

“Clothed and in Her Right Mind:” Mark 5:1-20 and Postcolonial Discourse

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POSTCOLONIALISM AND THE BIBLE

In his recent book entitled Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation, R. S. Sugirtharajah describes postcolonial concerns in the following manner: When postcolonialism appeared in the 1980s, it “introduce[d] power and politics into the world of literary criticism in such a way as to expose how some literature, art, and drama were implicitly linked to European colonialism” (21). And so it is not surprising to find that when postcolonial criticism entered the field of biblical studies, it

[p]ut colonialism at the centre of biblical studies[, despite the fact that t]here is a remarkable reluctance among biblical scholars to speak of imperialism as shaping the contours of biblical texts and their interpretation. What postcolonialism makes clear is that biblical studies can no longer be confined to the history of textual traditions, or to the doctrinal richness embedded in texts, but needs to extend its scope to include issues of domination, Western expansionism, and its ideological manifestations, as central forces in defining biblical scholarship (74).

Sugirtharajah's postcolonial critique of the Bible is particularly challenging because of his careful attention to the history of Bible translation and the history of missionizing biblical interpretations. He challenges European and North American interpreters of the Bible to search "not just literary [texts] but other texts [as well], such as historical discourses, official documents, [translations of the Bible], and missionary reports," to show how the Bible has been appropriated and reworked by colonized peoples (21). Then he proposes that "overlapping areas in which biblical scholars can cooperate with the postcolonial agenda include: race, nation, translation, mission, textuality, spirituality, representation," with "related identity categories" such as "slaves, sex-workers, the homosexual/heterosexual divide, [and] people of mixed race" (25).

When I first read these sentences in Dr. Sugirtharajah's book, his list of "related identity categories" caught my immediate attention. The terms "slaves and sex-workers" struck a personal chord with me, for in the spring of 2002 I had begun researching the history of my Chinese American wife's maternal grandmother who was raised in San Francisco's Chinatown in the early 1900s, in a Methodist women's rescue home

dedicated to saving Chinese prostitutes and “mui tsai” or “debt slaves” from lives of “shame” and abuse. My current research project focuses on the history of this Methodist mission to Chinese and Japanese immigrants in San Francisco between the years of 1870 and 1920, and I have been intrigued by the role that Scripture plays—or doesn’t play—in the women’s description of their work.

READING THE STORY OF THE GERASENE DEMONIAK IN SAN FRANCISCO CHINATOWN, 1870

In my historical research of this Methodist women’s work, I have discovered that there was one biblical story and image that recurred with regularity in its annual reports and memorials: the story of the Gerasene demoniac from Mark 5:1-20, who was found “clothed and in his right mind” after Jesus exorcised from him the demon named “Legion.” As a New Testament scholar, I had never spent much time analyzing this Markan exorcism, and what little attention I had paid to it, had been spent exploring its remarkable constellation of purity motifs. To be sure, I was aware that in his little book entitled Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), John D. Crossan had argued that naming the demon “Legion” was a way for the first century mind to connect “demonic possession and colonial oppression” (89). “Colonial exploitation,” Crossan went on to say “is incarcerated individually as demonic possession” (90). Then, echoing a rather simplified version of Homi Bhabha’s understanding of cultural mimicry and hybridization, Crossan spoke of the “almost split personality position of . . . colonial people[s], [who], if they submit gladly to colonialism, . . . conspire in their own destruction; [but] if they hate and despise it, . . . admit that something more powerful than themselves, and therefore to some extent desirable, is hateful and despicable” (91).

Paul Hollenbach and Ched Myers had made much the same point a number of years earlier (“Jesus, Demoniacs, and Public Authorities: A Socio-Historical Study” and Binding the Strong Man; and more recently, Christopher Burdon “‘To the Other Side’: Construction of Evil and Fear of Liberation in Mark 5.1-20”), but what surprised me was finding Methodist missionaries in late nineteenth century San Francisco Chinatown evoking the story of the Gerasene demoniac in their own not-so-subtle colonialist enterprise.

