Hans Leander

*Discourses of Empire: The Gospel of Mark from a Postcolonial Perspective*

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Angela N. Parker

Chicago Theological Seminary

Chicago, Illinois

From the moment that Hans Leander connects his time as a peace activist in Sweden to his erudite research and scholarship on the Gospel of Mark, one realizes that *Discourses of Empire: The Gospel of Mark from a Postcolonial Perspective* is a work in which a scholar-activist can easily become invested. A revision of his doctoral thesis at the University of Gothenburg, Leander’s work joins other scholars such as Simon Samuel and Tat-Siong Benny Liew as examples of the continued importance of postcolonial and postmodern approaches to the Gospel of Mark.¹ Leander extends beyond both Samuel and Liew by proposing ways to “uninherit” (a term borrowed from Ananda Abeysekara) the colonial heritage of modern biblical scholarship. Because politics in Sweden also plays a part in Leander’s work (e.g., the question of religious congregations taking part in political-social engagement or remaining separate from politics altogether), uninheriting the colonial heritage means attempting to reject the binaries that one finds in Swedish politics and in biblical scholarship, since binaries act as forms of interpellation.² Arguing that there is an interconnection between biblical scholarship and European colonial expansion, Leander

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2. Citing Louis Althusser throughout this work, Leander questions the ways that texts interpellate, construct, and constitute group identity and representation (12–13).
seeks to uninherit the colonial heritage of modern biblical scholarship after conducting an extensive parallel analysis of select Markan passages in the empires of Rome and Europe, respectively.

Before conducting the analysis, Leander outlines the scholarship that argues for various readings of Mark (e.g., Mark as Roman apology, Mark as an anti-imperial gospel, Mark as an imperial gospel, and Mark as a combined reproduction of and resistance against imperial ideology), and subsequently introduces his readers to postcolonial theory (ch. 2). Drawing on the work of Edward Said, Leander highlights how postcolonial criticism is a form of discourse theory that studies texts and artifacts in the aftermath of European colonialism. Going beyond the one-sided nature of Said’s orientalism, Leander hints that Gayatri Spivak’s work in the subaltern, catachresis, and pharmakon will be influential in his study. Additionally, Homi Bhabha’s concepts of mimicry, mockery, and colonial ambivalence will also figure in Leander’s reading of Mark. Moving past an analysis of the colonizer–colonized relationship, Leander explores collective identities for political solidarity.

In chapter 3 Leander shows how postcolonial criticism and biblical scholarship began to amalgamate into the contested field of postcolonial biblical criticism (48). Upon Leander’s reading of scholarship, he argues that there are four clusters of postcolonial biblical criticism: vernacular hermeneutics (i.e., liberation, contextual, or cultural hermeneutics), empire studies, feminist criticism, and extrabiblical postcolonial criticism. Leander argues that the issue of secularism poses a challenge to extrabiblical postcolonial criticism (54–56). Said’s work was important to show how secular humanism was deeply enmeshed in European colonialism. Accordingly, Leander sees Said’s lack of engagement with Christianity as an invitation for biblical scholars to critically engage our own field (60). For Leander, that means (1) probing a general theoretical shift as represented by “postmodern influence” and (2) decentering biblical scholarship geopolitically. Attention to the “postmodern influence” insinuates that biblical scholars are obliged to interrogate the naturalness of assumptions regarding the production of meaning. Moreover, biblical scholars must relate postcolonial criticism to the upbringings of people in China, India, Latin America, Botswana, and so on. Attention to various geopolitical issues will uphold the impossibility of epistemological premises and call for interculturally and interreligiously engaged forms of interpretation (64). Leander does anticipate criticism of his classification of postcolonial biblical criticism by citing biblical scholarship’s revival of interrogating the discipline’s “lost origin” (64). More specifically, he highlights the co-authored works of Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner along with Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood in order to show that their investigations of modern biblical scholarship are intertwined with colonial discourse even though they identify an “epistemic break” in biblical studies when scholars began to morally critique the Bible.
Accordingly, Leander argues that the postcolonial approach stands in a “fractured and critical continuity” with modern biblical scholarship (72).

In part 2, “Mark in European Colonialism,” Leander argues that scholarly interpretations of Mark are related to colonial expansion. In chapter 4, “Modern Biblical Studies and Empire,” Leander analyzes the colonial discourse found in sixteen biblical commentaries from the latter half of the nineteenth century (76). Defining European colonial discourse as a designation for the ensemble of cultural production, academic knowledge, and social practices that together with military and economic expansion made European colonialism possible, Leander highlights how this discourse occurs in the commentaries by exposing inherent binaries therein contained (77).

