

DISCOURSES OF EMPIRE

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

FROM A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

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Generally regarded as the first written gospel, Mark probably began circulating in this form during the 70s C.E, the hey-days of Flavian Rome. Reading Mark as a representation of a collective identity position, this dissertation primarily studies the various ways in which it related to Roman imperial discourse.

Informed by postcolonial theory as well as by the close interconnections between the Bible and European colonialism, moreover, the dissertation approaches this historical question from the presumption that the past—even for scientific biblical scholars—is continuously caught up in the present. A meta-critical analysis of what appears to be a colonial heritage of biblical scholarship is therefore also included.

The study thus has a tripartite division: 1) theory; 2) nineteenth century Europe; and, 3) ancient Rome. The first part presents postcolonial criticism as a form of discourse theory and discusses how its employment in biblical studies affects the dominating historic-critical paradigm. The second part studies how seven passages in Mark (1:1; 5:1–20; 7:24–30; 8:31–9:1; 11:1–22; 12:13–17; 15:39) were interpreted by nineteenth century commentaries—mainly British and German—and how these interpretations were connected to European colonialism. Despite a significant degree of diversity and complexity, the interpretations were nevertheless found to be enmeshed in the forming of elevated European self-understandings.

Focusing on the same Markan passages, the third part studies how the Gospel, at the time of its initial circulation, formed a collective identity on the fringes of Roman imperial city culture. By applying a number of postcolonial heuristic concepts, Mark is pressed for the subtle ways in which it opposes, reproduces and undermines imperial discourse. While at times contesting and at other times divinely justifying Roman rule, most of its dealings take place in the more ambivalent terrain represented by mimicry/mockery, catachresis, metonymic gap and the opening of a third space. The position's evasive character, it is argued, was more threatening to imperial discourse than would have been its downright opposition. The real threat rested not as much in the antagonistic contrasting of Jesus and the emperor as it did in the playful, yet profound, subversions of imperial notions of strength and triumph.

Keywords: The Gospel of Mark, postcolonial criticism, discourse theory, ideological criticism, historic-critical paradigm, European colonialism, early Christian identity, Roman Empire, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, mimicry, hybridity, catachresis.