Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire

By Mark G Brett

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

It is popular in postcolonial studies to despise Christianity and the Bible and their support of colonization and its evils. *Decolonizing God* does not deny the evils of colonization, nor the fact that the Bible has been used to support its devastating effects of land misappropriation, racial inferiority, slavery and forced labour of indigenous people, but argues the Bible can and should be read as a critique rather than support of Empire.

The writer Mark Brett teaches Hebrew Bible at Whitley College in Melbourne, Australia, and researches land rights issues as Policy Officer of Native Title Services Victoria. He draws on these two spheres in his postcolonial reading of Scripture and history in *Decolonizing God*.

The book argues that the Bible has disappointingly been used to support colonialism and its devastating effects, but that the relevant texts were often written by people affected by imperial domination and had anti-Empire intentions. Brett weaves together an in-depth investigation of hermeneutics, biblical and colonial history and social justice to unveil a fascinating account of how different parts of the Bible have been used in support of empires and how they might better be used as a critique.

After his introduction, Brett offers eight chapters that unpack the background of passages from Genesis to Paul to uncover fresh interpretations in the hope of ‘decolonizing God’. For example, he shows how the injunction ‘to subdue the earth’ (Genesis 1:28) has been misapplied to allow exploitation of resources and taking land from indigenous people who did not cultivate their land. In Australia, aboriginal land was taken by the crown on the basis of ‘terra nullius’ – that it had no prior owners. Native Title has been recognised since 1992, but only for Aborigines who can show continuous practice of traditional law and customs. If the tide of history has washed away such continuity, there is no claim. Ironically, those most affected by colonization in Australia, those for whom government policy removed their ancestors from their lands, have no legal basis to Native Title.

Furthermore, Brett covers ancestral religion and the importance of maintaining clan land claims, the shocking genocides of Canaan passages an what he suggests is its subversive mimicry of Assyrian literature, the prophets condemnation of land misappropriation, the cultural resistance in Ezra and Nehemiah, Jesus’ resistance of oppressive economics and Roman imperial domination, and Paul’s egalitarian appeals.

The volume concludes with a chapter on postcolonial theology and ethics. Brett argues we need to ‘make space’ for nature and the created order and not just people, for the marginalised and not just the powerful, for hearing God through other traditions and not just Christianity, and for the perspectives of non-Western cultures and not just Western views. He appeals for a broader ‘catholicity’ and hospitality to ‘the other’ in the interest of feeling the pain of the world and developing constructive responses.

*Decolonizing God* is a welcome and valuable contribution to biblical studies, postcolonial studies, hermeneutics and public theology. It is a fascinating examination of the historical use of Scripture in colonization and a helpful argument for fresh post-colonial readings. Readers interested in how the Bible has been read over the last few hundred years in support of colonization, and how it might better be read (especially in a post-colonial world), and the relevance of the Bible to indigenous land rights, will find it an invaluable resource.

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