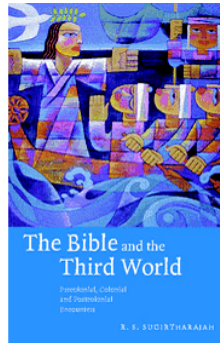


○ REVIEW OF R. S. SUGIRTHARAJAH'S *THE BIBLE AND THE THIRD WORLD: POSTCOLONIAL, COLONIAL AND PRECOLONIAL ENCOUNTERS*

Robert Paul Seesengood, Drew University

Correspondence to Robert Paul Seesengood: rob.seesengood@yahoo.com

Robert Paul Seesengood reviews R. S. Sugirtharajah's *The Bible and the Third World: Postcolonial, Colonial and Precolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).



If, taxonomically, books in critical theory may be divided into historical survey, exegetical survey, or sophisticated analysis, Sugitharajah's *Bible and the Third World*, even in its structure and contents, begins to blur into hybridity. Already surpassed – both chronologically and in critical reflection – by Sugitharajah's own *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford 2002), *Bible and the Third World* may be one of Sugitharajah's most extensive yet also accessible works to date. Further, lacking (for obvious and understandable reasons) the critical nuance and contextual specificity of *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism* (Sheffield Academic, 1998), *Bible and the Third World*, in some ways, serves as both prologue and further expansion.

Sugitharajah outlines his thesis:

Along with gunboats, opium, slaves and treaties, the Christian Bible became a defining symbol of European expansion. The underlying purpose of this volume is to trace how the Christian Bible, the ur-text of European culture, as Stephen Prickett calls it, has been transmitted, received, appropriated and even subverted by Third World people. It narrates the arrival of the Bible in precolonial days, through to its appropriation in the postcolonial context, both by the colonizer and colonized (1).

By exploring the use of the Bible in a 'third world' context, Sugitharajah means specifically the use of the Bible in the cultures of Africa, Asia and Latin America. He first traces the development of the term (beginning with Alfred Sauvy), notes its limitations, and acknowledges its potential pejorative connotations. Rooting his own use in Sauvy's primarily class-and-production-based description of division, Sugitharajah observes:

For my part, I feel the term Third World is still serviceable because it encapsulates a particular way of existence and experience. It is a suitable semantic metaphor which conveys a relationship, especially the unequal relationship that exists between the strong and the weak. It refers to people who have been left out and do not have the power to shape their future. It defines a relationship marked by power and mediated through old colonial ties, and currently through the economic and cultural presence of neocolonialism (3).

Sugitharajah grants, certainly, that this description applies 'both globally and locally'. Further, he is clear what he presents is neither exhaustive nor systematic in its portrayal. Rather, *The Bible and the Third World* examines the use of the Bible in three major (still, somewhat generically defined) non-European contexts across three general epochs of colonial encounter in order to exemplify specific issues and contexts of the colonial / racial / class conscious implications of Bible reading and promulgation. 'Colonial' is used, primarily, to describe the nineteenth century military and economic expansion of Europe and North America (particularly Britain, Spain and the United States).

Sugitharajah proceeds in three general moves, exploring Africa, Asia and Latin America's encounters with the Bible in precolonial periods (obviously beginning much earlier in his survey of Africa and Asia), the height of the colonial era, and 'postcolonial' continuations of Bible reading. Each of these three major sections (the shortest being the 'precolonial' era, the longest being 'colonial embrace') focuses on specific examples of appropriation or resistance, citing heavily from original documents, letters, and published documents. The final section, postcolonial encounters, is the most theoretical.

Precolonial: Sugitharajah narrates the first intrusions of the Bible into Asian and African contexts in this section. The Bible was rarely translated; translations were paraphrastic (largely for liturgy) and the Bible did not play a significant role in indigenous versions of Christianity. Sugitharajah argues Augustine, and others like him in North African Christianity, were largely participating in European religious discourses marked, for example, by their near exclusive use of the Bible in Latin. Indigenously, the Bible was dismissed as an inferior literary product or incorporated into indigenous religious practices (where parallel). Sugitharajah argues 'the Bible arrived in the East before Christendom and Europe came to be inextricably linked and before Europe and Asia were thought of as distinct and segregated entities' (36). The Bible remained remote and did not play the central role early in religious life that it would later (37). '[N]o translation of the complete Bible was ever made available in the vernacular languages of Africa and Asia' (38). I wonder how this applies to Coptic translations? Finally, 'the Bible found its place among the many sacred books; it did not threaten to subsume or surpass the religious texts of other faith traditions, but coexisted with them as one among many' (38).