The story of the Gerasene demoniac is also one of the many texts Professor Sugirtharajah discusses in his book entitled Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation. With his usual penchant for uncovering the remnants of long forgotten scriptural insights, Sugi discovered that decades before Hollenbach, Myers, or Crossan were writing of the connection between colonialism and demonic possession, Mary Baird had written a short Expository Times article that explored the Gerasene story’s imperial underpinnings. In her 1920 essay, Mary Baird had argued there that the military meaning of the man’s name “Legion” should be taken literally, since the “Tenth Roman legion was garrisoned in Palestine at the time when Jesus was engaged in his activities” (Sugirtharajah 92). But my colonialist access to the story of the Gerasene demoniac is neither Roman occupied Palestine nor nineteenth century British occupied Asia and Africa. My access point is found in San Francisco’s Chinatown, in 1871.

On April 3, 1855, Reverend Otis Gibson, a newly appointed Methodist Episcopal Church foreign missionary along with his new bride, Eliza Chamberlin, left Baltimore, Maryland for China. The Gibsons would spend the next ten years in Foochow, China,

establishing a church and school, before returning to the United States in 1865 due to Eliza's failing health.

In December 1867, two years after his return to the United States, Reverend Otis Gibson was asked to establish for the Methodist Episcopal Church a "Chinese Domestic Mission" in San Francisco, California. Ten years later he penned the conversion story of Jin Ho, the first Chinese prostitute rescued by the Woman's Missionary Society of the Pacific Coast, a society founded by him, his wife, and eleven other Methodist San Francisco women in 1870. In Reverend Gibson's account of Jin Ho's 1871 rescue, written six years after the event, the Markan account of the Gerasene demoniac becomes the subtext through which he "reads" Jin Ho's conversion. Reverend Gibson writes:

[A] note was sent by Captain A. Clark, of the Police Station, asking me to call at the station to see a Chinese woman, who refused to talk with Chinamen, but intimated that she wished to see a missionary, or "Jesus man." I answered the call, and found a poor wretched, stupid, forlorn looking woman—an apology for a human being, who gave her name as Jin Ho, and simply said, "Don't take me back to Jackson Street." The poor thing had escaped from a vile den on Jackson Street, leaving all her tinsel jewelry and gay trappings behind her; had run some six or seven blocks down to the foot of the street, and had deliberately thrown herself into the cold waters of the bay, choosing rather a watery grave than longer endure her life of slavery, shame and sorrow; desiring thus to end a pilgrimage upon which no ray of light ever shone, no star of hope ever

beamed. A colored man with a long boat hook rescued her from drowning, and a policeman brought her to the station.

After a few minutes' conversation with me she desired to be taken to the Mission House. While on the way she frequently murmured in Chinese, "Don't take me to Jackson Street," "Don't take me to Jackson Street." In six months from that time "Jin Ho" was so changed and improved that those who saw her at the Police Station did not recognize her. She remained about a year in the asylum, then did service in a Christian family, professed faith in the religion of Jesus, was baptized and received into the Methodist Church, and afterwards married a Mr. Jee Foke, a good substantial Chinaman, a member of the Congregational Church, with whom she is now living in peace and comfort, with none to molest or make her afraid. She is now clothed and in her right mind and enjoys a good hope of eternal life [emphasis in the original] through Jesus Christ our Lord. Such *was* Jin Ho; and such *is* Jin Ho now [emphasis in the original], the first Chinese woman that sought refuge in the Asylum of the Methodist Mission (Gibson 204-205).

POSTCOLONIAL COMPLICATIONS IN READING REVEREND GIBSON'S ACCOUNT OF JIN HO'S RESCUE

The account of Jin Ho's rescue became the foundational story of the Methodist women's work in Chinatown, and was reworked and retold in all its later histories of

missionary activity in San Francisco.¹ But Reverend Gibson's recounting of Jin Ho's life is not only the first published account of her rescue; it is also by far the most complex account, especially from a postcolonial perspective. In Reverend Gibson's telling, the conflicting ideologies and politics of gender, race, and empire in nineteenth century San Francisco Chinatown collide with the allusions to the Markan exorcism story and raise challenging questions about the Gerasene man's own "salvation" in Mark 5:1-20.

The account quoted above is found in Reverend Gibson's 1877 book entitled The Chinese in America, a book that was ridiculed in the popular press for its positive portrayal of the Chinese people and for its thesis that the Chinese were not an economic threat to American capitalism, and could be assimilated into mainstream Protestant American culture.

