God as "The King" and His Act of Reconciliation: Hope! Despair! A Postcolonial Dalit Feminist Re-interpretation of "The Vineyard and the Laborers"

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Drawing from New Testament texts, Christians pray, "Thy kingdom come." What kind of kingdom does God rule? How do images of kingship and kingdom affect Christians worldwide? Some people view God's kingship favorably, while others criticize it as inherently bound to the problems of any empire. In the last few decades, scholars and activists have resisted the values of empire in the Bible, especially after the emergence of postcolonial hermeneutics. Scholars whose identity is largely defined by their colonized status[1] see the Bible largely as a western book, as colonial Scriptures. Postcolonial biblical scholars have unabashedly established that the Bible contains the language of imperialism and thus provides avenues for perpetuating imperialistic ideology. A significant factor in the continuation of imperialism is one of the primary images of God. For instance, God is widely addressed and understood in the image of a king, both in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament. Using "king" as an image for God is problematic in two aspects at the very outset, as it proclaims, first, God as an emperor and so potentially imperialistic and, second, as an exclusively male figure.

To discuss the image of God as "the King," I engage a kingdom parable of Jesus, the parable of the vineyard and laborers in Matt 20:1–16, which is much relied upon to explain the kingdom of God. Using a postcolonial perspective, my initial and critical questions of the texts are the following: How does the imperialistic language that is used for God translate itself in the colonized societies and cultures affected by colonialism? Does it play a role in constituting norms and expectations in favor of colonialism? What does it mean for the colonized subjects, who resist imperialism and colonialism, to see and worship the God of the Bible who is depicted as the King? Is "kingdom" essentially oppressive and thus unacceptable, or is it different if it is in the context of the "kingdom of God" since God's rule is promised to ensure justice for all? Is it significantly different and liberating? Thus I use postcolonial rhetoric that resists and examines the imperialistic and colonial nuances that arise from the text, while critically engaging the text to reinterpret the kingdom of God as offering an alternative realm that ensures fairness, equality, liberation, and justice for all.

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I argue for a different postcolonial interpretation within a larger conversation. God as the King and his territory as the kingdom of God is suspicious and off-putting to scholars who vehemently resist a territorial nature to the kingdom of God and power that the King supposes, in spite of all of his good intentions. The kingdom language, whether projected in a positive manner or not, is troubling to most postcolonial scholars. They perceive that "kingdom" as a phenomenon is inherently oppressive. Because it is oppressive, it justifies discrimination and promotes monarchy, which often results in violence and injustice to its subjects. The intensity of a kingdom's violence and injustice varies, depending

1. For instance, see their postcolonial deliberations in Musa W. Dube, "Toward a Postcolonial Feminists' Interpretation of the Bible," in *Semeia* 78 (1997): 11–25, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St Louis: Chalice, 2000), and "Looking Back and Forward: Postcolonialism, Globalization, God, and Gender," in *Scriptura* 92 (2006): 178–193; R. S. Sugirtharajiah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and *Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006); Kwok Pui-Lan, "Response to the *Semeia* Volume on Postcolonial Criticism," in *Semeia* 75: 211–217 and *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press: 2005); Jeremy Punt, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa: Some Mind and Road Mapping," in *Neot* 37.1 (2003): 59–85 and "Why not Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in (South) Africa: Stating the Obvious or Looking for the Impossible?" in *Scriptura* 91 (2006): 63–82; Gerald O West, "Finding a Place among the Posts for Post-Colonial Criticism in Biblical Studies in South Africa," in *OTE* 10: 322–342. For other important readings on postcolonial biblical criticism, see Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006) and Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia, eds. *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

on who is seated on the throne. Therefore some scholars unabashedly reject any biblical text that contains imperialistic language and oppressive nuances. They rely heavily on textual deconstruction[2] that calls for a discussion on the authority of biblical texts that contain imperialistic nuances.[3] In an attempt to decolonize the texts and address the politics of interpretations, postcolonial biblical criticism somewhat disengages itself from the power that the Bible as Scripture has among the masses.

As a Lutheran biblical scholar, I remain mindful of the profound effect the Bible has on people of faith; in fact, biblical understandings are a largely determining factor in a global ethos. My attempt in this article is not to rule out the authority of Scripture; on the contrary, the intent is to be critically aware of both the direct and indirect power that the Bible has in defining norms in the postcolonial, or rather in neocolonial, globalized societies. Thus, I deviate from the postcolonial scholars who question the authority of Scripture because of the view that the Bible is simply a colonized western text. I approach the text critically to see if the kingdom of God can offer an alternative model in a larger sense, and if it is possible to regard the "kingdom of God" as simply the lack of a proper expression to describe God's will, vision, and wisdom. How does it make a difference if the kingdom of God promises justice for all?

