



Review of

**David Joy, *Mark and its Subalterns:
A Hermeneutical Paradigm for a Postcolonial Context*
(London: Equinox, 2008), 222 pp.**

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David Joy, the author of *Mark and its Subalterns: A Hermeneutical Paradigm for a Postcolonial Context*, examines the Gospel according to Mark from a postcolonial biblical perspective. He critiques the limitation placed by Euro-American traditional hermeneutics stating that traditional interpretations look at faith. However postcolonial hermeneutics stretches the reading to deal with the issue and condition of faith: the plight of the poor. Both historical and postcolonial viewpoints are examined — contextualization of theology and hermeneutics versus native hermeneutics. Historical critical interpreters are credited for providing the background for the sociopolitical setting of the Gospel necessary for hearing the voices of the subaltern.

However, Joy quoting West points out that, “The historical-critical method also reminded readers how the Bible had been misused for colonization, national oppression and exploitation.”¹

Joy more than adequately supports his research by examining the works of Archie Lee, L. E. Donaldson, S.V. Gallagher, K. C. Abraham, and J. G. Muthuraj to access the contextual treatment of the text and to lay the background for postcolonial views from R. S. Sugirtharajah, Kwok P.-L., M. Dube, S. Kappen, and F. F. Segovia. Indian postcolonial views are substantiated by T. Manickam, M. Vellanickel, A. Amaladass, G. M. Soares-Prabhu, and F. X. D’sa. However, many other authors are also mentioned.

Joy addresses the identity of subalterns in Mark, the nature of Roman oppression in Galilee, the setting of Mark, postcolonial dimensions of the text and a possible hermeneutic paradigm for India. Therefore the book presents a postcolonial hermeneutic for Mark in an Indian context. He uses three main hermeneutical methodologies, liberation, subaltern and feminist. Explaining the need for this specific context Joy states that there is a need for examining the connection between colonialism and native history. This study from the margins focuses on representation, gender, race and power.

In the re-reading process, Joy looks at traditional interpretations and then evaluates the major insights of contextual/subaltern exegesis. For example missionary attempts at biblical interpretation are criticized for not taking into account the native voices and not addressing the sociopolitical and religious cultural lives of natives, indigenous and local systems of religious order. Referencing missionary hermeneutics Joy quotes Padinjarekuttu’s analysis of J. Schmidlin, a German missiologist stating that the task of missionaries in the first half of the first century was to conquer the colonies spiritually.² He explains that this attempt produced in India “serious paradigm shifts even in the area of biblical hermeneutics.”³

¹ Gerald O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation : Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*, 2nd, rev. ed., The Bible & Liberation Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1995) 51.

² Isaac Padinjarekuttu, *The Missionary Movement of the 19th and 20th Centuries and Its Encounter with India: A Historico-Theological Investigation with Three Case Studies*, Europäische Hochschulschriften. Reihe XXIII, Theologie (New York: P. Lang, 1995).

³ David Joy, *Mark and Its Subalterns: A Hermeneutical Paradigm for a Postcolonial Context* (London: Equinox, 2008).

What is said to be missing from all interpretations including some postcolonial is the recognition of or the analysis of the presence of the empire in the text. Joy's interpretation from an Indian context gives evidence of why a postcolonial reading is necessary and more effective than other models of interpretation. The first given is the recent attempts by New Testament scholars to focus on the presence of the empire in the text. Second, the sudden increase of postcolonial theories and ensuing attempt, "to deconstruct the historiography in a postcolonial context heralded the urgency and necessity of an alternative reading strategy for the Bible in a postcolonial context."⁴

Joy makes three clear points in his analysis of the situation in Galilee at the time of this gospel which he feels fit within the parameters of postcolonial discourse. He explains that, "the context of Mark is Roman colonialism and the postcolonial context of the researcher helps in revealing the true meaning of the text in an effective manner, if postcolonial strategies are used"⁵. First: the indigenous are the oppressed and are the natives in Galilee. They also fit the description given by Joy of the subaltern: they are the people of inferior status in society forced by the economic protocol of the empire to act in opposition to the standards set for them.⁶ In Mark examples of subalterns are a fisherman (1.16-20), a customs employee (2.13-14) and a Zealot (3.18).⁷ Second: the Roman Empire consists of the ruling classes and the colonizers who oppress the indigenous. Joy describes the presence of the Roman Empire as a major contributing factor in the emergence of the subalterns in Mark. Third: Jesus is portrayed as liberator of the oppressed.

In Joy's rereading he extracts three passages. In Mark 10.17-31 he discusses the issues of the poor; 7.24-30 addresses issues of race, gender and hybridity and 5.1-20 looks at class, nationalism and subalternity. Joy's paradigm of Mark as a postcolonial discourse suggests that Jesus saw riches and class distinction as detrimental to society as whole. For example in Mark 10.17-31 the rich is portrayed as unwilling to give up wealth to alleviate the economic pressures placed on the poor. The author, from Jesus' perspective, sees a way to benefit all: share the wealth so all can benefit (10.21). In this chapter Joy raises an important question; "how did the

⁴ Joy, 182.

⁵ Joy, 60.

⁶ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back : Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989) 215.

⁷ Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Gospel and the Poor* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 23.

rich become rich”⁸. This brings into the picture the empire and how the poor and oppressed are used in the maintenance of an economy that separates them from the rich. Chapter Four entitled “Colonial Powers and Their Marks on Mark” lays out the imperial markings of the empire in creating and sustaining the separation of classes and the elevation of the rich above the poor.

Successfully presenting a paradigm for India, Joy does an exceptional job explaining how the caste system and gender biases were exploited by further alienating various groups with the use of scripture. Christianity was presented as a superior religion when it was presented by the missionaries. The interpretations of the native indigenous were not taken seriously by the colonist and attempts were also made to denigrate their local customs and beliefs. Joy references at this point the article by Sugirtharajah entitled, “Imperial Critical Commentaries: Christian Discourse and Commentarial Writings in Colonial India,” *JSNT* 73:83-112. Sugirtharajah explains that commentaries were presented justifying the occupation by the British as a corrective to native interpretations which were viewed as uncivilized.

⁸ David Joy, 135.