legacy as well as sharply criticising the colonialism that remains inherent in his thinking. It is unfortunate, then, if Jennings’ work serves as a route to dismiss Colenso’s work summarily, without apparent engagement with it, as in Joshua W. Jipp, ‘What are the Implications of the Ethnic Identity of Paul’s Interlocutor? Continuing the Conversation’, *The So-Called Jew in Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (ed. Rafael Rodríguez and Matthew Thiessen; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016) 183–204 (185 n. 8).

⁵² Cf., e.g., John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015): ‘the grace of God is not bounded by worth, ethnic or other, and the dynamic of unconditioned favour by which Israel was formed is reaching now to unworthy Gentiles... Christ thus proves to be the ultimate crisis for Israel, and its ultimate source of unconditioned grace; he also enacts its *comprehensive* expression, embracing both Gentile and Jew’ (553, 559, italics original).

⁵³ Colenso, *Epistle to the Romans*, 215.

Attentive readers will likely already have noticed some striking similarities with the New Perspective on Paul that developed in the wake of E. P. Sanders' landmark study, notably in the work of James Dunn and N. T. Wright.⁵⁴ Attempting to move away from the idea that Paul was attacking Jewish 'legalism' and what Sanders called 'legalistic-works-righteousness', and the associated Christian caricatures of Jews and Judaism, Dunn and Wright argue that what Paul was attacking was essentially a form of ethnocentrism, concisely encapsulated in Wright's comment that the 'meta-sin' Paul confronts in Rom 9–11 and elsewhere is 'the attempt to confine grace to one race'.⁵⁵ For Dunn, this ethnocentrism was expressed in the idea that membership of the people of God was demarcated by the 'identity markers' of circumcision, food laws and Sabbath observance.⁵⁶ The focus on ethnocentrism was intended to replace the idea that Paul was attacking the notion that salvation was earned by doing good works (in obedience to the Law), which Sanders had shown to be unjustified, and to offer a different target for Paul's critique. There is a striking similarity, in broad terms, in Colenso's reading of Romans. As we have seen, Colenso sees Paul as primarily engaged in a frontal attack on any notion of arbitrary election or privilege, based on racial, ethnic or religious identity, in particular through the ways in which he denies that Jewish identity grants any privileged or certain guarantee of standing before God. The problems with the New Perspective's depiction of Jewish ethnocentrism versus Christian universal inclusion have been amply discussed, and they apply in some ways, as we have just seen, to Colenso's depictions of Judaism.⁵⁷ But what most distinguishes Colenso's reading from the New Perspective reinterpretation is the particular context in which it emerges, and the particular challenge it therefore expresses, as we shall discuss below.

Before turning to these wider reflections on the significance of Colenso's interpretation, and its methodological importance, one other feature of his reading deserves to be noted, again because of the ways in which it resonates with post-Sanders readings of Paul, with their tendency to move away from judicial/legal interpretations of Paul's soteriology. That is Colenso's participationist understanding of Paul's view of Christ's death (and resurrection). The idea that Paul understood Christ's death and resurrection in a primarily participationist way, rather than in judicial or legal terms, is often traced back to Schweitzer, who in turn influenced Sanders' adoption of this understanding of Paul.⁵⁸ Others, such as Morna Hooker, have followed with their own versions of a participationist understanding.⁵⁹ The question of how to interpret and integrate the apparent themes of both

⁵⁴ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977). Among many works by Dunn and Wright, the earliest statements are: James D. G. Dunn, 'The New Perspective on Paul,' *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 (1983) 95–122 (cited from the repr. in James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (London: SPCK, 1990) 183–214); N. T. Wright, 'The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith,' *TynBul* 29 (1978) 61–88, included among other relevant essays in N. T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (London/Minneapolis: SPCK/Fortress, 2014).

⁵⁵ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 240; cf. also 167.

⁵⁶ See Dunn, 'New Perspective,' where he comments, like Wright, that these badges 'had become [for Paul] the expression of a too narrowly nationalistic and racial conception of the covenant' (201–2).

⁵⁷ See discussion and references in David G. Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion: Religion, Race, and Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020) 28–36; David G. Horrell, 'Grace, Race, and the People of God', *One God, One People, One Future: Essays in Honour of N. T. Wright* (ed. John Anthony Dunne and Eric Lewellen; London/Minneapolis: SPCK/Fortress, 2018) 191–210.

