

Jesus, Materialism, and the Women Who Teach and Preach Mark's Gospel

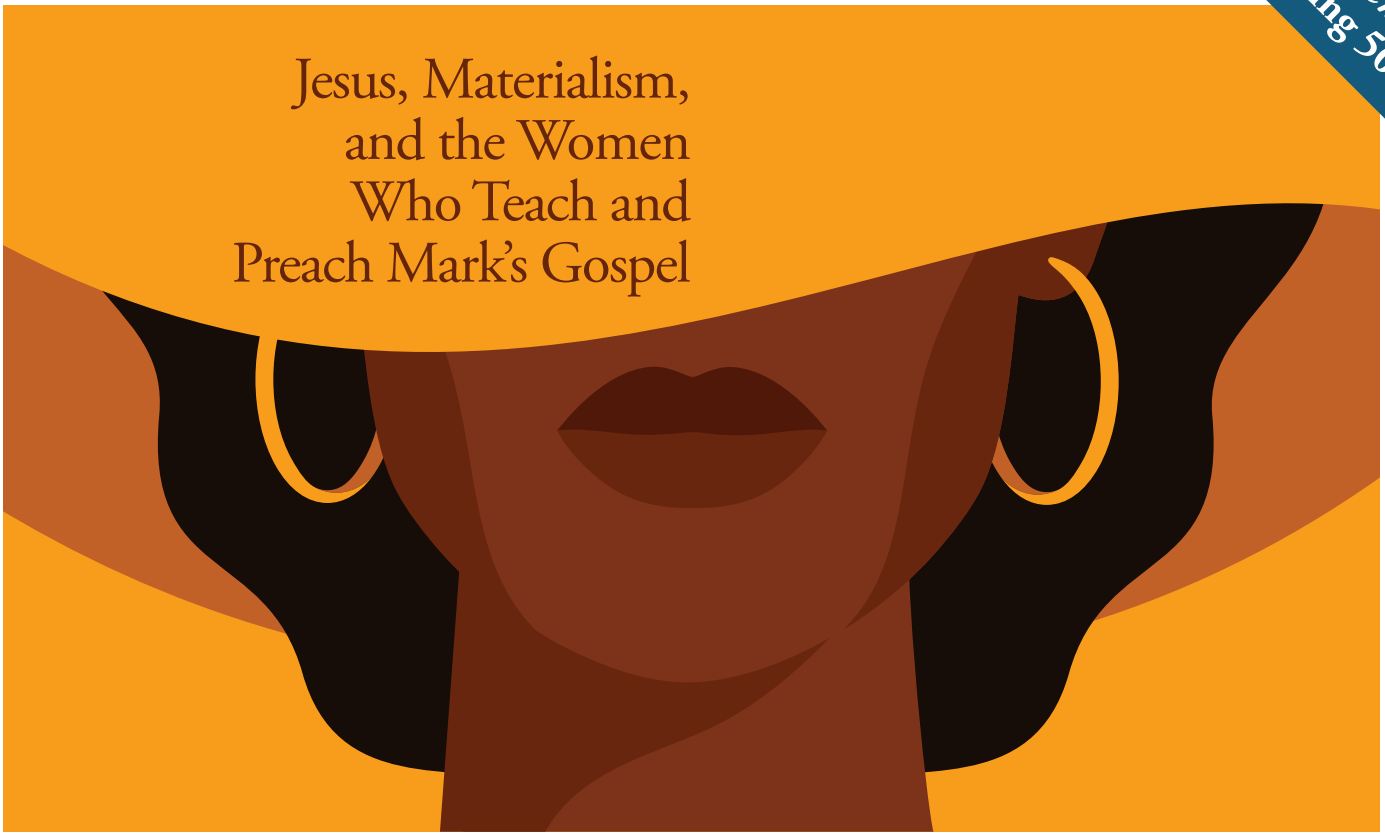


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Introduction to This Issue

In this issue of *Currents*, I have the pleasure of introducing you to a variety of voices who work on the Gospel of Mark. The first three essays are a conversation about Robert Moses' book titled *Jesus and Materialism in the Gospel of Mark*. In his work, Moses argues that Mark's presentation of Jesus' ministry and mission as a journey on "the way," a journey to Jerusalem that ultimately results in his suffering and crucifixion, is a journey where Jesus embodies that which is least, vulnerable, and destitute in society. For Moses, Mark's Jesus invites his followers to journey with him on the way. This invitation to discipleship is a call for believers to reassess their relationship with material possessions and their desire for wealth and power. Like Jesus, believers are to travel light on the way. We cannot hold on strongly to possessions as such a hold can be a hindrance for the journey. To embrace those in society who are least, vulnerable, and destitute is to embrace Jesus himself and the God who sent him. Moses argues that traveling requires believers to depend on God to provide their needs. The journey is a rejection of the status quo and demands followers of Jesus to shun greed. Moses argues that there is also a call to care for the marginalized.

In his review and response to Moses' work, **C. Clifton Black**, Otto A. Piper Professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, titles his essay "Wealth and Poverty in Apocalyptic Tension: Reflections on Robert Ewusie Moses, Jesus and Materialism in the Gospel of Mark." After examining the crux of Moses'

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interpretation of the Gospel of Mark, Black concludes with commendations of the author's treatment of an underexamined topic in Markan exegesis: materialism. Black also highlights Moses' stance that Mark's moral attitude toward wealth and poverty is a function of the evangelist's theology, thus situating Jesus and his disciples in apocalyptic tension. Mark's depiction of discipleship contains a tragic aspect that correlates with Jesus' own tragic destiny. Even when Black sees Moses as inclined to relax this tension, Black believes that further work which compares materialism in other Gospels may be fruitful, future work. Finally, even if Moses does not get into homiletical conversations, such work means that our congregations have biblical resources to confront religious and political powers on behalf of the powerless.

