



With Homi Bhabha at the Jerusalem City Gates: A Postcolonial Reading of the 'Triumphant' Entry (Mark 11.1-11)

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Abstract

This article investigates Mark's story about Jesus' 'triumphal' entry and its relation to Roman imperialism. The article's first part analyses how that relation has been understood in both a late nineteenth-century biblical commentary and a contemporary political reading respectively. In the article's second part, a reading is suggested that is informed by the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha. Special attention is given to how Jesus acquires the colt by ἄγγραεία, how he is greeted, and how the procession ends anticlimactically in the temple. The entry story with its subsequent temple incident, it is argued, could be taken as mimicry of celebratory welcomes. This places Jesus in an interstitial third space in-between a clear-cut anti- and pro-Roman position, a space that is characterized by colonial ambivalence.

Keywords

ἄγγραεία, Homi Bhabha, postcolonial criticism, reception criticism, Roman Empire

In Mark's story about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Mk 11.1-11), there are a number of royal and messianic signals: Jesus rides on a colt on which no one has ridden; there are garments placed on the colt as well as on the road; and the crowd spread leafy branches and cry out in acclamations and blessings of 'he who comes in the name of the Lord' with reference to the kingdom of David.

From a postcolonial perspective,¹ an issue that immediately presents itself is how such an entry story relates to Roman imperialism.² Is it

1. Postcolonial criticism is a heterogeneous field of research that challenges Western traditions of knowledge and its anchorage in global relations of domination and subjection. For introductions to and overviews of postcolonial biblical criticism, see Dube 2000, Segovia 2006, Moore 2006a, Sugirtharajah 2006 and Liew 2008.

2. 'Imperialism' is defined by Edward Said (1993: 9) as 'the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory'. 'Colonialism' is defined more narrowly as 'the implanting of settlements on distant territories' (1993: 9).

antagonistic? Is it acquiescent? Is it reproducing imperial ideology? Or could it be understood in some other way? Evidently, biblical scholars tend to answer these questions quite differently, and many simply avoid the question.³ From the perspective of postcolonial criticism, I suspect that the answer, as well as the lack of an answer, is related to the social location of the scholars in question. From such a suspicion this article begins with what could be called a postcolonial reception analysis. Following an approach initiated by Edward Said, two contradictory interpretations of the entry story are critically compared and related to their respective discursive locations.⁴ In the article's second part I approach the Markan text from a postcolonial perspective. Assuming all readings to be discursively embedded, the reading offered here is explicitly related to Homi Bhabha's theory about the relations that typically develop between colonizers and colonized. As I will argue, this particular perspective makes possible a more credible understanding of how Mark⁵ relates to Roman imperialism, since it acknowledges the story's inherent contradictory signals.

Postcolonial Reception Criticism

Ezra P. Gould

In the late nineteenth century, during which British colonialism is often described as having reached its zenith (Porter 1997), the English-speaking world received one of its most highly renowned biblical commentary series—the ICC. At a time when British and American divines

3. For antagonistic readings, see Reimarus 1970 [1774–78]: 92 (although an interpretation of Matthew's account, his early reading had a strong effect on readings of Mark), Brandon 1967: 349–50, Belo 1981: 178–79, Myers 1988: 290–97 and Horsley 2001: 109–10. Passively submissive readings: Catchpole 1984: 322–23 and Roskam 2004: 159–61. Readings that avoid the issue: most commentators refrain from explicitly discussing how the entry story relates to Roman imperialism, which, however, often implies an acquiescent interpretation. The implied passive submission could be deduced from the commentary's interpretation of Mk 12.13–17; see Taylor 1953: 451–52, 80; Cranfield 1959: 347–54, 72; Gundry 1993: 623–27, 99.

4. 'Discursive' is here used with the meaning it has in discourse theory, in which it generally refers to 'a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)' (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 1). Discourse analysis, which intersects with postcolonial criticism, belongs to a wider field of cultural studies and is influenced by poststructuralism. It is characterized by an interest in how language (in a wide sense as culture and texts) forms and 'creates' the world, including social processes such as identity formations and relations of power.

5. In this article, 'Mark' designates the text rather than the author.

had mainly produced popular and homiletical commentaries, the ICC series was launched with the purpose of firmly bringing British and American scholars into the German-dominated field of critical biblical scholarship. One of the first works in the series was a commentary on the Gospel of Mark written by Ezra P. Gould (1896), who at the time was professor at the Divinity School of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, USA. The commentary seems to have been well received. According to a reviewer, it met the need in the English-speaking world of a 'thorough, scholarly, up-to-date' commentary; Gould's work 'surpass[ed] all others' (Votaw 1896: 66).

Commenting on the pericope of Jesus' entry (Mk 11.1-11), Gould points to an apparent inconsistency in the Gospel story. Previously, Jesus has repeatedly refrained from claiming power, and his way to Jerusalem has been described as a journey to his suffering and death. But as he rides into Jerusalem, Gould finds, Jesus accepts the very position that he has previously denied, i.e. his kingship. Such a proclamation was necessary, Gould argues, in order to communicate the demand of Jesus to be accepted 'as King, and not merely as Prophet'. Having made his messianic claim, however, 'he proceeds as before with his merely spiritual work'. The key to these apparent contradictions, Gould claims, is to be found in 'the splendid self-consistency of Jesus' procedure, and in its absolute inconsistency with worldly ideas and policies'. Jesus would use 'absolutely only spiritual means' (Gould 1896: 205-206). Although not stated explicitly, Gould seems to deny that the Markan Jesus that rides into Jerusalem would constitute any political threat or opposition to Roman power. Explicit statements are found, however, in Gould's commentary on Jesus before Pilate (Mk 15.1-15): 'Pilate understood the facts', Gould claims, that the kingship of Jesus 'involves no harm to the state'. In support of his reading, he refers to Jesus' silence regarding his messianic claims, which Gould sees as the opposite of stirring up the people—'he had repressed them'. Further, Gould argues, he had commanded paying of tribute to Caesar and thereby 'used his authority to enforce that of the State, not to overthrow it' (Gould 1896: 282-85).

