
Mark's Gospel and Justice for the Poor

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I first heard Professor Moses speak “virtually” at last year’s SBL, at the panel on Professor Lisa Bowens’ excellent book, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation*, and much appreciated his thoughtful remarks and questions. And I had the pleasure of meeting Professor Moses in person last summer (2022) at the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas meeting in Leuven and hearing his paper there on community discipline in Matthew and Paul. I am truly delighted to have the opportunity to review his most recent book, *Jesus and Materialism in the Gospel of Mark: Traveling Light on the Way* (Fortress, 2022).

The thesis of Prof. Moses’ book is succinctly and cogently summed up in the Conclusion, from which I quote:

The author of Mark has masterfully created a narrative about Jesus’ journey on the way, whose identity as Son of God can only be fully comprehended through his suffering and crucifixion (15:33-39). The Son of God invites his followers to journey with him on the way (8:34). And this call to follow Jesus entails the loss of material security and everyday comforts. If the call to follow Jesus entails material loss, then believers ought to hold lightly to material possessions; for holding on strongly to possessions can be a hindrance for the journey on the way. . . . The Jesus of Mark has brought good news to the poor. He reminds his Jewish contemporaries, especially the religious elites, of God’s special concern for the most vulnerable in society. His engagement with the Jewish Law reminds his people of the true essence of the Law, which is to liberate and refresh the souls of God’s people, especially the most vulnerable” (pp. 193-94).

Key components of this overarching reading of Mark are (my numbering):

1. The call narratives and subsequent episodes, especially in Part One (1:1-8:21) emphasize renunciation of possessions and the confidence that “Just like God’s provision of manna in the wilderness for Israel, believers can trust in God’s providence.

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2. Jesus “rejected applications of the Law that were not in keeping with the Law’s liberating spirit” (p. 194; e.g., 2:23-28; 2:18-22; 7:1-23); elsewhere this is called “the essence of the Law” (see above and, further, below).
3. “Jesus’ understanding of the Law also sets the stage for his clash with the Jewish religious authorities, whom Jesus viewed as having neglected the poor” (p. 194). Hence, “His action in the Temple was an enacted parable that criticized the Temple for failing in its duty to aid those who were vulnerable and marginalized” (p. 194; 11:15-25, and 12:38-44, the contrast between “ostentatious displays of wealth and piety by the religious elites and a destitute widow who gave her last penny to the Temple” [p. 194]).
4. “As Jesus journeys to the cross, the reader witnesses that Jesus himself takes on the form of the poor” (pp. 194-95; e.g., 9:33-37, cf. 10:3-16; 10:45, cf. Phil 2:7-8; 10:17-27, cf. 9:34-35; 14:10-11).

5. "Jesus is revealed as a king not in the way of the world [exemplified by the triumphant conqueror Vespasian]; Jesus is king in his suffering and crucifixion." "He is at once both a servant and a king, a slave and a master, the afflicted and the healer, and the pilgrim and the goal of the pilgrimage" (p. 195, with special focus on 11:1-11; 10:45; 15:33-39).
6. "A community like Mark's that was composed of members mostly from the lowest ranks of society and that faced persecution would have found Jesus' message on God's concern for the poor and the dangers of material wealth to be comforting and inspiring" (p. 195).

This argument is a strong reading of Mark's Gospel, seeing it as having a consistent and pervasive concern with the poor, the hungry, and the marginalized. Not only does this reverse conventional wisdom—in that more often one thinks of Luke among the gospels for this particular ethical concern for the poor—but it also unites ethics and Christology in Mark in a quite profound way. Moses' reading insists that Mark's Christology is deeply imbued with the sensibility of the Philippians hymn (Phil 2:7-8), as well as that of Paul's 2 Cor 8:9¹: "for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sakes, though rich, he became poor, so that you might become rich through his poverty." Jesus' very form of death on the cross, Moses argues, for both Mark and as attested in Paul, marks him as a poor person whose sacrifice enriches others and alleviates their poverty, while in himself serving as an embodied condemnation of wealth. This in turn sets the model for discipleship in his name.

Professor Moses' book has many virtues. Most commendable is the very close exegetical treatment of the text of Mark, consistently cross-referencing with the narrative itself and its unfolding plot, logic, and enscripted worldview. The extensive end notes show wide reading and judicious engagement with a host of key voices in prior NT scholarship as well as independence of thought. The contextual sphere of references is most ambitious, starting with a clear and abiding commitment to situate Mark in relation first and foremost to the scriptures of Israel (the Tanak/LXX), but also a range of other comparanda along the way (e.g., Philo, Josephus, Dead Sea Scrolls, Roman historians, material culture), and some ancient Christian exegetes (e.g., Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Jerome, and John Chrysostom). The reader also encounters W.E.B. Du Bois and at least one Ghanaian proverb! The writing is clear, the argument is well sign-posted, and the assumptions on which it is built are made evident. Its topic could not be more important.