My specific identity as an Indian dalit feminist scholar and in my particular context—with my life experiences and knowledge—offer a lens for how I interpret the texts and the kingdom parables. As an attempt at reinterpretation, my aim in this article is not to sum up the research that has already been provided for this text but rather to give a fresh interpretation that comes as I approach the text from a different contextual standpoint, influenced and informed by my experiences of suffering invisibility as a dalit Christian woman in India and as a person of color living in the United States. Thus I ask different questions of the text from a postcolonial, dalit, feminist perspective than do historic readings of God as a gracious King, which demand different answers that lead to reinterpretation.

A kingdom parable of the vineyard and laborers: Toward reinterpretation

The parable of the vineyard and the laborers begins with a statement. Jesus says: "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard" (Matt 20:1). Even though the parables of Jesus are self-explanatory, in many parables Jesus goes ahead and gives his interpretation. However, this parable goes without explanation, thus calling readers to come with their own understanding and interpretations. My memory of listening to the interpretation of this parable from Sunday school, from pulpits, and from general readings, is registered around the landowner's generosity and magnanimity, which then called for submission to a model of power disparity even in the kingdom of God. My memory matches historical interpretations, which applauded God the King for his generosity, who offers an alternative kingdom model.

> Worldwide, churches must transform proclamation, preaching, worship, teaching, witnessing, communal formation, action, and advocacy so as to make care for all creation foundational to missional vocation.

According to the parable, the owner of the vineyard hires workers and promises to pay them a denarius for a full day's work. Without any further negotiations, the laborers begin their work, evidently indicating fairness is in play. About the third hour, the owner goes out and sees the people who are jobless and invites them to work in his vineyard. He tells them, "'you also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went" (Matt 20:4). Here again there is evidence of trust between the owner and the laborers. Interestingly, the owner goes out again two more times and invites some more workers to work for him in the vineyard.

The owner does not stop; the day is almost over, yet he goes out again and finds some *others* standing around. The owner does not just invite them this time but asks them a question, seemingly a genuine question, "'Why are you standing here idle all day?'" (Matt 20:6). The answer is rather surprising. They tell him, "'because no one has hired us'" (Matt 20:7). The story makes a shift at this point. The landowner's question conveys prejudgment, as if the laborers were lazy and did not look for work, standing idle all day. Although the potential workers are taken aback by that question, they tell him that no one has hired them, including the landowner himself.

Postcolonial, dalit, feminist interpretation urges deeper questions. What makes them stand there all day long? Why were they denied an opportunity to work? What factors could cause their invisibility? They lost their day without working, not because they were lazy but because they did not find someone to hire them to work. They were simply deprived of earning their daily bread. They were unemployed, even though there was potential work. Only when they tell him no one has hired them does the landowner invite them to work and join the other laborers.

The laborers who are hired as the very last bring much significance to the lives of dalit men and women in India who, for the large part, earn their livelihood working as agricultural laborers for daily wages in the lands of the landlords. The best that they can hope for in their life is to work under a reasonably

2. See R. S. Sugirtharajiah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 39. Musa Dube sees the Bible as a colonizing text in "Toward a Postcolonial Feminists' Interpretation of the Bible," 15.

3. Kwok Pui-Lan, "Response to the *Semeia*," 211–217.

kind landlord. I have known many dalit men and women who are eternally grateful to their landlords for the small considerations and favors that the "landlords" have offered to them. There are clear boundaries that exist as to what dalit laborers can hope for and similarly what the landlords can expect of the laborers. Even though they are daily wage laborers, the expectation is such that they are often treated in slavery conditions. A subaltern dalit feminist reading therefore relates to the laborers in the text who are the most invisible and subaltern, approaching the text from the point of view of laborers rather than the landlord, who is often central in historic interpretations.

The landowner in the parable certainly exhibits compassion as he continues to invite the laborers who are in need of work. He is not bound by the usual work patterns but invites the laborers irrespective of the time. At the end of the day, when it is in the evening and when it is time to pay them their wages for their hard work, the owner calls for the workers, beginning with the last ones who had been hired. Contrary to expectation, the landlord pays them a denarius, an equal amount that has been promised to the people for the full day of work. It is possible for these people who received much more than expected to respond to the landlord with gratitude for his generosity. However, the first-hired laborers obviously expected more money for their greater hours. To their displeasure and disappointment, they also have received their daily wage, a denarius. The landowner at the end makes them all equal, which makes the first-hired laborers grumble. The tone of the workers changes when they feel unjustly treated, by making them equal to the people who joined work at the end of the day. The story has been known for the generosity of the landowner.