Like Black, **Margaret M. Mitchell**, the Shailer Mathews Distinguished Service Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Literature, also responds positively to Moses' book. Mitchell notes Moses' strong reading of Mark's Gospel as having a consistent concern for the poor, the hungry, and the marginalized. For Mitchell, one profound part of Moses' reading is that he unites ethics and Christology. Specifically, Jesus' form of death on the cross marks him as a poor person whose sacrifice enriches others and alleviates their poverty, while also serving as an embodied condemnation of wealth. Thus, Jesus is the model for discipleship.

Further, Mitchell commends Moses' strong exegetical work and his range of sources. While she generally agrees with the premise of his work, Mitchell is willing to debate smaller areas of disagreement with Moses. Nonetheless, they are small and debatable. However, Mitchell closes with a mighty question on the difference between economic poverty versus spiritual poverty and how those dualistic ideas show up in Congressional Bible studies led by Ralph Drollinger. Therefore, we see that Moses' reading the Gospel of Mark and materialism is not simply an academic exercise but one that may well have public policy repercussions.

Moses responds to Clifton and Mitchell in his essay titled "Mark's Jesus on Wealth and Poverty: A Response to C. Clifton Black and Margaret M. Mitchell." First, Moses responds to Black's question on the Rich Man in Mark 10:17-31: "If Mark leaves us with an unresolved tension, then how confidently may we claim, with Moses, that 'this [rich man] has already pledged allegiance to another god, another master?" Recognizing such an important question, Moses offers several critical clues in Mark's text that may reveal that the rich man has succumbed to the power of wealth. Second, Moses engages Black's question on the temple incident in Mark 11:15-19. As we read these essays, one notes that there are still thorny interpretative issues to engage as we all wrestle with Jesus' temple event.

In his response to Margaret Mitchell, Moses engages the duty of the temple and modern applications. Moses' response to Mitchell engages important questions concerning how readings of the Gospel of Mark may inform public theological and secular debates in addition to the policies concerning those experiencing poverty.

Turning to temple duty, Mitchell believes that Moses over-determines that the main responsibility of the temple in Jerusalem is to provide sustenance for the poor and vulnerable. In his essay Moses clarifies his stance and provides an excellent example of how scholars have such distinctive conversations in the biblical texts. As I introduce these fine essays, my hope is that readers of *Currents* can see that scholarly debates, similar to public debates, can occur in respectful and dialogical ways.