A first question that begs our attention is Gould's way of separating 'spiritual' from 'worldly'. Since the late 1970s, biblical scholars with an interest in the social context of Jesus and the Gospels have pointed out how Mediterranean antiquity differed from modern societies, especially in terms of the relation between religion and politics.⁶

6. Theissen 1977; Malina 1981; Borg 1984; Schottroff and Stegemann 1984; Elliott 1986.

In antiquity, these scholars tend to argue, religion was not separated from politics in the way it is said to be in modern societies. If the spiritual–worldly dichotomy was not self-evident in antiquity then, perhaps it was part Gould’s particular location. In order to explore this issue, I will analyse the discursive context in which Gould’s work was produced. Such an analysis would entail placing Gould’s text side by side with texts from the dominating colonial discourse of its time. This brings us right to the centre of postcolonial criticism and to one of its founders, Edward Said, whom I will introduce briefly.

In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) analysed Western colonialism from a linguistic and cultural perspective. Previously it was seen primarily as a political, economic and military enterprise. Using what he later referred to as *contrapuntal reading* (Said 1993: 66–67), Said showed how academic texts as well as fiction and novels generated an understanding of the Orient that was closely tied to Western colonial expansion. Reading texts that seemingly would have little in common, he pointed to a wider discourse in which the West was essentially distinguished from the Orient. In this discourse, Orientals were described as exotic, irrational, emotional, etc. and became an image of ‘the other’ against which Western identity was formed.

As has been showed by R.S. Sugirtharajah (1999) and Pui Lan Kwok (1998: 80–81), contrapuntal reading could also be applied to biblical studies by relating scholarly work to colonial discourses. Although calling it *parallel processing*, Kwok conducts an analysis similar to that of Said. Relating nineteenth-century research on the historical Jesus to colonial discourse, she finds a parallel in how ‘the natives’ are construed. For colonizers, the natives were all irrational people who needed to be civilized. For biblical scholars, the natives were the people who, a few decades the death of Jesus, could not distinguish myth from reality.

Conducting such an analysis on Gould’s text will be interesting not because it helps us to understand Mark in antiquity, but so that we might understand Gould in his context and of what production of knowledge his work was part. The question then becomes one of which texts are to be placed side by side with Gould’s commentary. Since space is limited here, I will focus on texts that were produced in the context of Protestant mission. Although the relationship between Protestant mission and British colonialism is a disputed topic, they are quite clearly related. It is sufficient here to point to a recent work by Christopher Hodgkins, who argues that Protestant Christianity gave the British Empire ‘its main paradigms for dominion and possession but also, ironically, its chief languages of anti-imperial dissent’ (2002: 2). Since Gould’s

commentary in all probability was read by Protestant Christians, reading Gould's text in parallel with descriptions of Protestant mission is then a way of relating it to the British colonial expansion. Due to my particular location I will bring Swedish texts into the analysis as well—Christian mission was quite extensive in Swedish churches at this time.

Looking at the explosion of missionary magazines in the European and North American contexts in the late nineteenth century, it is evident that Christian mission was a popular subject. Although missionaries were comparably few in number, the missionary magazines made their work widely known to Europe, and the magazines could be read as representations of a Christian colonial culture. Although Sweden could hardly be said to be a colonizing country, in the discourse of Christian mission Swedish people became part of the wider European imperialism. At certain points in Swedish magazines this connection is also spelled out:

Without doubt, the Englishmen are, with all their mistakes, of all nations on earth those who have the power and means that are required to prepare the way for Christianity and protect its tender sprout among the heathens (Tottie 1884: 118, my translation).

In this magazine, published 'under supervision by the Church of Sweden's Board of Mission', the colonial expansion is seen as opening up the land for Christian mission, by preparing the way—which could include such activities as building railways and upholding law and order. Hence colonialism is somehow seen as an expression of divine will. However, there is also a clear tendency to separate the political-economic aspects of the expansion, which involved coercion, violence and greed, from the Christian mission, which in its essence was seen as purely religious and absolutely free from coercion. The same tendency to separate the *worldly* colonial expansion from the *spiritual* Christian mission is also present in general treatments of Protestant mission history.⁷ Hence, Christian identity during the European colonial expansion was construed, partly at least, through a binary division of spiritual and worldly—the very same

⁷ Protestant mission in the late nineteenth century is fairly well documented. A prominent author was Gustav Warneck from Germany, whose works were translated into different languages, including English and Swedish, see Warneck 1901, 1903. See also the works by E. J. Ekman (1893) and Henry Ussing (1902).

division that Gould thought was the key to rightly interpreting the Markan depiction of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

But even though such a binary division was a prominent part of missionary discourse, the picture is rather complicated. A key political issue in British imperialism during the nineteenth century was the abolition of slavery, and one of the strongest voices against slavery came from Protestant missionaries. Further, since newly formed colonial states tended to lack a legislation that regulated the relationship between church and state, there were often conflicts between mission stations and the colonial administration. A leading Anglican missionary, R.H. Walker, wrote about these experiences in the Kingdom of Buganda in a letter to his brother in 1898: 'Our work here is, on a small scale, so like the work and history of the Church in the 4th and 5th century. Many questions are just the same as were then settled. The relation of Church and State is continually cropping up.'⁸ The sharp distinction between spiritual and worldly, it seems, although part of Protestant identity construction, was not easily implemented in a social context. The Protestant identity formation, of which Gould's interpretation was a part, was rather contradictory. On the one hand it could be characterized as non-worldly and non-political. On the other hand it was part of a social practice (Christian mission) that both legitimized and resisted a highly political and worldly colonial expansion. Despite the complexity of its discursive location, however, Gould's image of a 'purely spiritual Jesus' that does not interfere with the state could quite clearly be labelled pro-colonial and acquiescent.

