

Review of Hans Leander, *Discourses of Empire: The Gospel of Mark from a Postcolonial Perspective*; Semeia Studies 71; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013.

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In *Discourses of Empire*, Hans Leander examines the Gospel of Mark from two discrete imperial contexts: European colonialism and Roman imperialism. After an introductory unit (Part I) outlining the intersection between postcolonial criticism and biblical studies, as well as highlighting the core heuristic concepts within postcolonial theory that prove methodologically significant, Leander moves through seven Markan pericopes from the vantage of the two aforementioned settings (Part II & III). A selection of German and English nineteenth-century commentators facilitates Leander's study of the intersection between biblical studies and identity constructions moulded by European colonialism (Part II), which is then, in turn, juxtaposed with a reading of Mark's own location and self-understanding vis-à-vis the Roman Empire (Part III). Leander's aim in this dual focus is to "uninherit" (72) the nineteenth-century colonial heritage from modern scholarship.

Part I is an initiatory discussion concerning the general milieu of postcolonial studies (chapter 2), as well as the (often strained) intersection between postcolonialism and biblical scholarship (chapter 3). For Leander, Said's criticism of nineteenth-century academia, particularly his understanding of colonialism as a totalizing discourse that results in not only "epistemic productions" but also economic and military enterprises (36), is a theoretical premise applied to Leander's investigation of nineteenth-century commentaries in Part II. Bhabha and Spivak's influence is largely felt in Part III, as Leander applies a number of their conceptual tools to specific narratives throughout the Gospel of Mark—the subaltern (colonized, marginalized, gendered), catachresis (resistance manoeuvre), *pharmakon* (Western dominance as both medicine and poison), mimicry (imitative [subversive] behaviour), hybridity (intermingling of two cultures), and the third space (new structures/initiatives created in hybridity).

In Part II, Leander engages J. A. Alexander, Chadwick, Holtzmann, Meyer, Weiss, Swete, *et alia*, in order to elucidate how European biblical interpretation was deployed within a colonial context and therein served to enshrine and dispense a colonial heritage. For the purposes of this aim, Leander examines a number of Markan texts which naturally give prominence to imperial discourse: the "Son of God" incipit (Mk 1:1), the Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20), the Syrophoenician woman (7:4-30), the *parousia* statement (8:31-9:1), the entry into Jerusalem (11:1-11), the Roman tribute question (12:13-17) and the Centurion's confession (15:39). Leander synthesizes the material by identifying three interrelated binary divisions used by European commentators to generate colonial identities: Greek/Semitic, Jewish/heathen, and spiritual/worldly (145). The colonial (and Christian) identity is often formed in association with the foremost division in each category *over against* the other. For instance, the essentialist binary

division between a Semitic understanding and a Hellenistic/Gentile understanding is used for interpreting “Son of God” in Mk 1:1, in which the former is (negatively) theocratic and earthly, whereas the latter is (positively) metaphysical, eternal, and Christian. Moreover, the Christian/heathen dichotomy functions as a hermeneutic in the Gerasene demoniac narrative (5:1-20), which reinforces a Christian form of universalism integral to European colonial expansion (97). What these examples illustrate is the thoroughgoing colonial heritage embedded within this burgeoning and formative period of biblical interpretation.

Part III, the centre piece of Leander’s study, re-examines each of the selected Markan texts with reference to Roman imperial discourse. Concerning the incipit in Mk 1:1 (Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ [υἱοῦ θεοῦ]), Leander identifies three linguistic interplays with imperial discourse, all of which surround the pragmatic range of certain lexemes that—when heard against various Roman inscriptions—are pregnant with subversion. Moreover, the name λεγιών (“Legion”) in the Gerasene narrative functions as a catachresis by associating the Roman military with unclean spirits, a point which Leander supplements by suggesting how the notion of “masculine strength” associated with Roman might is subverted by the strength of Jesus and is therefore a “mockery” of Rome’s military prestige. As two last examples, Leander argues that the entry into Jerusalem exemplifies a mimicry/mockery (following Bhabha, 1994) of imperial triumph, and the discourse surrounding the tribute tax creates a “metonymic gap” (via the use of κῆνσοϛ) in which Rome’s total power is pondered and negotiated (275-84). Having considered each Markan pericope, Leander’s overall thesis comes to light, namely: while Mark reflects both anti-imperial and pro-imperial perspectives, the predominance of ambivalent strategies used throughout the text—such as catachresis, mimicry, and the opening of a third space—renders the final Markan narrative into a (“destabilizing”) threat to imperial discourse, not an unqualified opposition to the Roman empire (304).