⁵⁸ See Albert Schweitzer, *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1930); ET: *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (2nd ed.; London: A&C Black, 1952); Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, e.g., 453–63.

⁵⁹ Among many examples, Morna D. Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Douglas A. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (JSNTSup 274; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2005), esp. 17–55; Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

participation and justification in Paul continues to be a prominent challenge in studies of Pauline theology.⁶⁰

What makes Colenso's reading of Paul's participationist Christology more distinctive and interesting – apart from its formulation many years before Schweitzer's *Mystik* – is the way in which he connects this with his universalist instincts. As we have seen, even 'the spirit of Christ' (Rom 8.9) is understood to be a spirit that infuses and inspires human beings, past and present, beyond the church and even beyond any explicit knowledge of Christ. Likewise, the death of Christ is understood to be something in which all humans have already participated, with baptism marking the recognition, rather than the enactment, of this reality, such that the hope of sharing in the resurrection is also one that encompasses the whole of humanity.

Colenso's commentary thus anticipates in interesting and distinctive ways some of the themes and motifs that have become prominent in New Perspective readings of Paul. But the context and focus for the generation of these readings is, of course, very different. The New Perspective emerges as part of a (belated) post-Holocaust reckoning with Christian caricature in the representation of Judaism, and, in the case of Dunn and Wright, a perceived need to rearticulate the 'problem' that Paul confronted, once legalism and good works could no longer be plausibly assumed as the target.⁶¹ It is also shaped, as John Barclay has astutely pointed out, by the multicultural ethos emerging in this period.⁶² More specifically, the New Perspective, along with discussion of justification and participation, emerges in particular from the context of Protestant debates about Paul's understanding of salvation, the death of Christ, justification and so on.⁶³ In Colenso's case the context is that of colonised Natal in the nineteenth century, and the encounter between English settler-colonialists and the Zulu peoples. Finally, then, it is important to consider how this context shapes Colenso's reading, and how this might stimulate our own reflections on approaches to the interpretation of the New Testament.

5. Colenso, Africa, and Contexts of Interpretation

Colenso's interpretation of Paul's attack on Jewish ethnic privilege and assuredness of election is, like the New Perspective's critique of Jewish ethnocentrism, problematic, but it is important to understand its purpose in context. As Jennings observes, the thrust of Colenso's reading of Romans lies in drawing an equivalence between the Jews in Paul's argument and 'English Christian settlers in the new world of Africa'.⁶⁴ Paul's letter to the

⁶⁰ See, e.g., the attempt to integrate them through an understanding of justification that is intrinsically participatory, in Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 40–105; or the more traditional reading, in reaction against the 'New Perspective', in Stephen Westerholm, *Justification Reconsidered: Rethinking a Pauline Theme* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). Paul's 'in Christ' language has also long been recognised as central to these debates, on which see recently Teresa Morgan, *Being 'in Christ' in the Letters of Paul* (WUNT 449; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), who argues that such language is either instrumental or encheiristic in Paul, and thus does not support the 'participatory' reading as much as generally thought.

⁶¹ See further Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 28–36.

⁶² John M. G. Barclay, "'Neither Jew nor Greek': Multiculturalism and the New Perspective on Paul', *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. Mark G. Brett; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 197–214.

⁶³ As critics have pointed out, even Sanders' attempt to develop a much more positive perspective on first-century Judaism frames the analysis in Protestant terms. See, e.g., Philip S. Alexander, 'Review of E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*', *JJS* 37 (1986) 103–6; Jacob Neusner, 'Mr Sanders' Pharisees and Mine: A Response to E.P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah*, *SJT* 44 (1991) 73–95; R. Barry Matlock, 'Almost Cultural Studies? Reflections on the "New Perspective" on Paul', *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies. The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore; JSOT Sup 266; Sheffield: SAP, 1998) 433–59 (444–7); Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 31–2.

⁶⁴ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 139.

