

SUGIRTHARAJAH, R.S., *Troublesome Texts: The Bible in Colonial and Contemporary Culture* (Sheffield, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008, pp.vii + 161. £35.00/\$70.00/€47.50. ISBN 978-1-906055-38-7; ISSN 1747-9650.

The Bible IS a troublesome text. Its interpretation has been over the centuries the cause of major conflict. It has been used to promote slavery and patriarchalism. It has been the cultural symbol of empire, the basis of education systems in non-Christian developing regions. From it identity is claimed, and land disputes are fomented. Missionaries, by translating God as 'Ancestor', replaced tribal histories with an over-arching Biblicist 'history' in which Adam and Abraham became common ancestors. Biblical violence, as part of sacred history, becomes an acceptable political model, and patriarchy-with-polygamy is validated as a legitimate social means of repressing women.

This thought-provoking collection of conference papers asks uncomfortable questions about Biblical hermeneutics. In 'Gautama and the Galilean', Sugirtharajah uses his Sri Lankan background to explore how and why Victorian theologians constructed lives of Buddha and Jesus in the ways in which they did, revealing rampant racism in seeking to diminish Buddha and promote Jesus. However, there were unintended consequences: enough 'Orientalists' (scholars adopting the field of oriental history and religion) took the task seriously enough to contribute to the preservation of texts which turned Buddhism from a local cult to a respected global world religion. Buddhism was encountered as an indigenous religion separately in Nepal and in Sri Lanka: the differences were greater than the similarities but in time the conclusion was reached that these two traditions had a common core. Sri Lanka Buddhism was named *Hinayana* (lesser vehicle) and that in Nepal and Tibet Mahayana (greater vehicle). Hinayana (also referred to as Theravada) was regarded as purer than Mahayana, which was considered syncretistic with local pagan deities and spirits. Today, Mahayana belief and ritual would be treated philosophically and symbolically. The Dalai Lama (leader of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism) is globally respected for his spiritual wisdom (though in China he is regarded as a political enemy). Lives of Jesus have abounded over the past two centuries, mostly devotional in intent (but some thrive on being controversial), and generally tell us more about the writer than about the historical Jesus, about whom we actually know little. Even the canonical gospels are fictional hagiography which owe more to the need to

demonstrate fulfilment of scripture than to historical recollections. Unfortunately, fewer genuine sayings of Jesus have survived than words of the Buddha.

Chapter 2, 'Subjecting the Johannine Letters to Postcolonial Criticism', concludes that the letters have a dogmatic, imperialistic tone demanding compliance, but that the new message being promulgated owes some informal debt to Buddhism. To 'walk in the truth' and 'walk in love' is likened to the Buddhism requirement to 'walk by dhamma', a praxis-centred practical religion by which 'everyone who does justice is born again' and 'everyone who loves is born of God' (3 Jn 4, 2 Jn 4-6, 1 Jn 2.29, 1 Jn 4.7). For the writer, actions not words indicate a person's faith, salvation by works contrasting with Paul's salvation by faith and God's grace. Unfortunately, this worthy ideal is presented as a demand to be obeyed and not an aspiration to be taken to heart.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Sermon on the Mount read in India as a basis for ethical spirituality, for example in the works of Gandhi and Roy. He notes that after independence this emphasis was replaced by Leviticus 19-26, a 'roadmap' for state building, John's Gospel (mystical), liberation theology and identity hermeneutics. A 2500 year old roadmap is not good news; John's Gospel is more mythic than mystic, promoting a Word made flesh (Jn 1), a miracle-working (or sign-giving redeemer, a heavenly Christ, a 'Comforter', a heaven ('in my father's house are many mansions', Jn 14). Liberation theology is actually a front for imperialistic hegemony, and identity (Jewishness, Christianness, Indian etc.) is as complex and controversial as Britishness in the UK and needs rather more than Bible hermeneutics to solve.

Chapter 4 looks toward next steps: these are for interpreters to explore power-knowledge relevantly. It challenges the dominant hermeneutic by demanding that emphases are shifted and silences are vocalised. Feminist studies have pursued this relentlessly over the past 30 years, in terms of vocalising the absences of a female point of view. Postcolonial studies have to recognise that Bible hermeneutics over the ages have been an instrument of repressive power, even punishing those who disagree with the hegemonic discourse.

Chapter 5 explores ideas of God after the tsunami of boxing day 2004, where images of all-powerful and compassionate deity were exploded. There are several ways of approaching this. The target is the fundamentalistic and simplistic concept of God, which has always struggled to explain evil and suffering; but also it challenges belief in God *per se* as an interventionist person, power or force.

Chapter 6 focuses on the link between Bible interpretation and conflict, even violent conflict. Those who study and interpret the Bible from outside the powered elite risk scorn and gagging, even lynching. For Sri Lanka, Sugirtharajah calls for open and honest multi-faith dialogue. The Old Testament validates war and violence, from the conquest of the land, the razing of Jericho, the hewing of Agag the foreign king to pieces, the killing of the Shechemites for raping (or seducing) Dinah and so on. Read by people intent on violence who want God on their side, this becomes intolerable propaganda.

Chapter 7 views the Bible industry as a form of cultural imperialism, for repression towards a dominant view instead of being a sea of challenging and exploratory stories. The Bible therefore needs freeing from hegemonic misuse and opening up as a source of controversial material. We need to remove from it the halo of absolute truth for all time and reveal it for what it is, a political document promoting the policies of a particular postexilic group in the mid-first millennium BCE.

Chapter 8, 'Future Imperfect' calls for attitudes of exclusivity towards the Bible as word of God to be replaced by a recognition that the Bible itself was (and is) a site of ideological battle, and has to sit beside the scriptures of other faiths as together charting the spiritual questings of humankind.

Chapter 9 ends the compilation autobiographically of Sugirtharajah's journey and motivation, calling for creative and imaginative scholarship. The scholar today (and indeed the general reader) cannot take for granted the assumptions and presuppositions of past ages, or of a religious dogma that has no roots in reality or rationality. Especially, the Bible should never be an instrument for repression and political power, or even social power within religious communities, whether extreme or routine. This reviewer's

own autobiographical journey has been one of escape from dogma in a context which disapproved even of questions (particularly if they were deemed the wrong questions). Those 'wrong' questions are however truly liberating and still dominate my personal and academic lives.

To end, let me redefine the Bible not as 'troublesome' (for that assumes that there are embarrassments to explain away) but as complex, intellectually challenging, and a rich source for future study which is itself liberated from old dogmas.

Stephen F. Bigger, 2010.