Richard A. Horsley

In contrast to Gould, let us move forward roughly a hundred years to the present time and look at one of the most influential political readings of Mark, that of Richard A. Horsley (2001). Unlike Gould, Horsley finds that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem fits quite well within Mark's previous portrait of Jesus. The dominant plot in Mark, Horsley argues, is 'the conflict between Jesus, his program and movement, and the Jerusalem rulers and their representatives backed up by Roman rule' (2001: 101). Horsley regards the entry story as a continuation of the renewal of Israel that Mark depicted in the first part of the Gospel. The village-to-village renewal initiated by Jesus and the disciples constituted a challenge to the

8. Cited from Hansen 2002: 157.

local authorities, he claims. With the entry into Jerusalem the conflict has escalated. Leaning on the note in Mk 14.1 that it was Passover, Horsley reads the people's cry of 'Hosanna' as recitations of the Hallel psalms (Pss. 113–118), which he sees as alluding to the Exodus. Since the Exodus was a memory of 'liberation from oppressive foreign rule', Horsley concludes that Mark here presents Jesus as confronting 'the Roman-sponsored Jerusalem rulers in a way reminiscent of the Exodus', a confrontation that eventually led to the authorities' decision to kill Jesus (2001: 109–10). For Horsley, then, the entry story stands in clear opposition to Roman imperial power.

In order to analyse Horsley's work contrapuntally, as I did with Gould's, I will look for signals that place Horsley's text in a specific discursive context. First, its title *The Politics of Plot ...* points at a socio-political discourse. Secondly, he criticizes other scholars' readings of Mark as stamped by 'Christian theological training' (Horsley 2001: ix–xv, 101). These signals, in combination with key phrases in the specific reading of the entry, such as 'liberation from foreign rule' and 'the conflict between the rulers and the people' (2001: 109–10), place Horsley's text in an anti-colonial, liberationist church critical discourse. Here Jesus is seen as belonging to an oppressed indigenous people struggling for freedom from foreign rule (2001: 29, 42).

An apt text to juxtapose with Horsley's is the *Misa Campesina Nicaragüense* ('Nicaraguan Peasants' Mass') by Carlos Mejia Godoy. Written in 1975 during the Somoza dictatorship, the lyrics articulate the decision of Christians to join the struggle against the dictatorship and to create a new society. Although banned by both the Somoza government and the established church the same year it was published, it spread rapidly and is generally seen as playing an important role during that struggle (Godoy 1987: 4). The anti-colonial rhetoric comes to the fore when Pilate is described as an 'unscrupulous and malicious Roman imperialist who cowardly washed his hands to erase his misdeed' (Godoy 2001: 34). Further, a typical liberationist discourse is seen in Godoy's relating the risen Christ to the rising of the people against the oppressive rulers:

I believe in you, comrade,
Christ human, Christ worker,
vanquisher over death.
Your immense sacrifice
engendered a new people
for liberation.

You are rising
 in every arm raised up
 to defend the people
 against the exploitation of rulers (Godoy 2001: 34).

In a polarized situation like that of Nicaragua in 1975, Jesus is depicted as clearly taking sides with the people against the rulers. This is similar to Horsley, who saw Jesus as taking sides against the 'Roman sponsored Jerusalem rulers'. Although Godoy's text might be a little too theological for Horsley, they depict similar patterns of an oppressed people struggling for liberation from their exploitive rulers.

But how anti-colonial is a typical anti-colonial position? This poses a paradox. On the one hand, it opposes colonial ideology as oppressive and exploitative. On the other hand, however, it tends to reproduce an inverted colonial ideology, where liberation not infrequently turns into oppression. An anti-colonial position reacts against a colonial discourse (or ideology) that typically has established a dichotomous division between superior colonizers and inferior indigenous (colonized) people. By instilling these categories with essential characteristics and traits (cf. Said 1978 and above), colonial rule appears natural and self-evident. In an anti-colonial discourse, though, these categories are reversed to the effect that the indigenous people are seen as superior to the colonizers. But the essential (colonial) categories are left unquestioned or even reinforced.

Horsley (2001: 143) refers to this dynamic in a discussion about demon possession, where he quotes Fanon: 'The Manicheism of the settler [thus] produces a Manicheism of the native'. Fanon's Manicheism, however, has been debated by postcolonial critics and interpreted in different ways.⁹ Although Horsley refrains from discussing the problems entailed in an anti-colonial reversal, there are still some contradictory signals in his work that raise the question of whether he actually reads Mark as a Manichean reproduction of colonial discourse. His reading of the entry story with its juxtaposition of the people and foreign rulers seems to comply with it. So does his tendency to homogenize or essentialize 'the (indigenous) people'

9. This debate stems from Fanon's ambivalence about the essentialism that tended to characterize the movement of which he was part. Citing Senghor's phrase 'Emotion is Negro as reason is Greek', Fanon (1967: 106) expressed scepticism against using such stereotypical notions but simultaneously acknowledged the strength that came with elevating blackness.

in Mark's Gospel as adhering strictly to indigenous tradition: 'Mark's Jesus', he argues, 'insists on the original Mosaic covenant as the *only* guide for the people's social economic life' (Horsley 2001: 43, italics added). On the other hand, Horsley (2001: 37) is generally critical of 'the essentialism that pervades Western thinking about peoples and nations'. And later on in his work he describes the movement of the fulfilment of Israel that the Markan Jesus initiated as also including other peoples—most clearly represented by the Syrophoenician woman (Mk 7.24-30)—whose identities were 'hybrid' (2001: 213). But then again, according to Horsley (2001: 203) this is not part of the dominant conflict in Mark's Gospel: the Syrophoenician and other women in Mark belong to a 'subplot'.

In my final reading of Horsley, therefore, his interpretation of Mark quite clearly represents a typical anti-colonial position. A problematic aspect is its failure to acknowledge that Mark lacks any notion of 'the indigenous people'—the 'subjected people' or similar—as a homogenous and unified category. If Mark has the people saluting Jesus in the entry story, he has them doing quite the opposite during his trial. Further, as has been argued by Laura Donaldson (2005: 103), Mark depicts men and women in a way that ought to undermine any possibility of lumping them together under the master term 'the colonized'. The differences with which characters are presented in Mark's story, she finds, 'destabilize the tightly contained polarities of the anti-colonial and reconstellate along the much more shifting, diffuse, and often contradictory boundaries of the postcolonial'. Although an anti-colonial reading such as Horsley's could be appreciated as a challenge to the comfortable, acquiescent readings of Mark, it nevertheless lacks tools for accentuating the subtlety and complexity that I will argue is typical of Mark's way of re-inscribing and subverting Roman power.