As Moses engages Mitchell's citation of Ralph Drollinger, he discusses his ultimate goal in the book (and his overall project). Moses desires to complete at least three books focused on the Gospels under the umbrella theme "the poverties of affluence." He hopes that a fourth book would synthesize information from the first three books in order to address the sort of questions that Mitchell is raising here. As he begins such work, Moses believes

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that Drollinger provides an excellent example of "the poverties of affluence." Wealth oftentimes creates hubris and blinds us to the needs of those around us. Further, the apocalyptic framework in the Gospel of Mark shows that those with rank and status are blind and lack discernment. Moses alludes to other texts that he would engage in order to unpack his framework. However, I am particularly riveted by his last line and invitation: "let's go spend time with some poor people."

Moving away from Robert Moses' *Jesus and Materialism in the Gospel of Mark*, readers are invited to engage four women, two biblical scholars and two womanist preachers, as they engage the Gospel of Mark.

First, my own essay titled "Black Girls are at their LAST: Exploring a Womanist/Childist Reading of Jairus' Daughter in Mark 5" notes that scholarship in the Gospel of Mark is turning its attention to the children named in the Gospel. As a womanist New Testament scholar, I add my womanist lens to an offshoot of feminist biblical interpretation: childist interpretation. Childist interpretation has opened ways to consider children in the biblical text. In my essay, I argue for re-imagining Jesus' ministry in today's context. Specifically, recognizing that Jairus' daughter is a child of privilege who has a patriarch to advocate for her, I argue that black girls are "at their last" and require protection and ministry as one of society's least protected groups. Accordingly, thinking through a Jesus-focused ministry in contemporary contexts would mean advocating for ministry aimed toward black girls as a high priority in faith-based settings.

Next, **Rochelle Samuels**, who holds a Master of Theological Studies in Practical Theology, is a current Doctor of Ministry Student, and Associate Minister at Salem Missionary Baptist Church in Lawrenceville, Georgia, provides her womanist sermon on the hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5. Her sermon, titled "This Woman's Worth: Still Making a Way" reads Mark 5:25-34 with attention to the personhood of the hemorrhaging woman. Samuels notes that for too long the woman in the Mark 5:25-34 text has been presented mainly as a progenitor of faith with little imagination on how her encounter with Jesus impacted her life and Christianity today. Samuels asks a number of questions: Is faith the deepest hermeneutical reflection to develop from this text? Have we overlooked the significance of this divine intervention as Jesus begins to engage directly with women? In pondering

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those questions, Samuels invites the church to go deeper than a superficial interpretation of her story. True to Jesus' ministry, class, status quo, and gender norms are being challenged here. This text screams inclusivity and not just window dressing on church membership rolls. Her fight for life mirrors the women, minorities, and other marginalized people of today who are still fighting for equity and inclusion.

Next, **Jennifer Bashaw**, Associate Professor of New Testament and Christian Ministry at Campbell University, pens a provocative essay titled "Did God Forsake Jesus? Abandonment and Presence in Mark 15" In this work, Bashaw questions a dominant strand of church tradition that interprets Jesus' words from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" to mean that because of the sin Jesus took upon himself, God abandoned Jesus during the crucifixion. Noting that such an interpretation is built on later theological assumptions rather than the context of Mark's crucifixion narrative, Bashaw uses the literary context of Mark 15 and Psalm 22 to answer the question, "Is Mark communicating God's abandonment or absence in his crucifixion narrative or does the story's connections to Psalm 22 lead to a different conclusion?"

Finally, **Leah D. Jackson**, another Doctor of Ministry student and ordained minister, offers her womanist sermon titled "The Day That Jesus Got Healed." Noting that Jesus willingly healed numerous people during his ministry, Jackson flips a reading of Mark 7:24-30 on its head to argue for Jesus' healing. In said text, Jesus is confronted by a Syrophenician woman whose daughter was suffering from a demon. Jesus refuses to heal her daughter. This sermon, originally preached for the Doctor of Ministry Intensives at McAfee School of Theology, explores the social and cultural factors present in the interaction between Jesus and this woman. Jesus, in his humanity, is forced to confront his bias, providing an example of how believers can faithfully interrogate their embedded theology.

I am grateful to author Robert Moses and his conversations with Clifton Black and Margaret Mitchell. Their collegiality and discussions on the important history of scholarship within Markan studies must serve as a model on how scholars, activists, and public intellectuals must strive to do dialogical work. We are living in a world that seems to have lost good dialogical examples. These fine scholars provide such examples.