From a postcolonial perspective, the same interpretation is carried through a missionary approach, wherein the kindness and generosity of missionaries are applauded. While it is true that there were acts of kindness and compassion from individual missionaries during periods of colonization, as a postcolonial scholar I join others in a hermeneutic of suspicion about their acts of kindness. Were they sometimes bound to colonialism? How are their acts of kindness separated from the power of colonialism? My parents both received education from missionary boarding schools during the colonial missionary regime in the pre-independent India. My parents always called the missionaries "angels" who were sent from God with noble virtues of kindness, compassion, generosity, and giving. While all this is true, what got lost in this perspective is asking: What did the colonizer claim in return for these services? While the colonized subjects then would not have cared about the intention of the missionaries, as a *post*colonial subject, my hermeneutical discourse with the text begins with hermeneutical suspicion; I seek to interpret the text asking rather different questions regarding fairness and justice. Colonized subjects and postcolonial subjects have different expectations.

However, does that mean the kingdom is an accepted, relevant, and appealing phenomenon, if the king represents the personality of the landowner in the story of the vineyard and laborers? What is at stake despite the good things that happen in the story? There

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are two important aspects to name. First, the power disparity is obvious in this model, in which it is justified that some are landowners and some end up being laborers. This model does not offer any opportunity for a reversal of the roles that bring equity and justice in a bigger picture. The landowner continues to own the land and reap the benefits from the labor of the laborers, and the compensation they receive is never the profit, only wages. The story setting is intrinsically hierarchical and offers no redemption for the people who are in the lowest status.

Second, the nuance of the claim of the landowner to pay what he will portrays a monopoly over the land and the money that he owns. In verse 15, the landowner says, "'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'" What if the landowner chooses to do it differently and is in fact unfair and unjust? The kingdom model that Jesus offers does not ensure justice, as much depends on the choice that the individual landowners and kings make in their own kingdoms. While the parable of the vineyard and the laborers is one of the best kingdom parables referring to God's generosity and offering possibilities that are seemingly fair and just, it does not ensure justice in all aspects, as the landowner ultimately is all-powerful, gets to choose what he wants at the end, and is not accountable for anyone. Similarly, a reversal of roles is unimaginable, proving this set-up to be an unjust system, which is not liberating. The language that is used in this parable and in other kingdom parables is territorial and imperialistic and thus calls for caution, since it can translate into oppressive ideas and relationships, for language and images are powerful tools.

Kingdom imagery is problematic from a postcolonial Lutheran perspective. My interpretation here is best kept in tension with the fact that kingdom imagery often leads to injustice. While it does seem unfair at the outset, the landowner, who represents God, nevertheless ensures fairness and justice through an act of reconciliation. The workers who are hired at first are the people who are privileged and are able to grab the opportunity for work and earn their livelihood. Compared to these workers, the ones who did not find work until later are faced with the factors that leave them marginalized in the society. People who are marginalized have to make extra efforts to be able to find work and make a living. The final group of people called into the fields are the downtrodden, marginalized, invisible, and subaltern people, who are often misunderstood and misjudged for their misfortunes and thus often re-victimized.

However, the landowner in the story offers an alternative model as he is not only willing to hire them in the last hour, but he offers fairness to the people who were denied an opportunity

to work. Paying them one denarius, equivalent wages, is his act of reconciliation. Earlier, the landowner must have somehow ignored the potential workers even though he was in a position to hire them. There are factors that made the last-hired laborers invisible. The landowner takes on accountability for their lack of opportunity, if not for intentionally denying them an opportunity to work. He compensates them with an act of reconciliation and thus ensures equity, fairness, and justice.

In summary, how I read "King" and "kingdom" in this text is loaded with paradox. On the one hand, it is liberating for the laborers who experienced invisibility, denial, and lack of opportunities to experience liberation through the landlord's initiative for reconciliation. On the other hand, an alternative model that is promised in the parable leaves the laborers in a vulnerable condition, since their lives and livelihood are at the disposal of the "landlord." There are no rights or claims ensured for the laborers. Inequality and other factors that led some laborers to be denied their opportunities to work are not addressed. While a dalit feminist reading affirms the act of reconciliation of the "landlord," and thus finds the story liberating, a postcolonial stance cautions about the inherent oppressive nature hidden in its structure. Such acknowledgement of tension over images and language is crucial to the whole Christian community's engagement with the power of images.

As Christians we all stand together in solidarity with the oppressed, the exploited, the marginalized, the poor, the sick, the elderly, people of color, women—*and now also endangered nature*.

Discussion Questions:

1. What other parables and images might be oppressive or lead to injustice in various contexts?
2. What would you do to adjust the ways we hear different meanings in "the kingdom of God" and the ways this might cause injustice?
3. What do you think of the argument that the landlord—God—seeks reconciliation? Why?