Thus far, two readings of Mark's entry story have been analysed and related to their respective social location. Neither of them, it seems, offers a persuasive and satisfying interpretation of how the story relates to the colonizing discourse. Concluding the first part of this article, there is a perspective needed that affirms the text's inherent complexity and that makes possible a more nuanced way of describing how Mark's entry story relates to Roman imperialism.

Reading the interpretations by Gould and Horsley, it is noteworthy that neither of them compares the entry story to similar stories about

Greco-Roman triumphal entries. Although they draw divergent conclusions, they both primarily focus on how Mark relates to Jewish traditions. Since the wider imperial cultural context, particularly its traditions of triumphal entries, is of key interest from a postcolonial perspective, this is where I will begin my reading.

Imperial Allusions

Judging from the numerous sources, triumphal entry processions or celebratory welcomes were relatively common in antiquity. There are accounts of Greek,¹⁰ Roman¹¹ and Jewish¹² triumphal processions. Being both political and religious manifestations, they elevated rulers and granted them authority and power.¹³ Presumably, they were a well-known phenomenon and were spoken about extensively. As argued by Collins (2007: 514-16), the widespread attestations of such stories give reason to regard them as a specific literary genre to which the Markan account belongs. In three different articles, such accounts of celebratory welcomes are analysed in the search for a common structure (Catchpole 1984; Duff 1992; Kinman 1999). Although differing somewhat in the

10. A famous example told by Josephus, *A.J.* 11.332-36, is when Alexander the Great entered Jerusalem. See also Polybius, *Histories* 16.25.1-9, who describes how King Attalus of Pergamum received a triumphant welcome upon entering Athens. Similarly, Athenaeus, *Deip.* 6.253c, describes how Demetrius is triumphantly received into Athens, saluted as 'the only true god'. Also, Mithridates was welcomed and hailed as 'God and Saviour' in cities in Asia Minor after his victory over the Romans in the first century BCE (Diodorus Siculus 37.26).

11. Roman emperors generally received grandiose welcomes when they travelled. For instance, Suetonius (*Ner.* 25.1-3) offers a telling description of Nero's entrances to different cities, including Rome. See also Plutarch, *Antony* 24.3-4 about the welcoming of Antony into Ephesus; Josephus, *A.J.* 16.12-15 discusses Marcus Agrippa's entry into Jerusalem. There is also the somewhat different but related Roman triumph in which a Roman ruler did not enter a foreign (sometimes vanquished) city, but his own—Rome (Josephus, *B.J.* 7.132-157). See also Versnel 1970.

12. There are many examples from the Hasmonean period: the victory over and entry into Gaza by Simon Maccabeus (1 Macc. 13.43-48; 14.7), Jonathan Maccabeus's glorious reception when entering Ascalon (1 Macc. 10.86; 11.60), and the honourable reception of Apollonius into Jerusalem (2 Macc. 4.21-22). Also, Josephus, *B.J.*, 2.433-34, describes how Menahem (a Jewish insurgent during the war against the Romans), armed with Herod's weapons, entered Jerusalem in the state of a king, after which he became a leader of the rebellion.

13. This is shown most clearly by the decree that granted celebratory welcomes of Augustus in the cities he visited; see Dio Cassius 51.20.2-4.

sources discussed, the studies nevertheless point towards a recurrent pattern which these accounts of celebratory welcomes share.¹⁴

1. The prominent person is greeted and hailed—often as a divine revelation—by the citizenry near the city gates.
2. He (they are all male) is then formally escorted into the city, accompanied by hymns and/or acclamations.
3. The procession typically ends in the temple where some kind of ritual takes place—either a benevolent sacrifice or a hostile expulsion of some kind.

The entry story in Mark's Gospel has a similar pattern. Jesus is greeted by 'many' (11.8) outside the city. With garments and leafy branches he is escorted into the city, accompanied by hymns and acclaimed as 'coming in the name of the Lord' (11.9). The messianic undertones with their divine and political connotations reinforce the suggestion that the story belongs to the wider imperial discourse of celebratory welcomes. An important difference, however, is how the procession ends. The procession continues, as expected, into the city and into the temple. While there, however, the customary ritual does not occur. Jesus shortly looks around and then retires, for as Mark says, 'it was already late' (11.11). The ending of the procession, as depicted by Mark, therefore is an anticlimax.

The Anticlimax

This anticlimactic ending has been generally acknowledged and is possible to interpret in different ways. There seem to be two alternatives. Firstly, Collins's suggestion is built on Kinman's (1999) argument about the implicit expectations that existed when a prominent guest arrived at a city. A failure to provide a customary welcome, he argues, would be taken as an insult and could have severe consequences. He therefore interprets the nonexistence of an official welcome of Jesus in Lk. 19.28-44 as signalling an insult against Jesus. Collins (2007: 516, 20-21) also argues that Mark's way of describing Jesus' arrival in the temple without any leaders of Jerusalem there to welcome him 'would be viewed as an affront'. However, Mark is different from Luke in some crucial ways. In Mark, Jesus has never been to Jerusalem, which

14. The pattern is described somewhat differently. Most notably, Catchpole differs by suggesting that a procession always is preceded by a military victory (1984: 321-23). This particular suggestion, however, reflects Catchpole's attempt to reject Reimarus's thesis that 'the triumphal entry could aim at nothing other than a secular kingdom', and Catchpole is here contradicted by several of the Greco-Roman sources.

makes it much more questionable whether the Jerusalem leaders could be expected to know who he was. Also, Mark depicts Jesus in much less royal terms than Luke, which further lowers the expectations of a grand official welcome in the temple and decreases the notion of Jesus being insulted.

A second suggestion comes from Paul Brook Duff (1992), who similarly emphasizes the importance of the concluding ritual in Greco-Roman triumphal entries. Somewhat differently, however, he regards the concluding ritual as a kind of ‘appropriation’ in which the ruler symbolically takes possession of the city. By postponing the concluding ritual and describing it as a condemnation rather than an appropriation, Duff argues, Mark ‘gives his “triumphant entry” an ironic twist’. Although Duff might be exaggerating the case for a particular ritual of appropriation—the concluding ritual seems to be more of a diverse character—his argument is still quite suggestive. Particularly telling is his conclusion that Mark ‘teases his readers with what seem to be triumphal allusions but never satisfies their expectations’ (Duff 1992: 70).