Regardless of Reverend Gibson's Chinese sympathies, his book's account of Jin Ho's conversion remains the perspective of a white Christian male, a voting citizen of the United States. But the Woman's Rescue Asylum, in which Jin Ho was the first "inmate," was a white Methodist women's work, and that fact is not mentioned at all in Reverend Gibson's account.² Nor, for example, does Rev. Gibson tell his readers that he could

¹ Interestingly, Rev. Robert Samuel Maclay concludes the preface of his book Life Among the Chinese: Characteristic Sketches and Incidents of Missionary Operations and Prospects in China (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1861) with the following paragraph: "To those whose earnest and oft-repeated suggestions induced the author to prepare this volume for publication, to those who are interested in the evangelization of the Chinese, and to all who desire information concerning the oldest nation in the world and one of the grandest empires on which the sun has ever shone, the following pages are now presented, in the earnest hope and with the fervent prayer that they may contribute somewhat toward the ushering in of that glorious period when China, *clothed and in her right mind, shall be found sitting at the feet of Jesus*" (8; emphasis mine. Special thanks to George Ngu [2 September 2009] who brought this quote to my attention).

² The account of Jin Ho's rescue given to Rev. W.C. Pond in 1884, citing a private letter from Otis Gibson, is somewhat different: "One day, about thirteen years ago, some police officers dragged up out of the water near one of our wharves a sort of bag of coarse sacking, which was found to contain one of these women not yet dead. She was taken in her rude and dripping habiliments to the station house. In her distress and fear, using the only English words she knew to utter her protest and her prayer, she cried: 'no China house: mission: mission.' She was at length understood, and was carried to the M. E. Mission House, and was received, though she resembled, as one of the ladies afterward told me, any other animal quite as much as

understand very little Cantonese, since his ten years of missionary work in China had been spent not in Guangdong (Canton) but in Foochow, which had its own unique local dialect, or language.³

Reverend Gibson's rescue story, filtered as it is through the Markan account of the Gerasene demoniac, reveals at least five implicit levels of intersecting hegemonic power relations in contrast to Mark's three levels, and these reflect the more complex social structures in American colonization:

- 1) White male policeman and white male missionary "Jesus man" (both named)

(Jesus in Mark's story)

- 2) White females (invisible, although the Asylum was their institution)

(invisible in Mark's story)

- 3) Black man (unnamed)

(an alternative "Jesus man" who understands slavery?)

- 4) Chinese men (some unnamed, with whom Jin Ho refused to talk; one named, whom she marries)

(the local swineherds/people of the Decapolis?)

- 5) Chinese woman (Jin Ho; no Christian name given)

she did a human being. She was washed, was neatly dressed, was fed, and was made to feel that those about her were friends. And so the human, and, by and by, the divine in her began to appear. Renewed, baptized, she became at length the Christian and beloved wife of one of the members of my own church, and after two of three years died in peace and hope through faith." The last phrase: "the beloved wife of one of the members of my own church," must be Rev. Pond's words, since he was the Congregational missionary working in Chinatown, and Jin Ho married a Congregationalist.

³ See the Wikipedia article, "[Fuzhou dialect](#)" (personal email correspondence with George Ngu, 2 September 2009).

(the demoniac)

Unlike the Markan exorcism, which ends with two thousand pigs rushing into the lake and drowning, Reverend Gibson's telling of Jin Ho's story begins with a Chinese woman mimicking the actions of the possessed pigs, running to the San Francisco Bay and throwing herself into the water. Just as the loss of the (unclean) Gerasene pigs implies economic hardship for those who owned them, so also Jin Ho's attempted suicide implies a loss of economic power for the Chinese "foreigners" who make their living off her "vile" life. And although the bay is supposed to be Jin Ho's "watery grave," it actually foreshadows her eventual Christian baptism, functioning as a liminal experience that marks her transition to white American culture.

Like the Gerasene demoniac who wants to leave the region of the Decapolis and follow Jesus, Jin Ho does not want to remain in "pagan territory" (Chinatown's Jackson Street), but wishes to stay with the "Jesus man" in the "Mission House." And of course this is precisely what the Jesus man desires as well. Thus, unlike the Markan Jesus whose blitzkrieg-like exorcism ends with his command to the man to stay behind, Reverend Gibson's Jesus man welcomes the Chinese woman into the Mission House. Despite the lack of any reference to exorcism in Reverend Gibson's story, Jin Ho's transformation is no less dramatic than that of the Gerasene demoniac. However, her transformation is part of a longer process that lasts more than six months, and carries over into a life of discipleship that is eventually crowned by Christian marriage.