Chapter 5, “The Semitic and the Greek (1:1),” highlights how nineteenth-century commentators tended to base their interpretation on a binary division between a Greek and a Jewish understanding of the title “Son of God” (94). The prominence of this binary distinction in the material indicates to Leander that commentators reproduced the orientalist discourse along with its racializing tendencies (94).

Chapter 6, “Between Man and Brute (5:1–20)” highlights the Christian/heathen binary (96–97). Leander shows that nineteenth-century commentators associated the heathen with sin, guilt, or unreason. In particular, Leander highlights how commentators were able to show that certain people (e.g., “the negro” and women) are more inclined to lavish sin and demon possession. Language such as “unchecked indulgence” and “sensual appetites” were part of the construction and feminization of non-European heathens and savages in many commentaries. (108)

Chapter 7, “Submissive Heathen and Superior Greek (7:24–30),” shows the complexity of interpretations surrounding Mark 7:24–30. On the one hand, commentators viewed the Syrophoenician woman as a prototype for the distant wretched heathens. On the other hand, commentators also noted that, since she was a Greek, the woman must have been a member of a high-level culture. Accordingly, when the woman became a representation of someone with whom Europeans could identify, commentators limited the Christian/heathen dichotomy. However, commentators could undermine the dichotomy when Europeans identified with the progressive Greeks over against stagnated Semites (115).

In chapter 8, “The Embarrassing Parousia (8:31–9:1),” Leander specifically examines the nineteenth-century commentaries to ascertain if Liew’s assertion of a “might-is-right” ideology is a major theme within, since the centers of European empires produced these commentaries (117). Finding that interpretations of the parousia were complex in
relation to colonial discourse, Leander does note that, while the notion of eschatological judgment was a crucial motive for Protestant mission, scholarly interpretations of these passages were highly diverse and contradictory. Leander finds a recurring theme of embarrassment over the notions of a grandiose second coming of Jesus. Some scholars tended to distance themselves from these images, instead identifying them as Jewish rather than Greek. Instead of a “might-is-right” ideology, Lender finds that commentators formed their elevated European identities by disavowing the parousia.

Leander interrogates the spiritual/worldly binary in the nineteenth-century commentaries in chapters 9 (“Only Absolutely Spiritual [11:1–11]”) and 10 (“An Irish Cat among the Pigeons [12:13–17]”). These commentaries constructed a European colonial identity centered upon a notion of Christianity as a spiritual religion (124). Accordingly, many commentators read Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem in Mark 11:1–11 as a spiritual figure without any worldly or political aspirations. This spiritual/worldly distinction also carried a certain anti-Jewish tendency, since commentators argued that the people’s call for the coming of David’s kingdom was worldly rather than spiritual (126). Moreover, Leander notes that commentators juxtaposed their interpretations with missionary magazines as a way to show that the English were required to prepare the way for Christianity.

According to chapter 10, all nineteenth-century commentators except one, George Alexander Chadwick, saw a dichotomous division between religion and politics in the question of tribute in Mark 12:13–17. Chadwick is significant for Leander because he points to a postcolonial optic that allows someone’s location in the middle of colonizer and colonized to have significance for interpretation. Chadwick, the Irish cat among the pigeons who may have harbored anti-British sentiments, reads the tribute episode as a call to tax resistance under certain circumstances (136). All other nineteenth-century commentators distinguished between a worldly and spiritual sphere by which the claims of Caesar are harmonized with the claims of God (131). Chadwick allows for an early oppositional reading of this text.

Showing the universalism of imperial Christianity, the final text (Mark 15:39, in chapter 11: “The Centurion between East and West”) shows how there was a strong tradition to take the famous saying of the Roman centurion as an expression of Christian faith. Some more critical commentators began to view the centurion as a hybrid Roman-oriental identity who could undermine one of the key dichotomies of European colonialism: the racialized border between East and West (143–44). Leander concludes Part 2 by highlighting the three interrelated binary divisions: Greek/Semitic, Jewish/heathen, and spiritual/worldly. In all of these divisions, “Christian” becomes an identity that has power over Semitic, heathen, and worldly in each of the foregoing binaries (145–46). Leander
argues that these divisions interpellated Europeans to a more “enlightened” colonial identity position.