The anticlimactic ending of the entry story, then, establishes an ambiguous or ironic relation to imperial discourse. This relation is enforced by the kind of animal used—a colt rather than a horse.¹⁵ But even though the story quite clearly resembles yet differs from imperial triumph narrations, it is far from obvious how that is to be interpreted. Where does it place the Markan Jesus in relation to imperial discourse? In order to find a way of articulating this relation, I will make use of Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial theory that innovatively treats the ambiguous, unstable and rupturing relations between colonizers and colonized. At this point, therefore, I will make a brief presentation of Bhabha’s work.

Homi Bhabha

Said’s argument in *Orientalism* provoked a multifaceted response and criticism that eventually expanded into the wide and highly contested field of postcolonial studies.¹⁶ One of the scholars who responded to Said was Bhabha. Whereas Said tended to look at colonialism from a

15. Even if Jewish tradition granted that a king could ride on a colt or a donkey (Gen. 49.8-12; Zech. 9.9), there seems to be no such precedent in Roman discourse.

16. For a discussion about the criticism against Said and his response to it, see Said *et al.* 1996. Also, see the afterword that was included in a later edition of *Orientalism* (Said 1995). For introductions to postcolonial studies, see Moore-Gilbert *et al.* 1997, Loomba 1998 and Gandhi 1998.

Western viewpoint, seeing it quite unambiguously as a unilateral quest for power, Bhabha focused more on the unsettling relationship between colonizer and colonized, on the imitative and rupturing processes of identification that he argues typically arose between them—or to use his characteristic vocabulary, on the interstitial *inbetween* space of translation and negotiation. By bringing Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and Derridean deconstructionism to texts such as nineteenth-century missionary reports, Franz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Bhabha (2005: 153) argues that 'the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference'.

A colonial identity, far from being unambiguous, is then seen as characterized by a fluctuation between on the one hand self-confident universalism and on the other anxiety of being imitated and mocked. The confident authoritative aspect, phrased from the European perspective as 'the white man's burden' and by Fanon as 'turn white or disappear' (1967: 100), implies that the colonized are supposed to learn and imitate the universal colonial culture, i.e. 'become civilized'. Whereas Fanon regarded this imitative behaviour as a pure negative—as a sign of inferiority complex—Bhabha strips it of any identity or essence and sees it instead as *mimicry* which he understands as subversive in a profound sense. By imitating the colonizer, by becoming almost like them, colonial power is undermined. Further, Bhabha argues, the imitation is not a complete harmonization, but a form of metonymic resemblance, a repetition with a difference. Or, as he repeatedly states, 'almost the same *but not quite*' (italics in original), which means that mimicry always tends to teeter on the brink of mockery, parody and menace. The subversive effect of mimicry on colonial discourse, then, is not so much a consciously applied counter-imperial strategy, but rather an elusive effect of the colonial discourse itself. On the other hand, by highlighting its subversive effects and associating it with 'camouflage', Bhabha (2005: 121-31, 72) also draws attention to the political possibility of mimicry being used as a strategy for consciously undermining colonialism.

Mimicry could then be understood as a two-way ambivalence that characterizes the relation between colonizers and colonized. In order to conceptualize the location of these contradictory processes of identification, Bhabha alternately uses terms such as *the interstitial inbetween space* or, more conveniently, *the third space*. He describes this as a space where identity positions are negotiated and where socio-political initiatives can emerge. Rather than being derived from previous historical or essential categories, these identity positions radically undermine notions of

cultural essence or hegemony (Bhabha and Rutherford 1990). Here, Bhabha leans on Lacan and typically prefers talking about 'identification' rather than 'identity', which implies an understanding of culture and identity as being continually rewritten and negotiated rather than fixed and stable.

An illustration of the parodic and rupturing aspects of mimicry from contemporary popular culture is the spoof documentary movie *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, in which a Kazakh journalist tries to imitate a dominating American culture. Trying to tell jokes as taught by a US teacher, Borat imitates yet subverts the teaching, thereby becoming almost the same, *but not quite* an American.¹⁷

Interestingly for my argument here, moreover, Bhabha's investigations on identity are not limited to the colonizers-colonized relation, but also concern national identities in more general terms. In *Nation and Narration* (1990: 294), Bhabha points to an ambivalence that resides within the nation itself, enacted in a continuous fluctuation between what he calls the 'pedagogical' and the 'performative'. 'In the production of the nation as narration,' he suggests, 'there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative' (1990: 297). Whereas the pedagogical (nationalist) discourse signifies 'the people' as an *a priori* historical presence, constituted by an historical origin or event, the performative construes 'the people' in repeated enunciations of the national discourse that both adds to and substitutes its meaning (1990: 294-306). Although Bhabha here primarily is discussing modern nations, his explicit focus on narration (rather than organizational aspects) as creating collective identities makes for a much wider significance.¹⁸ And, as I hope to show, the ambivalence (or *dissemination* as he Derrideanly terms it) between the pedagogical and the performative is also present in Mark's narrative, particularly in its way of rephrasing a Jewish national discourse. With Bhabha's theories as my optic, therefore, I now return to the Jerusalem city gates and the 'triumphant' entry that Mark has depicted.

17. The menacing effect is perhaps seen most clearly when Borat, visiting a rodeo, first excites the crowd with chauvinist, pro-US remarks, then sings a fictional Kazakhstan national anthem to the tune of 'The Star-Spangled Banner', which receives a strongly negative reaction.

18. For an argument that nationalism is applicable to antiquity, in particular Jewish nationalism, see Goodblatt 2006.

The Entry as Mimicry

The entry story's way of resembling, yet differing from, Greco-Roman celebratory welcomes serves as apt material for interpreting as mimicry. Taking it as such, the anticlimax is not primarily expressing hostility in the way Collins has suggested (see above), but is rather a parodic undermining of imperial notions of power. The delayed climax in the Markan account has a curious similarity with Borat's attempts to imitate American joke telling: in both instances there is a problem of timing. To tell a successful joke, Borat needs to say the word 'not' at the exact right moment, and as he fails (he is either too late or too early) he becomes almost the same as *but not quite* an American. Correspondingly, when Jesus enters Jerusalem, the delay of the final climax makes the entry come across as almost the same as *but not quite* an imperial triumph.