Colonial: Nearly every aspect of precolonial experience with the Bible would be reversed during the epoch of European colonial expansion. Sugitharajah traces the dual development of protestant missions and energetic translation and dissemination of the Bible (largely by various Bible societies of Europe and North America). Initially, translation of the Bible was resisted by missionaries because the fundamental 'truths' of the Bible could not readily find expression in (inferior?) indigenous dialects. Many feared wide-spread Bible reading would disrupt or contradict theological instruction. Later, protestant organisations and Bible societies began to translate the

Bible, creating neologisms when required and paraphrasing as necessary. Eventually the English Bible became the staple and indigenous peoples were forced to learn English (and British customs, history, theology, etc.) to participate in religious discourse. Despite rhetoric elevating the Bible alone (insisting on no particular creeds or confessions in translation), the English Bible and (protestant) Christian theology became normative techniques of colonial subjugation.

The process, however, was not exclusively hierarchical. Protest of political and theological hegemony was also enabled by the central status of the Bible and by strategic biblical exegesis. Readers such as Olaudah Equiano, William Apess, K. N. Banerjee, Pandita Ramabai, and various African emancipatory movements used the Bible in various (sub-altern) protests of (altern) metropolitan ideologies or practices. European exegetes, such as Colenso, also used a vocabulary created by biblical hegemony to advance readings in protest of various rhetorics of domination. Tracing this complex and hybrid discourse, Sugitharajah offers a concluding chapter on the Bible societies themselves, outlining the work of the *colporteurs*. The Bible was 'read into' third world communities as a device of colonial control while simultaneously offering a vocabulary for sub-altern protest. In other words, Sugitharajah's work unveils the true hybridity of colonial and postcolonial engagement regarding the Bible.

Postcolonial: The first two sections of Sugitharajah's book are historical. The final section of *The Bible and the Third World* turns to a theoretical analysis of 'postcolonial' readings. Sugitharajah clearly assumes the work of both Bhabha and Spivak, but does not explicitly engage these theorists; he demonstrates theory with specific examples of exegetical practice. In the final section, Sugitharajah explores the history of liberationist readings and the development of post-colonial theory. His discussions of the difference between liberationist and postcolonial readings is particularly valuable, as is his treatment of the relationship of postcolonial and post-colonial contexts, the historical validity of using postcolonial methods to analyse the primary or originary contexts of the Bible, and the precise borders of 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' contexts (all wonderfully treated in precise ways).

In some sense, it might seem pedagogically beneficial to have foregrounded these theoretical and taxonomical issues prior to the presentation of the more historical literature; in other words, to read the book backwards. On the other hand, organised as they are, these theoretical concerns arise more organically and in a way that better reflects their development in the hermeneutics of the last 100 years. Clearly, Sugitharajah's central points – that Bible reading is always culturally preconditioned and that 'the needs of the present... dictate and control any reading practice' (277) seem overwhelmingly reinforced and defensible.

In its presentation, *The Bible and the Third World* offers a collection of readings from actual (and contextually described) writers. Much of this material has not been collected in a single monograph; some, such as the survey of the *colporteurs*, is likely to be new to both seasoned scholars and to beginning students. Further, the explicit linkage of theory, narrative history, and demonstrated exegesis grounds all arguments with specific examples and increases pedagogic value.

The result is a highly useful text. It will find particular use in (most likely, but not exclusively) graduate courses on Bible interpretation, postcolonialism, and critical theory. That said, its value is not simply in the classroom; Sugitharajah's cogent treatment of theory will also be instructive to scholars who already use postcolonial methodologies. Though not as technical and full as

what is found in other works, Sugitharajah's cogency and precision in *The Bible and the Third World* makes this volume uniquely approachable.