Further, I am grateful to the women who teach and preach Mark's Gospel. Since women still only make up about 25% of PhD trained biblical scholars, it is important to read the work of myself and Jennifer Bashaw as alternatives to traditional (i.e., white male) readings of Mark's Gospel. Moreover, while televangelist and megachurch preachers may still be popular in today's culture, I would surmise that reading alternate ways of preaching the Gospel of Mark provides lenses that many of us did not realize we needed. With that said, I am thankful for both Rochelle Samuels and Leah Jackson. May these alternative ways of teaching and preaching thrive in the academy and in religious conversations.

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From the General Co-Editors

Heartly thanks to **Angela N. Parker**, Assistant Professor of New Testament and Greek at Mercer University and author of *If God Still Breathes, Why Can't I? Black Lives Matter and Biblical Authority*, for serving as Guest Editor for the October 2023 issue of *Currents*, which focuses on the Gospel of Mark. In bringing together in one place a scholarly conversation on a significant book in recent Markan scholarship, two womanist scholars who engage Mark's Gospel, and two pastors who speak from a womanist perspective on Markan texts, she has provided readers with different angles of vision on Mark's Gospel that will deeply stimulate readers' own biblical interpretation, teaching, and preaching.

This month we feature two *Currents* FOCUS articles that resonate with the Markan theme of the issue. **Yung Suk Kim** contends that Jesus' death is not itself good news but a tragic event resulting from his radical love of humanity and his bold challenge to power. Jesus was crucified because he challenged the wisdom of the world that privileged the strong and wealthy. But God vindicated him and acknowledged his work of grace. From the cross, we must see God's grace and love. Jesus is good news because he proclaimed the good news of God (Mark 1:14). The gospel/good news is not knowledge about God or Jesus but the power of God that empowers the poor, downtrodden, and marginalized. As such, the gospel must deal with injustices, racism, oppression, and poverty.

Jackson Reynolds wrestles with the theological implications to Jesus' words on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Is Jesus a pious rabbi expressing praise and hope? Or has God truly abandoned Jesus? A classic example and expression of Luther's theology of the cross, these words of Jesus can be sweet gospel relief to those in times of despair. This article explores previous prominent interpretations, including from Stacy Johnson and Jürgen Moltmann, and proposes a new interpretation of subjective abandonment with objective solidarity.

Finally, we mark the 50th anniversary year of *Currents in Theology and Mission* by republishing an article (2016) by our founding editor, **Ralph W. Klein**. On the threshold of the journal's transition to an online, open-access venue, his article rehearses the historical background of the journal and outlines what he did as editor over the course of thirty-five years, both when it was solely a *Seminex* publication and when it was joined by the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Wartburg Theological Seminary, and, at its origin, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. Klein makes several suggestions for the new online version and wishes it a long, successful run.

Preaching Helps was born on the "edge of exile," as Ralph Klein notes in his recap of *Currents'* history. *Preaching Helps* began as a separate publication, but later became part of the larger journal. The early editors were *Seminex* faculty; George Hoyer was the first, followed by New Testament scholar Robert Smith. One of his colleagues said, "[Smith] taught scripture as proclamation; he wrote as a preacher for preachers." In his own words he said, "As a teacher of the Bible I would be a failure if I kept my nose and students' noses only in the Bible." Bob Smith edited *Preaching Helps* for over a decade. We are grateful for his insistence that biblical scholarship should have something to do with preaching! When *Currents* was published six times a year, the December issue was devoted to the gospel for the coming year. Now, with

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only four issues a year, that emphasis comes in the October issue; readers will find several essays that focus on the gospel of Mark. In this issue's *Preaching Helps*, we will stay in Matthew through the Sundays of Ordinary Time. But with the First Sunday of Advent, we enter the year of Mark, a book that begins with a fragment and ends too abruptly. Several writers will help us not only read the texts but connect the Bible to life beyond the Bible. We are so grateful for the vision and stewardship of **Barbara Lundblad**, through whose labors *Currents* continues to offer wise exegetical and homiletic guidance to the faithful preachers who have been loyal readers of *Currents* across these fifty years.

Kathleen D. Billman and Craig L. Nesson

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