Further, the colt itself quite unmistakably hints that the entry story aptly could be read as mimicry of celebratory welcomes. Not only is it almost the same as *but not quite* a horse, it is also an animal 'on which no one has ever sat'—a telling image of the in-between space that is opened up by the entry story in its imitation and displacement of imperial and nationalist discourses. Before expanding further on this, however, I would like to point out two more components of the entry story that feeds into this particular interpretation. I will also discuss how this reading affects the interpretation of Jesus' subsequent acts in the temple.

Ἀγγαρεία (Mark 11.3)

In v. 3, there is an enigmatic phrase that tends to trouble Markan commentators. Jesus has been instructing the disciples on how to bring him the colt to be used in the entry. He asks them to enter a village and take an animal even though it does not belong to them. If questioned, they are supposed to answer: 'The Lord has need of it', in Greek ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ χρεῖαν ἔχει. The disciples go to fetch the colt, as they are told, and when they are about to take it some of the bystanders question them: 'What are you doing untying the colt?' (11.5). As soon as the magic phrase is pronounced, however, all objections are dropped, which appears rather remarkable. What made the bystanders voluntarily let go of the colt? Who does ὁ κύριος refer to? Here the reader/hearer needs to fill in what is only implied in the text.

ὁ κύριος (with definite article) has only been used once before in the Gospel (Mk 5.19), and in that context it is variously taken as referring either to God or to Jesus. Similarly, in 11.3, it is quite unclear to whom it refers. In his widely read Markan commentary, Vincent Taylor (1953:

454-55) gives three alternatives: the Lord can refer to Jesus, to God or to the owner of the animal. Somewhat reluctantly Taylor votes for the third option; so does Hartman (2005: 421). Collins (2007: 518), however, chooses the first, Jesus. Here, I will suggest a fourth option, which is based on what some of the commentators mention without much discussion. Specifically, this scene, where an animal is acquired for transportation, resembles the Roman practice of requiring the local population to procure beasts of burden, generally known as ἀγγαρεία (forced labour). To my knowledge, the discussion of how that allusion relates to Roman imperialism is meagre.¹⁹

ἀγγαρεία is a Persian loan word that stems from the Persian empire (c. 500–300 BCE) that developed a postal service by enforcing local transportation. As shown by Derrett (1971) and Wink (1992: 202-204), its use during the time of the Gospels is well known. That the Romans practised ἀγγαρεία is evident from the passion narrative, where the soldiers ‘compel’ (ἀγγαρεύουσιν) Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus’ cross (Mk 15.21; Mt. 27.32). It is also shown in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus teaches about going two miles if anyone forces (ἀγγαρεύσει) you to go one (Mt. 5.41).

As argued by E.A. Judge (1981: 39), this forced labour was generally a source of bitterness and friction in the Roman provinces. The Roman soldiers were carrying heavy burdens, and in order to move fast the local population and its beasts of burden were compelled into service. There are stories of whole villages trying to flee to avoid being forced to carry burdens (MacMullen 1963: 88). When the Greek philosopher Epictetus

19. Four recent commentaries mention the allusion: Gundry 1993: 627-28, Perkins 1995: 658, Hartman 2005: 414 n. 22 and Collins 2007: 518 n. 60. Perkins comes closest to a discussion when she states that Jesus is different from the Roman occupying power since he promises to give the animal back to its owner. Derrett (1971: 243-48), in his otherwise brilliant analysis, seems to overlook the imperial allusion when he argues that the acquisition was consistent with Jewish customs according to which a rabbi had the right to comander animals for transportation. In that case, as Derrett says, the phrase should have been rendered ‘our master (*maran*) needs it’. In another interesting article Stauffer (1956: 85-86) argues that the phrase was an official requisition formula that prepared for the ‘königlichen Adventus’ of Jesus. Categorizing the Markan Jesus as a non-political king, however, Stauffer makes a Roman-friendly interpretation based on the above-mentioned dichotomous division between spiritual and worldly. In sum, there seems to be a lack of discussion about the disruption that is signalled when a popular healer and preacher from a subdued people makes use of an imperial requisition formula.

(contemporary with Mark) writes about freedom, he makes use of ἄγγαρεία in a telling image:

But if there be a press (ἄγγαρεία), and a soldier should lay hold of it [your ass], let it go, do not resist, nor murmur; if you do, you will receive blows, and also lose the ass in any case.

(Epictetus, *Dis. ab Arrian*. IV, 1.79)

That ἄγγαρεία was hated and disputed is evident by the many laws and imperial edicts that aimed at regulating the practice. One such edict, inscribed in both Greek and Latin, is preserved from a pillar in Galatia, and Judge (1981: 40-42) dates it to 18 or 19 CE. Here the local population is imposed upon to supply carts, mules and donkeys as means of transportation for their imperial masters in exchange for specified payments, and in certain cases for free. The edict also regulates who has the right to use these services and mentions particularly the Roman knights involved in ‘the needs of Augustus’, in Greek τοῦ Σεβαστοῦ χρήαις.²⁰ From these regulations it seems possible to derive a phrase that would be used in a typical requisition of an animal: ‘Augustus has need of it’ (cf. Derrett 1971: 246). Or even more likely, since Augustus was often referred to as ‘Lord’, the phrase could also be rendered ‘The Lord has need of it’—the very enigmatic phrase that Jesus instructs the disciples to use.

