Sugirtharajah, R. S., ed.

*Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*

3rd edition


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Having attended the review panel session on this book at the 2006 SBL meeting in Washington D.C., I am delighted to be able to add my voice of appreciation and to reflect on its contribution. I will do so by focusing on both the frame provided by the editor, R. S. Sugirtharajah, and on the pictures in-between.

The Frame: Part 1

In his introduction, subtitled “Still at the Margins,” Sugirtharajah begins by noting the various changes since the publication of the first and second editions of *Voices from the Margin* (1991 and 1995). The first change he notes is from the perspective of mainstream biblical scholarship. “Not much” has changed, he argues (1). Mainstream biblical interpretation is still “biblical interpretation,” with the margins being given their geographical region as adjectival modifiers, such as “African biblical scholarship.”

Sugirtharajah then goes on at more length, appropriately so, to discuss the changes that have taken place on the Third World margins. First, the margins are now more “crowded” and “complicated” (3). But what strikes Sugirtharajah most about these crowded margins is that from within their midst there is the rise of male-led conservative
scriptural control across the various religious traditions found on the margins. What is good to see, however, is that Sugirtharajah has not lost his own activist edge, for he goes on to say that “The task, then, in this respect, is to reclaim the margin from reactionary forces and reinvent it as an accessible model of critique and resistance” (3). I agree. In the midst of neo-conservative co-option of the Bible, the socially engaged biblical scholar must contribute to the contestation of the Bible. A second, related, change Sugirtharajah sees is that “The Bible, which became, at least for a brief spell in the 1980s and 1990s, a profitable tool for the people and a potent instrument for empowerment and political change, is now claimed, consumed, studied, and acknowledged as an authority by the powerful” (3). Again, he is right, and again he is right to urge us to contribute “counter-readings” (4).

A third change he discerns is “the fragmentation of audiences and readership” (4). Although he celebrates the recovery of diverse identities that this fragmentation signals, he is worried that hegemonic forces may be manipulating aspects of identity politics in order “to keep the marginalized in their allocated places” (4). One of the strategies of the center is to celebrate, commodify, and then consume the exotic differences of the margin. And one of the strategies of elite control on the margins is to emphasize features of local identity over against common or overlapping features around which marginalized sectors can organize.

A fourth change is the post–liberation theology landscape of the third volume of Voices from the Margin. While the first two editions were drenched in liberation hermeneutics, this entire discourse, Sugirtharajah claims, has been “co-opted by the mainstream” (4). I think he overstates this here and elsewhere in his recent work. We are seeing a more complex and problematized form of liberation hermeneutics, and one of the features that is being recognized and recovered is popular spirituality (and its underlying resistant orientation, I would add), but this does not mean that “In the end, liberation theology became [past tense?] traditional and triumphalistic” (5).

Emerging from its wake (as Sugirtharajah sees it) and contributing substantially to this volume, both in terms of its framing and its essay selection, is postcolonialism. At this point in his introduction Sugirtharajah contrasts liberation theology and postcolonialism, and while much of the comparison is insightful, aspects of it are caricatured (or misunderstood). This is an unhelpful tendency in Sugirtharajah’s writings on liberation hermeneutics. His assessment that in the “the current political climate, which is palpably conservative, liberation is equated with terror and terrorism” (5), also says more about his own social location, in the belly of the British neo-colonial beast, and his orientation to the Anglo-American axis (of evil, to be sure) than it does about the margins themselves. Indeed, it is not always clear from which social location Sugirtharajah is writing about the
margins. Does his analysis reflect the analysis of those on the margins, or does it reflect the analysis of one who has made his home away from home in the diaspora?

In asking this question I am participating in what Sugirtharajah refers to as “diasporic hermeneutics” (5), the fifth area of change. “If the 1980s was the time of the subalterns, now is the time of the diasporic intellectuals” (5). Among the quandaries facing this marked shift of some from the margins to the center is “who are the authentic representatives” (6), and while I agree with Sugirtharajah that the question is a complex one, I disagree with him when he goes on to say that “What diasporic hermeneutics has done is to make regional-based theologies such as African, Asian, or Latin American almost redundant” (6). I am grateful for the “almost” but want to state clearly that African biblical scholarship and African biblical interpretation more generally (as well as African theologies) remain rooted in continental African realities. As far as African biblical scholarship and theology is concerned, the center of African academic gravity has not yet shifted to the diaspora. But I do agree with Sugirtharajah as he goes on to state “that these discourses, the one from home and the other from abroad, are motored and motivated by different agendas” (6). His listing of their very different agendas and academic sources is astute and soberingly accurate.