Romans thus becomes an attack on notions of English Christian superiority. As Jonathan Draper remarks:

He wished to show that the English Christian settlers had no grounds of racial pride over against the Zulu, and made the same point vis-à-vis modern Jews, namely that Christians have no basis for racial pride over against the Jews... Colenso's point was that no human being can base feelings of racial superiority against another on the basis of their Christian faith... For Colenso, the Epistle was specifically written by Paul to counter feelings of racial privilege and pride.⁶⁵

For Jennings, this attempt to undermine any notion of ethnic superiority, for all its positive features, relies on a 'whiteness hermeneutic' that, in the end, erases the located particularity of identities, replacing this with theological notions.⁶⁶ While such universal claims can indeed conceal notions of ethnic or religious superiority, of whiteness in particular,⁶⁷ it is at least debatable whether, as Jennings claims, 'Colenso's universalism undermines all forms of identity except that of the colonialist'.⁶⁸ We should certainly not overestimate the radicality of Colenso's perspective here: it is clear enough that he retains a sense of the advantageous position that belongs to the enlightened English Christians, bringing their Gospel to the ignorant natives of Africa. As many have pointed out, he was and remained an English imperialist and not some kind of 'liberation theologian *avant la lettre*'⁶⁹ – though his siding with the Zulu cause against what he perceived as injustice towards them, as noted above, placed him on the side of opposition to colonial rulers such as Theophilus Shepstone.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, he is much more self-critical than many of his contemporaries, and the argument he finds in Paul's letter to the Romans powerfully undercuts any abiding instincts regarding intrinsic differentials in status.⁷¹ The attempt to say, however

⁶⁵ Draper, 'Colenso's Commentary,' 116 and 124.

⁶⁶ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 138; see further above.

⁶⁷ See, e.g., David G. Horrell, 'Paul, Inclusion, and Whiteness: Particularising Interpretation,' *JSNT* 40 (2017) 123–47; Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 299–345.

⁶⁸ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 145. Jennings, it is important to stress, also highlights Colenso's radical position and its positive implications for African theology, compared to many of his time, even if Colenso remains mired in some of the presuppositions and prejudices of colonial theology; see, e.g., Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 135, 144, 163–6, 168.

⁶⁹ Philippe Denis, 'Introduction', *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; JSOT Sup 386; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2003) 1–3: 'Should we... regard Colenso as a liberation theologian *avant la lettre*? Certainly not. Neither should we see him as an anti-colonial hero. He was an imperialist... and remained so until the end' (2).

⁷⁰ For one example, see the remarkable sermon Colenso preached in 1879 at a memorial service two months after the British defeat to the Zulus at Isandlwana, in which Colenso primarily argues that the British have not 'done justly' nor 'loved mercy' in their dealings with the Zulu people (available at: https://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/rejan79.3.pdf accessed 16 May 2024). I am grateful to James Carleton Paget for alerting me to this sermon. For a nuanced assessment of Colenso's stance, see R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 110–39. On Colenso's ruptured relationship with his close friend Theophilus Shepstone, and the costly way in which Colenso chose to take the African's side, against Shepstone's aggression and schemes for domination, see Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 161–6.

⁷¹ This awkward combination of superiority and self-criticism is evident, for example, in the remark that 'the present state of the great body of the Jewish nation' and that of 'a heathen people like the Zulus' is seen as a result of the failure of 'us Christians... to let our light shine to the glory of our God before them' (60, and see further there); or 196, on 9.13: 'With reference to the Light which we, Christians of England, have received, it might be said, in like manner, "England has God loved, and Africa has He hated." Yet not all English Christians are children of the Light, nor are all African heathens children of Satan; but those, who have received most, shall have most required of them'. This last quotation captures well the juxtaposition of an abiding sense of national advantage

imperfectly, that a Zulu life is worth as much as an English life, is not to be dismissed. Indeed, while recognising Colenso's dated perspective (and language) on the ignorant heathens and his desire to bring the light offered by English Christians, it is worth reminding ourselves how his attitudes compare to those held by many of his contemporaries.

We have already discussed how Colenso's perception of the good that is evident among the Zulu people and his sense that God's grace already encompasses all humanity contrasted with those whose missionary message was one that emphasised the degradation of these non-Christian 'heathens' and threatened their endless punishment in hell. Another example, discussed by John Rogerson, comes from a lecture Colenso gave to the Marylebone Literary Institution in London in 1865, arguing for the validity of Christian missions. The lecture was directed 'against the view derived from, but not sanctioned by, Darwin that natural selection was responsible for some races being "higher" than others, that "lower" races would consequently disappear, and that missions were a vain attempt to interfere with this natural process'.⁷² Notwithstanding the problems of his own missionary viewpoint, when it is compared with the view that 'lower' races would simply become extinct due to their intrinsic inferiority, Colenso clearly takes the better side.