The phrase in 11.3 would therefore be a familiar echo to a well-known yet detested standard phrase for Roman ἄγγαρεία. But what is the subtext? Judging from the imperial edict, a person such as the Markan Jesus would have lacked all legal rights to make use of ἄγγαρεία, and even less so his disciples.²¹ On the contrary, Jesus and his disciples belonged to the wider category of people who were under Roman subjugation. By twisting the roles and presenting Jesus and the disciples as successfully practising ἄγγαρεία, Mark’s requisition story differs noticeably from standard use. The difference here accentuates the title ὁ κύριος, which in an imperial discourse doubtlessly would refer to the emperor and in a Jewish discourse would designate the

20. Comparing the edict to the phrase in Mark, the word χρήαις in the edict is similar to χρεῖαν in Mark. They are different forms of the noun χρεῖα that means ‘need’. χρήαις in the edict is in the dative plural and has an older spelling.

21. *Contra* Derrett (1971) who argues that Jesus’ instructions contain important legal implications from a Jewish perspective. He does not discuss the imperial allusions of the phrase, however.

God of Israel. In Mark, as we saw, the referent is rather vague. What I would suggest, then, as a fourth option (referring to the three mentioned above) is to take the phrase 'The Lord has need of it' as a mimicry of the imperial practice of ἀγγαρεία and that ὁ κύριος refers to Jesus as almost the same as *but not quite* the emperor.²²

In the discursive struggle of the meaning of ὁ κύριος (the emperor or the God of Israel), both uses of ὁ κύριος tended to be constructed around notions of masculinity, strength, power and domination. When these discourses are combined as they are in Mark's account of a Jewish prophet and Messiah making use of the official impressment phrase, ὁ κύριος is destabilized from a natural or self-evident meaning and becomes what Ernesto Laclau (1990: 28) would call a floating signifier. Not only is Mark thereby displacing the referent of the title, but also in a deeper sense power itself and the attitude and social practice that the title 'normally' implies (cf. Mk 10.42-44).

Catachresis (Mark 11.10)

Another difficulty in the text that has relevance for its relation to imperial discourse concerns the Hosanna cries in vv. 9 and 10. As we saw above, Horsley read them as recitations of the Hallel psalms that were sung during the Passover in remembrance of the Exodus. Although these psalms were used both at the Feast of Tabernacles and the Passover (Taylor 1953: 456), the literary context in Mark makes the Feast of Tabernacles less likely an allusion since that feast marked the conclusion of the harvest. The Passover with its political connotations fits much better with the genre of the entry story. From a Jewish perspective, therefore, the Hosanna cries in Mk 11.9-10 invoke the Exodus tradition and the longing for liberation from foreign rule, which at the time of Mark's writing meant liberation from the Romans. Therefore, Horsley is probably right about the connection to the Exodus. But the question is, of course, whether these allusions were understood by those hearers that were not brought up in a Jewish setting.²³

22. By extension, it might well be argued that 'ὁ κύριος' in Mk 5.19 similarly refers elusively to Jesus as resembling the emperor. In this passage Jesus has just dramatically exorcized a 'Legion' of demons into a herd of swine that consequently drowns in the sea. If Legion is taken as referring doubly to the demons and to the Roman army, the tone gets considerably more anti-Roman and oppositional.

23. Cf. Hooker 1991: 259, who argues that the Hosanna cries among Jews were perceived as an 'appeal to God to save his people from foreign domination'. However, she believes that in Mark they are rather to be taken as cries of homage.

Further, although the cries are rendered in Hebrew, Mark uses them quite differently as compared to Jewish tradition. In an interesting article in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Marvin H. Pope (1992) describes Mark's (and all the Gospels') way of rendering the Hosanna cries as a 'Christian misapprehension of a well-known Hebrew term', which he seems to regard as rather unfortunate and regrettable.²⁴ But this 'misapprehension' could also be seen, with Bhabha, as a performative enunciation of a national discourse that both adds to and substitutes its meaning. Or, to bring yet another postcolonial theorist into play, it could be seen as a *catachresis*.²⁵ In Jewish tradition, the Hosanna cries often had the meaning 'Save us from the Romans!'. By 'misusing' these cries as acclamations to Jesus when he enters Jerusalem, Mark transfers and dislocates their meaning from an indigenous Jewish ritual where they had more the function of recalling a past liberating and founding event. Placed in the context of mimicry of celebratory welcome, the Hosanna cries are used catachrestically as homage and acclamation. The 'original' anti-colonial Jewish meaning is thereby made unstable and transferred into a more slippery and elusive mimicry of imperial triumphant processions. This places the Markan Jesus in a much more ambivalent position in relation to Rome than the Exodus tradition would allow.

*The Temple Incident*²⁶ (Mark 11.12-25)

Since the entry story is the beginning of a longer section in Mark where Jesus acts provocatively and teaches in the temple (11.12-13.2), it seems necessary to discuss briefly how the entry story taken as mimicry affects the interpretation of the subsequent incident in the temple (11.12-25). Although delayed, Jesus' visit to the temple occurs the following day. In a typical Markan way, the temple act is surrounded by a two-part story about a withering fig tree, which Telford (1980) and many scholars

24. Since Hosanna in Hebrew means 'save now', Pope argues, the cry should not be translated 'Hosanna in the highest' (Mk 11.10), but rather 'Hosanna, please, O highest'. These are liturgical texts, he argues, that cry to the anointed king for deliverance.

25. The word is used in linguistics to designate a misapplication of a word. This particular way of using catachresis has been introduced by Gayatri Spivak (1990: 225-28), who sees it as a tactic that is often used among colonized people. It involves wrenching particular images, ideas or rhetorical practices out of their place within a particular narrative and using them to open up new arenas of meaning.

26. The traditional term, 'the cleansing of the temple', is a disputed designation among scholars and I therefore simply refer to it as 'the temple incident', 'the temple act' or similar.

following him have interpreted as communicating a not so subtle condemnation of the temple. Jesus is cursing the fig tree for bearing no fruit (11.12-14, 20-22), and his aggressive acts in the temple are then consequently interpreted as a symbolic cursing of the temple. As David Seeley (1993: 275) has argued, given the Roman destruction of the temple during their conquering of the anti-Roman Jewish rebellion, Mark can be read as letting the Romans 'absolve themselves of responsibility by claiming that the destruction had been divinely ordained' (cf. Mk 12.9, 13.2). Read in this way, Jesus' cursing of the temple expresses a desire for universality (cf. 'all people' in 11.17) that elevates a colonizer's military strength to a divine status. Mark is thereby seen as endorsing Roman imperial ideology according to which the stronger and more masculine power always has God on its side. As Stephen Moore (2006b: 199) has pointed out, Mark is here following a deuteronomic tradition (see, e.g., Deut. 28.25-68) in which a foreign imperial power is seen as a divine instrument for punishing Israel for its sins. This reading of the Markan temple incident is reinforced in Luke's Gospel in which a passage is added where Jesus foretells the Roman destruction of the city. The violent destruction of the temple, says Jesus here, is the result of Jerusalem's failure to acknowledge the time of its visitation (Lk. 19.41-44).