Turning to part 3, “Mark in the Roman Empire,” Leander is able better to define his postcolonial optic for reading his selected eight texts by asking the question: “What is the stance of Mark’s Gospel vis-à-vis Rome’s empire?” More specifically, Leander asks, “What is the interpellative effect of Mark’s Gospel?”

Chapter 13, “Mark Begins to Circulate,” analyzes both the oral tradition and written medium in use at the time early Jesus followers circulated Mark’s Gospel in the Roman Empire. Leander argues that the Gospel’s circulation as a written medium shows the beginning of a shift toward a more controlled mediation of the Jesus tradition (175–84). However, the controlled mediation stands in tension, Leander argues, with the open-ended nature of Mark’s story and the medium that he believes was used for circulation, the codex. This tension signals a catachrestic adaption of a nascent Roman writing practice that opened up cultural space for those who lived on the margins of the Roman Empire to ponder (184) as they saw the codex and heard Mark’s Gospel.

In chapter 14, “An Oppositional Beginning (1:1),” Leander argues that the term “Son of God” introduces Mark’s narrative while also signaling that the headline’s initial oppositional language will become escalated. Leander notes that the first part of Mark (1:14–8:21) narrates an oppositional plot wherein Jesus and the Twelve collide with Jewish collaborative authorities and unclean spirits. Accordingly, since “Son of God” was both a royal and an imperial title, the early Jesus followers had motives for adding as well as removing the title in the Markan incipit (197). Leander considers that locating the addition/omission of the title “Son of God” in a marginal movement (a move he considers akin to Bhabha’s colonial ambivalence) serves as negotiating its identity in an imperial religio-political context (199).

Leander’s analysis of Mark 5 in chapter 15, “Imperial Satire (5:1–20),” opines that “legion” represents a catachresis referring doubly to unclean spirits and Rome’s military (203–7). In a section on masculinity highlighting the similarities between Vespasian and Jesus, Leander argues that the resemblance would have signaled competition and antagonism to Mark’s audience (215). Playing on the notion of masculine strength, the imperial discourse connected to the Roman army illuminates the strength of Jesus while subtly mocking the potency of one of Rome’s prize legions: the Legio X Fretensis (215). As Mark’s audience compares Jesus to Vespasian, they would also note Rome is symbolically defeated in the image of the drowning swine.
Chapter 16, “Entering the Narrative Crisis (7:24–30),” is by far the most thought-provoking. Leander argues that the Greek Syrophoenician woman indicates a hybrid Hellenized identity with which a majority of Mark’s audience could easily identify. Since nineteenth-century commentators interpreted this woman as a gentile, Leander takes time to interact with the translation of Ἑλληνὶς, Συροφοινίκισσα τῷ γένει (i.e., the woman was “Greek, a Syrophoenician by birth”). Leander’s exegetical argument in this chapter involves three steps: (1) the usage of Ἑλλην in 1 and 2 Maccabees; (2) the use of Ἑλλην in the New Testament writings; and (3) the possibility of taking Ἑλληνὶς, Συροφοινίκισσα τῷ γένει as indicating a hybrid identity (225). Jesus’s encounter with this hybrid identity represents a breakdown in the narrative crisis revolving around three interrelated issues: ethnicity, gender, and the identity of Jesus as bread (230–38). Leander argues that the Syrophoenician woman, the first woman to speak to Jesus in the narrative, acts as a destabilization of the plot’s androcentric character. This destabilization serves as a new subjectivity that comes about where Roman control subjects both the Greek woman and the Jewish Jesus. As Jesus identifies his body with bread, the brittleness of Jesus’s body corresponds to the feminization of his body at his execution (237).

In chapter 17, “The Parousia as Pharmakon (8:31–9:1),” Leander continues to highlight the way that Mark’s Gospel disrupts and dislocates its original oppositional plot (245). After discussing how Jesus rebukes Peter when Jesus foretells his suffering, death, and resurrection (242), Leander considers Mark’s use of the cross as a catachresis that implies resistance against the stranglehold of the cross, since empire is “just as much an internal as an external enemy” (243). Mark’s use of the cross as a metaphor contributed significantly to the opening of social space that threatened and undermined the authority of imperial rule. Additionally, Leander argues that Jesus’s wisdom sayings in 8:35–37 were apparently insufficient, since Mark had to introduce an apocalyptic notion of parousia for the first time in the narrative (249). Accordingly, since Leander argues that apocalyptic writings served as a response to imperial domination, the parousia serves as pharmakon. For Leander, this insight means that Mark blurs the boundary between the present and the coming age by repeating some of the concepts of apocalyptic discourse while also transforming their meaning (251). Mark’s parousia, therefore, serves as medicine to annihilate oppressive powers but also contains an implied warning of becoming poisonous through replication of the same oppressive powers (252). This ambiguous interpretation transitions Leander to his next chapter.