From a methodological point of view, it is important to reflect on Colenso's explicit acknowledgement that his interpretation of Romans was shaped by his 'missionary' encounters, and specifically, as we have seen, by the 'sifting' process of respectful attention to the questions and objections of the Africans with whom he engaged. While the main contours of his theology and interpretation of Romans may have been formed already when in England, as he himself avers (though in a highly polemical context),⁷³ not least under the influence of F. D. Maurice and the circles with whom he engaged,⁷⁴ the details of the reading are, on Colenso's own testimony, shaped by his seven years' working among the Zulus of Natal. As Jennings puts it: 'As he shared space with black bodies, space born in speaking and listening, the theological seeds planted by Coleridge and Maurice began to grow and take new shape. Fully a man of his time, he was also in many ways ahead of his time.'⁷⁵

The seriousness with which Colenso took this task of engagement is also evidenced by his devoted labour to learn and publish on the Zulu language⁷⁶ (his deep immersion into African language and culture contrasts him with Schweitzer, who never learnt the languages of the people among whom he worked⁷⁷). Indeed, his willingness to have his thinking challenged and shaped by these encounters, which he also acknowledges in his work on the

– English Christians have received the light in a way Africa has not – and an immediate critique of any self-righteous sense of superiority based upon that.

⁷² John Rogerson, 'Colenso in the World of Nineteenth-Century Intellectual Ferment', *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; JSOT Sup 386; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2003) 127–35 (128; cf. 131). On the wider context of this debate in Victorian Britain, see David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Macmillan, 2016) 372–8.

⁷³ See Colenso, *Remarks*, 43.

⁷⁴ On the issue of the extent to which Colenso's views were shaped by his encounters in Africa, or by his formation in England and the influences of Coleridge and Maurice, see n. 35 above. Francis Watson has suggested to me that Colenso may also have been influenced in his reading of Romans by the earlier work of John Locke; see, e.g., *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (London: printed for Awnsham and John Churchill, at the Black Swan in Pater-Noster-Row. 1707) 4–5, 50.

⁷⁵ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 130.

⁷⁶ Colenso lists his books produced in the seven years in Natal from 1855–1862 in Colenso, *Remarks*, 46; most of them are on the Zulu language or are translations of the NT into Zulu. He comments too on the time and energy he has invested in this task of language learning, and on its importance (Colenso, *Remarks*, 43–8).

⁷⁷ See James Carleton Paget, 'Albert Schweitzer and Africa,' *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42 (2012): 277–316 (278, 292); also, in a work much more harshly critical of Schweitzer, Andrew M. Mbuvi, *African Biblical Studies: Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2023) 39–40.

Pentateuch, was precisely the subject of ridicule, as expressed in a mocking limerick from the time.⁷⁸ The limerick expresses the popular racism that found it laughable, and demeaning, that an Englishman should learn from an African. Yet this is precisely what Colenso makes explicit in his work – and makes his willingness to acknowledge the influence of his Zulu interlocutors all the more significant.

Colenso's universalist theology, which saw the grace of God already at work in the whole human race, and regarded insight into God and the good to be available to all people, within the context of their own culture and religion, gave him a framework within which he could acknowledge the good in Zulu culture. Consequently, as Draper points out, from Colenso's perspective '[t]here was no need for an absolute break with their former way of life... no severance of family and kinship ties'.⁷⁹ As a concrete instantiation of this, his early stance on the treatment of polygamy, which also attracted much criticism and opposition within the Church of England,⁸⁰ indicates in practice this sympathetic stance towards what we would call inculturation, in contrast to the oppositional rejection of African culture and religion all too common at the time.

