

Reading from the margins

by [Barbara Bowe](#) in the [July 17, 2002](#) issue

Reading the Bible from the margins means giving precedence to the experience and interpretive voices of Africans, Asians and Latin Americans, of the nonelite, of women, of popular and indigenous religious traditions and of people outside the "mainstream" of professional biblical scholarship. R. S. Sugirtharajah, a reader in biblical hermeneutics at the University of Birmingham in England, has become a major spokesperson for efforts to read the Bible from the margins. His book opens up a new landscape and raises a host of new questions for those resting all too comfortably in their certitudes and traditional "biblical truths."

"Precolonial Reception," the book's first part, explores the role the Bible played when it was still a "marginal and minority" text in the cultures of Asia and Africa. During this time of pluralism and syncretism, the biblical story joined with other local stories and voices to offer wisdom and guidance for daily life. Since the Bible had no "strong civil or ecclesiastical authority" bolstering its credibility, it was only minimally influential.

The book's second part documents the growing hegemony of the Western conquerors and their Christian "scriptural imperialism." Sugirtharajah surveys the role the Bible played in the clash of cultures endemic to the period of Western colonial expansion. The Bible became a ready tool of the colonizers and aided their efforts. The British and Foreign Bible Society struggled to disseminate the Bible in the vernacular languages of all the colonies. But biblical dissemination came packaged with hermeneutical principles marked by the inculcation of European manners and customs. "Under the guise of biblicization" alien values encroached, displacing local cultures. "The juxtaposition of biblical and secular history [was used] as a convenient weapon against those who dared to resist colonial intervention." "Textualization" was privileged over indigenous oral cultures, and biblical religion was affirmed "as a historical faith" superior to local religions.

The colonized responded with "two discursive practices--resistance and assimilation." Perhaps the most enlightening part of the book is its account of the

varied responses of different colonial readers: for example, Olaudah Equiano (1745-97), an Igbo freed slave from West Africa; William Apess (1798-1839), a Native American of the Pequot tribe; K. N. Banerjea (1813-85), an Indian Bengali; Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), a model Hindu woman and Brahmin turned Christian; and John William Colenso (1814-83), a missionary bishop of Natal, South Africa, who, though a colonist himself, was a model of dissent against the colonial expansionist policies and their biblical agenda. As a group, these women and men testify to the vitality of the intellectual response among the colonized. They provide evidence of fierce cultural loyalties and principles of reading the Bible that were resistant to domination by others.

The book's final part explores the current modes of biblical interpretation on the margins. It highlights the strategies of vernacular reading that explore "parallels between biblical texts and the conceptual traditions of one's own culture." These strategies engage in "narrative enrichments" employing popular folk tales, legends, proverbs and the like to enlighten biblical stories. And they "utilize ritual and behavioural practices commonly available in the [local] culture" to shed light on biblical texts.

Postcolonial readings go beyond the liberation hermeneutics of the 1970s and '80s by employing a more eclectic and hybrid approach, less sure of universal application and more rooted in particular social-historical contexts. Postcolonial readings, for example, reject the appeal to the "Exodus paradigm" as useful for all people. These readers recognize that the Exodus story sounds entirely different when read from the perspective of the Egyptians and the Canaanites. Such readings challenge traditional images of God and inject a dis-ease with the very notion of one "biblical truth." For example, a Cherokee Indian woman reading the story of Ruth would consider Orpah, not Ruth, as the embodiment of hope and an emancipatory vision because Orpah embraces her own clan and culture rather than surrender to Israelite norms.

More examples abound--examples that startle and sometimes disturb, but always inform us in new and significant ways. No one serious about wrestling with the Bible should fail to read this very important book.