POSTCOLONIAL COMPLICATIONS IN RE-READING MARK 5:1-20

Like Reverend Gibson, I, along with all the Markan commentators I have read, have tended to view the Markan narrator's comment "and they saw the demoniac sitting

there, clothed and in his right mind,” as an unambiguous assertion of salvation, restoration, and wholeness, especially since the man then begs to “be with” Jesus and eventually “proclaims” (“keryssein”) in the Decapolis region “how much Jesus had done for him” (5:20). Apparently he is no longer a danger to himself or to his community, and his being “clothed” is the first cultural clue of the change from socially unacceptable to socially acceptable status.

However, I knew something about the semiotics of clothing in nineteenth century Protestant mission work and American empire building when I first read Reverend Gibson’s little vignette. And Reverend Gibson’s reference to Jin Ho being “clothed and in her right mind” evoked a much different response in me than the phrase had when I had read it in Mark 5:15. Since I knew that a change of dress from “heathen clothing” to “American clothing” represented a step in the Chinese immigrant’s American colonization as well as an important step in Christian “conversion,” I read Gibson’s account with a much greater sense of suspicion and with a higher degree of ambivalence than I had ever read the story in Mark 5. Could it be that the Gerasene demoniac’s clothing reflected an ambivalent colonial status not unlike that of Jin Ho? Could his (re)clothing also stand for a certain degree of colonial mimicry or hybridity? If he was now in his “right mind,” then why were the townspeople so afraid? Is their fear to be read simply as the typical Markan response to Jesus’ power (which is the way I had always read the story), or could the townspeople’s reaction reflect their fear that the man is somehow now more of a threat “clothed and in his right mind” than he was as Legion-spewing demoniac? Does his clothing represent colonial mimicry—itsself a cause for

suspicion from both colonized and colonizer, or does it represent a self-empowering hybridity?

Interestingly, Paul Hollenbach argues that the former demoniac may have been more dangerous “sane” than “sick,” although he does not see the reference to the man being clothed as particularly significant to his discussion. Rather, Hollenbach suggests that perhaps “Jesus’ healing of the demoniac brought the man’s and the neighborhood’s hatred of the Romans out into the open, where the result could be disaster for the community” (581). Hollenbach then proposes that the man has perhaps “been transformed by Jesus from a passive ‘Uncle Tom’ into a threatening ‘John Brown’” (ibid).

Is Reverend Gibson’s Jin Ho likewise more of a threat to Chinese economic and social/colonial interests when she is “clothed and in her right mind” than she was when she was a “poor wretched, stupid, forlorn looking woman—an apology for a human being?” Will she be a prophetic, John Brown-like voice speaking out against the injustices of the Chinese sex trade? Or is Jin Ho more of a threat to American economic and social/colonial interests now that she is “clothed and in her right mind” than when she was as a “poor wretched, stupid, forlorn looking woman?” Will she be an “Uncle Tom,” docilely working for less pay as a domestic laborer than Irish girls would, thus “forcing” them out of the labor market? Will she want to stay in the United States and raise a family now that she is married to a Chinese Christian?

The answer to both questions, I think, is yes. If the Gerasene demoniac can be seen as more of a threat to Roman imperialism now that he is “healed,” Jin Ho can be viewed doubly so. “Clothed and in her right mind” Jin Ho is now a threat to transnational

Chinese interests and American colonialist interests alike. However, Reverend Gibson apparently does not see her as a threat to American economic and social/colonial interests, since he implies her Christian conversion is beginning to transform her Chinese ethnicity as well. For she has left “all her tinsel jewelry and gay trappings behind her” and is now “clothed and in her right mind.”

Reverend Gibson’s story of Jin Ho ends with her marriage to “a good substantial Chinaman, a member of the Congregational Church.” Reverend Gibson could not have foreseen that she would be dead within a few short years of her marriage—probably the result of a slow-working disease contracted during her years as a forced sex worker. And Mark’s gospel gives us no clue as to what happened to the healed Gerasene demoniac. Did he return to his family? Did he marry and raise a flock of Roman-hating children?