Returning to the heuristic concepts of Bhabha in chapters 18 (“With Bhabha at the Jerusalem City Gates [11:1–22]”), 19 (“The Emperor Breaks the Surface [12:13–17]”), and 20 (“The Secrecy Complex as Third Space [15:39]”), Leander begins to bring his study to a close by (1) highlighting Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem as “anticlimactic” mimicry (258–59); (2) highlighting the question of tribute being both a subconscious effect of colonial
discourse and a conscious subversive strategy of mimicry (283–84); and (3) highlighting how the Roman centurion opens up a third space of identification through B(h)ab(h)elian performance (291–93). In these chapters Leander continues to push the ambiguous nature of the Markan texts by showing how most of these texts are evasive in their dealings with imperial discourse and how this evasiveness can be more threatening to imperial discourse than downright opposition (304).

In part 4, Leander’s concluding chapter, “Different Marks in Different Empires,” attempts to show how nineteenth-century scholarly interpretations of Mark related to European colonialism interrelates to the stance of Mark’s Gospel vis-à-vis Rome’s empire. In this chapter Leander concludes that the author of Mark interpellated his audience to identify with the Jewish renewal movement that originated in the periphery of the civilized world. However, recognizing that he has argued that the postcolonial approach stands in a “fractured and critical continuity” with modern biblical scholarship (72, 308), Leander seeks to interrogate the colonial heritage of modernity and the postsecular trajectory with its questioning of the dichotomous division between politics and religion (309).

Additionally, realizing that Said, Spivak, and Bhabha refrain from discussing secularism as part of the colonial heritage, Leander engages the postsecular condition through the works of Talal Asad, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Ananda Abeysekara. Rather than seeing the secular as a natural and emancipative development in modern societies, Leander relates the concepts of uninheriting and mourning with other concepts, such as catachresis and reclaiming, in order to argue in his final chapter that these combined concepts can assist societies in giving up on secularism as a self-evident politics and begin to think about the important ways in which the intervention of religious discourses within the public sphere may “help us pose the question of democracy vis-à-vis minority differences in a new way” (310). Uninheriting Mark’s colonial heritage means breaking free of the binaries that he has outlined in this work while attempting to propose a postsecular condition and a new visibility of religion that quarrels with these binary divisions from a contemporary point of view. To formulate a contemporary theopolitically engaged Christian subjectivity demands thinking that transcends these dichotomies (314). Moreover, Leander argues that biblical scholars must provincialize historical criticism by entering this academic space that “one cannot not want to inhabit and yet must criticize” (319). Therefore, biblical scholars must not neglect the disciplinary history nor denounce its historical plausibility. Biblical scholars must move forward to the idea of “reclaiming Mark” and its subtle ways of both reproducing and undermining imperial discourses.

3. In this section, Leander combines the Babelian need for translation as identified in the work of Jacques Derrida with the colonial ambivalence of Homi Bhabha, hence the word B(h)ab(h)elian.
Overall, this work is a superb dual analysis of nineteenth-century commentaries in conjunction with postcolonial approaches to the Gospel of Mark. To my knowledge, there has not been an in-depth study of commentaries in such a way that Leander has conducted. While his work is erudite and well-argued, I know that some scholars may find criticisms in one aspect or another of this lengthy work. Nonetheless, there are the just two minor criticisms that I would highlight. First, Leander makes a few very quick leaps in connecting or contrasting Mark’s Gospel to Paul’s letters. One finds an example in Leander’s comments on the cross (248). Scholars are not certain that Mark’s audience knew Paul’s letters, so a reader may appreciate Leander taking a more critical stance in that area. Second, some corresponding chapters in part 3 had ample discussion with their corresponding chapters in part 2. Chapter 18, however, did not have much comparison with its corresponding chapter 9 in part 2. Readers may appreciate more continuity regarding those comparisons.

These minor criticisms aside, Leander has completed a work that is a remarkable addition to the conversation that scholars will continue to have surrounding postcolonial and postmodern approaches to Markan studies.