On the other hand, however, to read the temple act in Mark as unequivocally granting Rome a divine status or as a desire for gaining Rome's favour does not seem quite persuasive. After all, what Jesus performs in the temple is a rather provocative disruption of a powerful institution, and as such it could in itself hardly be seen as unambiguously gaining favour with Rome. As Carol Meyers (1992: 364-65) argues, the restoration and enlargement of the Jerusalem temple under Herod the Great had established friendly relations with Rome. Being a grandiose centre, even by Greco-Roman standards, the Jerusalem temple in Mark could be seen as representing a cosmopolitan Roman-friendly metropolis, not least manifested by daily sacrifices for the emperor. When Mark depicts Jesus as driving out the sellers and buyers in the temple, therefore, it could be taken as a disruption of an institution that was closely intertwined with Roman imperialism.

Even though more could be said about Mark's depiction of the temple incident, it seems sufficient for my purposes here to see the pericope as an expression of the deep ambivalence in relation to Roman power that seems to permeate Mark's Gospel. On the one hand, Jesus is depicted as disrupting the business-as-usual in the temple of a Roman-friendly city and thereby as subverting an imperial social order. On the other hand, by sandwiching Jesus' disruption within the cursing of a fig tree, Mark

could be seen as giving divine legitimacy to the Roman destruction of the temple and the suppression of the Jewish insurgents. The temple act vacillates between these different ways of relating to imperial power, which generates a rather intense fluctuation between anger and admiration, fear and desire. It could then quite accurately be seen as producing as well as reflecting what Bhabha terms colonial ambivalence. The ambivalence has a more subtle presence in the entry story with its mimicry of celebratory welcomes. By the delayed temple act, it expands vastly and creates a rather dramatic narrative development that points to the climax in 15.38-39, where the temple veil is torn from top to bottom and a Roman centurion in a highly ambivalent way 'confesses' Jesus as a Son of God (cf. Thurman 2007: 221).

Conclusion

We are now in a better position to return to the initial question of how the Markan entry story relates to the imperial discourse. How is Jesus depicted, and where does it place those who identify him as their Lord in relation to Roman power? As has become evident, there is no neutral ground from which to approach the question. Further, from a postcolonial perspective a simple categorization such as anti- or pro-Roman, or as I stated in the beginning, as antagonistic or acquiescent, does not seem trustworthy²⁷ or even desirable. But then again, as seen in the first part of this article, what is desirable depends to a high degree on the scholar's location. In Christian colonial discourse, a 'purely spiritual' king who completely refrains from making any socio-political claims was clearly desirable. From an anti-colonial standpoint, on the other hand, the desire would be quite the opposite. As I have attempted to show, however, a postcolonial viewpoint makes such allegedly clear-cut designations of the Markan Jesus appear as less credible homogenizations of the entry story as well as of the Gospel as a whole—they inevitably entail a suppression of the text's complex and contradictory signals. Taking the entry story as mimicry of celebratory welcomes, I have argued, makes possible a more credible way of articulating how the Markan Jesus relates to Roman imperial discourse.

Reading the entry story as mimicry does not imply that Mark's text is establishing a fixed position in relation to Roman imperialism, nor to Jewish nationalist discourse. Mark's way of catachrestically rearticulating

27. Especially since a position that appears to be acquiescent might just as well be seen as a camouflaged resistance and mimicry.

both an imperial formula of requisition and the Exodus Hallel psalms opens up a third space in-between the competing discourses where a new identity position is in the process of being formed.

In the ambivalent processes generated by Mark's story, the title 'Lord' is dislocated from its fixed position in an imperial discourse into a context where it becomes a floating signifier, thereby undermining imperial power as 'universal' and 'natural'. Probably this kind of ironic destabilization constituted a more difficult threat for Roman imperial power, as compared to a clear-cut anti-colonial resistance. This is not to say that the author of Mark necessarily had subversive intentions. And since the entry story places itself in such a slippery interstice, it is not confrontational in the same way as a traditional discourse of rebellion. Nevertheless, the imperial discourse is disrupted and the effects are subversive. The profound threat to imperial hegemony does not lie then, as one would perhaps assume, in an oppositional contrasting of the Lord Jesus and the Lord Emperor, but rather in the somewhat playful and ambivalent subversions of its very notions of strength and triumph.

Mark's text, it seems, not only complies with the postcolonial perspective with which I have approached it; it responds forcefully to it. Mark's entry story with its contradictory signals of mimicry and mockery could actually serve as an emblematic example of Bhabha's suggestions about the ways in which identities in a postcolonial space are negotiated in contradictory vacillating processes. This might be of value for a richer understanding of Mark in antiquity, but also and perhaps more importantly, it enables biblical scholars to reflect on Mark's relation to Roman imperialism in a way that addresses a wider contemporary academic arena of literary, social and political studies in which postcolonial criticism is rather prominent.

As is becoming clear, then, the interpretation suggested here is also part of a discursive location, as is all interpretation—there is no innocent or neutral ground from which to decide how Mark's text relates to Roman imperialism. Even if the question is avoided, that silence is also part of a particular location, usually of a dominant Western discourse with its default positioning of the Gospels as pro-Roman and pro-West. Saying that biblical interpretation is culturally and socially embedded, however, is not to say that it is predetermined. As biblical scholars we do make choices, and by our selection of questions, perspectives, terms, concepts etc., we write ourselves into particular discourses. The emerging field of postcolonial biblical criticism, I believe, could be taken as a challenge for

biblical scholars to investigate in a critical way how our texts are part of a wider contemporary production of knowledge.

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