The interpreter of the Gerasene demoniac story has an advantage that the interpreter of Gibson’s vignette of rescue does not: He or she can put the Markan pericope into the wider context of the gospel as a whole—to be read it in the context of other Markan exorcisms or other Markan stories that deal with clothing. And on the basis of such an exploration, could one argue that the demoniac in Mark’s gospel represents a postcolonial, counter-hegemonic social structure, one that contrasts with Rev. Gibson’s Jin Ho who sheds the clothing of Chinese imperialism only to reclothe herself in the dress of American imperialist dreams? Or does the demoniac’s clothing merely represent his “conversion” to another’s imperial dreams? Could an answer to this postcolonial query be found in the way Mark’s gospel plays with clothing metaphors?

At this point, my postcolonialist musings lead me back to the gospel of Mark, looking for references to clothing. I want to see how those references function in the

gospel and to see if a global understanding of the references might help me better understand the significance of clothing in Mark 5:15.

Interestingly, in the opening scene of Mark's gospel the reader finds a striking description of a character's clothing. John is baptizing at the Jordan, "clothed in camel hair, with a leather belt around his waist," and speaks of one "more powerful" who is coming after" him (ischyroteros, cf. 5:4), and of "not being worthy to unclasp" that person's sandals (lysai, cf. 5:2-4). In both instances, clothing clearly functions metaphorically: The "camel-hair" clothing and "leather belt" evoke the Elijah story (2 Kgs 1:8; 2:6-14; Mk 9:13) and the unclasping of sandals implies social status below that of household slave. Both are anti-imperial references. Not coincidentally, one of the first metaphors Jesus will use for describing what God is doing in the world will also be a clothing metaphor: He will point out that "no one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment" since a worse tear will result (2:21).

Changes in clothing reflect changes in social status in ancient cultures, and Mark's gospel is no exception. The tearing of one's garments represents a crisis of some sort (Mk 14:63), and the author uses five different words to describe various types of clothing (excluding sandals). These are: endyo Mk 1:6; 6:9; 15:20 (four times in Matthew; four times in Luke); himation Mk 2:21; (the verb, himatidzo) 5:15, 5:27-28; 6:56; 9:3; 10:50; 11:7, 8; 13:16; 15:20, 24 (twelve times in Matthew; nine times in Luke; six times in John); sindon Mk 14:51-52; 15:46 (once in Matthew and once in Luke); stole Mk 12:38; 16:5 (twice in Luke); and chiton Mk 6:9; 14:63 (two times in Matthew; three times in Luke; one time in John).

Toward the end of the gospel there is that other strange, unnamed man who, like the Gerasene demoniac, cannot be grasped or held. He slips out of his tunic and runs away naked into the night (14:51). I know that many interpreters want to tie this young man up with that young man at the end of the gospel, who is seated in a tomb, clothed in white, and who evokes fear in the Easter morning visitors at Jesus' gravesite (Mk 16:5-6, 8). But my postcolonial reading also takes the naked man back further into the Markan story, to the Gerasene demoniac who is likewise the source of fear when he is clothed and seated at the edge of a graveyard (5:15). Perhaps the naked man running off into the night *is* the Gerasene demoniac; perhaps he is Bartimaeus, throwing off his cloak to walk with Jesus into Jerusalem (10:50; cf. 6:9; 11:7-8). Or perhaps he is all these characters wrapped up—or should I say, unclothed and reclothed as one, whose status as unclothed marks “him” as a radical challenge to postcolonial mimicry or hybridity.

CONCLUSION

After the original Methodist Chinese mission buildings in San Francisco were destroyed by the 1906 earthquake and fire, the cornerstone of a new “Oriental Home” was laid in Chinatown in July 1911. A time capsule was sealed and cemented into the new building's entryway that day, and among the items placed in the copper box was a photograph of Jin Ho, the first Chinese woman rescued by the Chinese Methodist Mission. The box has never been opened, but I would love to break the metal clasp to look inside and find the photograph of Jin Ho. I wonder if she is wearing “American” clothes, or if she is wearing traditional nineteenth century Chinese clothing. I wonder what difference that difference would make to my reading or Reverend Gibson's reading of Mark's story of the Gerasene demoniac.

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