The concluding chapter (Part IV) revisits the interpretive binary divisions displayed in the nineteenth-century European commentators, suggesting a number of “uninheriting” strategies stemming from the postcolonial perspective outlined in Part III. One of the overarching strategies presented here is that a postcolonial reading of Mark encourages a recalibration of the linguistic representations of the “Other” found in nineteenth-century commentaries (Syrophoenician woman as a “Greek” not “Gentile”), as well as the denunciation of the uncritical reproduction of historically unsound divisions that in fact remain inseparable within the Markan context (use of spiritual/worldly dichotomy). The logic behind Leander’s juxtaposition of two purported imperial contexts is revealed; Mark’s own stance towards the Empire functions as a criticism of nineteenth-century colonial discourse.

Leander’s project displays commendable awareness of two salient and interrelated horizons: the totalizing impact of a colonial heritage upon the task of interpretation, and the need for analytical tools to elucidate the various complexities involved in an ancient text’s own stance towards imperialistic domination. Relating these two horizons is both the strength of Leander’s work and a point for further inquiry. Three issues press their relevance here.

First, while Leander avoids positioning Mark in relation to Rome in purist terms, suggesting instead that the dynamic is in fact ambivalence and hybridized, the nature of hybridity is certainly tipped towards that of resistance and opposition via mimicry and mockery. The question is not whether Leander's conceptualization of Mark's stance before Rome is satisfactory—individual exegetes may come to their own determination of the readings offer here—but whether or not it is sufficient to use the bilateral interface between Mark and Rome as the *sole* strategy of “uninheriting” a later colonial tradition. Can an examination of Mark's stance towards Rome through a postcolonial lens function as an effective strategy in this regard when the Jewish-Christian interface is withheld from the parameters of the study? As it stands, the reader may be left wondering: how does the nature of Mark's destabilization of Rome serve as a strategy of uninheriting a European colonial heritage relate to the Jewish-Christian dynamic in the parabolic theory (Mk 4:10-12), the parable of tenants (12:1-12), and the “apocalyptic” discourse (13:3-37)? By widening the postcolonial reading of Mark to include the Jewish-Christian-Rome interface, the hybridity of Mark may become more readily available and therein pose greater challenges to the function of Part III as strategy against the findings of Part II. It seems that any postcolonial analysis of early Christian texts would be benefited by engaging the complex of Christian-Jewish-Roman relations, particularly when using Bhabha's concept of cultures as fluid entities and the colonial experience as one that creates a truly hybridized subject.

Second, since the overarching aim concerns the “uninheriting” of a particular tradition, the volume would be strengthened by including a more substantial consideration concerning the import of the “post” in postcolonial theory, particularly as it relates to the contemporary scholarly milieu. R.S. Sugirtharajah, for example, cites Chow's comment on the potential threefold meaning of the prefix: “‘having gone through’, ‘after’, and ‘a notion of time which is not linear but constant, marked by events that may be technically finished but that can only be fully understood with the consideration of the devastation they left behind’” (1999, ix; see Chow 1992, 152). In what sense is the contemporary academic environment “post”-colonial? As a concomitant point, what is the connection between contemporary scholarship and the binaries latent within the nineteenth-century commentaries? While acknowledging the historically evolving and heterogeneous conceptions of the “post” in postcolonialism (Leander 2013, 30-1), the suggestion of an “uninheritance” would only be bolstered if the nineteenth-century colonial tradition was more readily shown to be concretized in contemporary scholarship.

Third, another lingering issue is anachronism. If postcolonial theory is largely developed in association with the infamous European colonial legacy, which itself is predicated upon particular notions of race, how transferable are these theoretical tools to early iterations of imperial activity? Leander contends that different economic modes of production within the two settings (colonial Europe and ancient Rome) do not preclude the overlapping cultural elements that are employed to perpetuate domination and subordination (13-14). Yet, the centrality of “race” is by-passed, softening the defence against the potential charge of anachronism. Due to the contentious nature of the transferability of postcolonial theory to texts of antiquity, particularly concerning anachronistic transposition of

nineteenth-century conceptions of race, addressing this potential disparity would strengthen the overall employment of the theory.

These inquiries aside, Leander's work is nothing short of engaging and resourceful. While some discussion has been raised here surrounding the wider framework of Leander's aim, the structural framework offered in this volume (addressing two imperial horizons) is ambitious as it is laudable. Those engaged with postcolonial biblical criticism will necessarily find their endeavours vitalized by Leander's project and, as a result, it should be heartily recommended.

Bibliography

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