Colenso, then, is no anti-imperialist revolutionary, no decoloniser ahead of his time, though his defence of the Zulu cause in his later years certainly set him increasingly at odds with the colonial administration.⁸¹ But he does represent an important and significant moment in the history of African biblical studies, albeit as an English colonial missionary. Two aspects of his approach to interpretation warrant highlighting. First, as we have seen, his reading of Romans was explicitly shaped by the context in which he wrote: just as Karl Barth's rather more famous Commentary on Romans was formed by the specific context of the failures of liberal theology and the horrors of the First World War, so Colenso's reading was shaped by his perceived need to challenge the ideology of English Christian superiority in the context of colonised Natal. The second aspect is the extent to which his Commentary, like his work more generally, represents the product of collaboration with Africans. As David Jobling claims, 'Colenso and his converts were creating biblical scholarship, African biblical scholarship'.⁸² The phrase 'and his converts' is crucial here: Colenso's reading of Romans was, we might say, co-produced through the probing and questioning of interlocutors such as William Ngidi. We might justifiably criticise the degree of condescension that remains in this 'voicing' of the native informer's perspective – what Jennings calls the 'theological commodification' of the African⁸³ – but it is also true, as Jennings remarks, that his enlisting of Ngidi and others as 'conversation partners' set them on a trajectory 'toward self-articulation'.⁸⁴ Colenso's reading of Romans is explicitly shaped by the African context and by conversation with Africans and presents an interpretation of Paul's most influential letter that powerfully opposes (English) racial or (Christian) religious superiority, finding in the letter (theological) resources for a generous and sympathetic engagement with the

⁷⁸ The limerick, which includes a racist label, is quoted in various places, and in slightly different forms, e.g., Sugirtharajah, *Bible and the Third World*, 110: 'A bishop there was of Natal/Who took a Zulu for a pal/Said the Kafir 'look 'ere/Ain't the Pentateuch queer?/And converted the Lord of Natal'; cf. also Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 152–3, who gives (on the basis of Guy's work) the original source as the newspaper, *The Natal Witness*, of 1863. On the 'ominous notions of cultural and racial superiority' that such 'humour' represented, see Guy, *The Heretic*, 187–8.

⁷⁹ Draper, 'Colenso's Commentary', 125.

⁸⁰ See Livingstone Ngewu, 'John William Colenso and the Enigma of Polygamy', *The Eye of the Storm: Bishop John William Colenso and the Crisis of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; JSOT Sup 386; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2003) 293–305.

⁸¹ See n. 70 above.

⁸² Jobling, 'Colenso on Myth', 67.

⁸³ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 154. Cf. Spivak's oft-quoted phrase concerning 'the ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern' (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin; London/New York: Routledge, 2006) 28–37 [28]).

⁸⁴ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 131.

Other. As such, its consequences, set in the wider context of Colenso's activity, and that of his family, were profound. Draper notes that '[h]is converts and scholars from Ekukhanyeni were among the vanguard of a new Zulu consciousness and resistance to colonialism, known early on as "the Bishopstowe Faction", after his house at Ekukhanyeni'.⁸⁵

6. Conclusion

Colenso's Commentary on Romans offers a valuable, if dated, case study for our own reflections on the current debates around methods in biblical studies, and more generally, the calls for decolonisation of the curriculum. This example illustrates, for a start, the Eurocentric (or Euro-American) focus of the discipline, such that Colenso's work remains barely discussed. Such Eurocentric myopia is no longer justifiable, if it ever was. More constructively, Colenso's commentary illustrates the way in which a particular context shaped a powerful reading of Romans, which was, to a degree, also co-produced through collaboration with Africans. As we have seen, it shares some striking similarities – and problematic aspects too – with the much later New Perspective on Paul, particularly in its interpretation of Paul's letter as a critique of presumed ethnic privilege, a theme that continues to have contemporary resonance. It also represents an early example of a participationist reading of Paul's theology. If Barth's celebrated *Römerbrief* threw down a challenge to historical-critical methods by presenting a model of the interpreter as connected with, rather than detached from, the object of inquiry, inhabiting Paul's letter so as to articulate its message for a new situation, so too, in its own distinctive way, does Colenso's commentary. Colenso in no way rejected historical methods – indeed, he was controversial in his day precisely because of his rigorously historical and rational probing of the biblical material, especially the Hexateuch, as well as his doctrinal convictions – but he also showed how, in the crisis of his own time and place, Paul could offer a powerful challenge. Is his commentary neglected because it, like his life's work, was critical of the ideology and practice of English colonial rule, albeit in compromised and partial ways? Or simply because it relates to an African, rather than a European, context? Whatever the reason, and without denying its problems and shortcomings, it deserves more attention within the history of Pauline studies, and a place of honour in the library of powerful readings of Romans.

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⁸⁵ Draper, 'Colenso's Commentary', 125.