Sugirtharajah then goes on to offer an informative overview of the sections of the volume and of the essays in each, commenting as he does so on the changes from the earlier editions. The six thematic sections are: “Reading Strategies,” focusing on theoretical and methodological concerns; “Subaltern Readings,” focusing on a broad range of marginalized contextual readings “from below”; “Many Readings: Exodus,” focusing on a problematizing of the exodus narrative from a number of perspectives; “Postcolonial Readings,” focusing on this emergent field of reflection; “Inter-textual Readings,” focusing on a reciprocal and collaborative reading of religious texts from different faith traditions; and “Popular Readings,” focusing on the importance of ordinary readers of the Bible on the margins.

Sugirtharajah concludes his overview by acknowledging, as I do, that the essays in his third edition “are a testimony to the resilience and the capability of marginal hermeneutics to be innovative and to continually reinvent itself” (9).

The Pictures In-Between

I cannot do justice to the truly wonderful collection Sugirtharajah has made. All I can urge you to do is to get your own copy and to explore it. The frame, important as it is, cannot encompass the riches bursting from the more than 450 pages in-between. Indeed, many may not even bother to read the framing essays (although they will diminish the
contribution of the collection as a whole should they not), opting instead to dip in for particular topics or locations. The essays each have their own integrity.

I am also not going to attempt to interrogate why certain of the essays in the earlier editions have been left out. There is integrity in this selection, and the framing essays explain sufficiently. I will be forgiven, however, for lamenting the passing of South African Itumeleng Mosala’s two contributions, one on “The Use of the Bible in Black Theology” and the other “Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: The Case of Micah.” The omission of these, along with some others, diminishes the liberation axis in the liberation-postcolonial alliance of this edition. It also diminishes the contribution of Marxist analysis to the third edition. Mosala’s work was a particularly innovative moment in liberation hermeneutics, contending as it did with the notion of the Bible as self-evidently on the side of the oppressed (which was the dominant perspective in 1980s of Latin American, North American Black theology, and South African Black theology, although not of feminist theology). Sugirtharajah may argue that Mosala’s work signals the beginning of a shift in liberation hermeneutics to postcolonial hermeneutics (which is the implication of Sugirtharajah’s redeployment of Mosala in another of his books, The Bible and the Third World, where he includes Mosala under postcolonial and not liberation hermeneutics), but I am not sure this is fair to liberation hermeneutics and the internal logic that led Mosala to shift our focus and make it more ideological with respect to the biblical text.

The Frame: Part 2

The other end of Sugirtharajah’s frame consists of a short but provocative “Afterword” in which he returns to some of the points he has already taken up in his introduction. First, he sees mainstream biblical scholarship becoming ever more arcane and insular. Enough said! Second, he sees the “real stuff” as the terrain of the Third World biblical scholar, who faces the rampant forces of globalization from outside and the insidious temptations to power from the inside. In an instant of insight he hyphenates the “liberation-postcolonial” (495), aligning these two related trajectories and so harnessing their considerable resources for the task at hand, which is to navigate between “postcolonial pride and imperial intentions” (495) so that the Bible may continue, but in a quite different way (now that postcolonial hermeneutics is having its say), to be a resource for “human rights struggles” and “democratic aspirations” (496).

Sugirtharajah does not end his “Afterword” here, although I wish he had. Instead, he asks whether the Bible will survive (and goes on to suggest some answers, from both the Western and the Third World). This may be a question in the Western world, but it is not a question in most African contexts. Instead, and my echo of Gustavo Gutiérrez is
deliberate, the question is not whether the Bible will survive but whether it will bring life or death and how we can ensure that it does indeed bring life.