I share Professor Moses' moral conviction that materialism (=greed, acquisitiveness, self-centeredness, brazen neglect of the poor) in twenty-first century America (and elsewhere) is a critical issue, and dare also to hope with him that the pandemic might serve as a catalyst for needed change in a world in which, according to the United Nations, "720-811 million people went hungry

I share Professor Moses' moral conviction that materialism (=greed, acquisitiveness, self-centeredness, brazen neglect of the poor) in twenty-first century America (and elsewhere) is a critical issue, and dare also to hope with him that the pandemic might serve as a catalyst for needed change in a world in which, according to the United Nations, "720-811 million people went hungry in 2021."

in 2021."² The USDA reports that in 2021, 10.2% of American households were experiencing food insecurity; this amounts to some 13.5 million adults and children.³ Although food insecurity is found across all demographics in American society, it is disproportionately high among black non-Hispanic and Hispanic families as compared with white non-Hispanic families; children and families with children are much more likely to live at risk.⁴ These facts demand our attention, as Prof. Moses powerfully insists.

In terms of the main assumptions of Moses' argument, I have broad agreements especially with points 1, 5 and 6 (as enumerated above): the structure of Mark's narrative as unfolding in two parts, with the two-stage healing of Mark 8:22-26 as a hinge and open metaphor about blurred and clearing vision; the reflections on the nature of discipleship "on the way," which leads to the cross (10:32-34; cf. 8:34;); the crucifixion of Jesus being his (I would say, *ironic*) enthronement as king and Son of God; the connections between Mark and Paul;⁵ the possibility that Mark was written

2. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/food>.

3. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/key-statistics-graphics/#:~:text=Food%2Dinsecure%20households%20include%20those,at%20some%20time%20during%202021>.

4. Following the research and categories of analysis in Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh, "Household Food Security in the United States in 2021," *Economic Research Report* Number 309, September, 2022, 16-21. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/104656/err-309.pdf?v=2911.2>

5. Moses references Pauline (or Paulinist) passages to interpret Mark throughout the book, but directly addresses the question of influence or contact only near the end, regarding it as "possible" or "plausible" (p. 176). I myself would go further and argue for direct contact with Paul/Pauline tradition in Mark's Gospel (Margaret M. Mitchell, "Mark, the Longform Pauline *euangelion*," in Robert Matthew Calhoun, David P. Moessner and Tobias Nicklas, eds., *Modern and Ancient Literary Criticism of the Gospels: Continuing the Debate on*

1. As argued also in his 2018 article in *JSNT*, "Christ's Poverty and His Crucifixion in the Early Church: Paul, Poverty, and the Powers."

in Rome; its author's knowledge of the devastating end to the Roman war on Judaea in August of 70 CE with the destruction of the temple; and the deliberate comparison between Jesus and the earthly king, Caesar (unmistakable given 15:16-19, and the ensuing acclamation of the centurion in 15:39).

The very strongest points for Professor Moses' exegetical reading of Mark, in my view, are the key role of "the deception of wealth" (*hē apatē tou ploutou*) in the parable of the sower/soils (allegorical expansion in 4:19) and its deft interpretive connection with the rich man pericope in Mark 10:17-22; one might add that this would parallel the personification of the *petrōdē* ("rocky ground" in 4:5, 16) in the person of *Petros* ("Peter"; cf. 3:16)" (p. 195) and confirm the central role of the parable of the sower/soils in the entire narrative.⁶ I agree that in some sense "deception" is a kind of demonic force in Mark: "Jesus presents wealth in apocalyptic terms. It is a powerful, deceitful force that demands allegiance like a god (4:19). That is a very interesting and important insight. The theme of the necessity for the disciples to renounce possessions to follow Jesus is indeed very clearly present in the rich man's failed call story (the only one in the gospel, 10:17-22; cf. 1:16-18; 1:19-20; 2:14; 3:13-19) and the extended dialogue that follows it that amplifies the renunciations of the apostles (not only of possessions but also of relationships) and the cost of discipleship (10:23-31). That "the widow's generous offering" (as Robert Moses calls the passage—so much better than "mite"!)) is the last passage before the apocalyptic discourse and passion narrative is indeed—must be—indicative of the importance of the theme of poverty and wealth for Mark, and its connection to the death of Jesus on the cross. And the contrast between the widow in chap. 12 and the rich man in chap. 10 seems deliberate to me, as well (pp. 161-162).

In some other places (related especially to points 2 and 3) I am less convinced by the formulation of the argument: while I agree that the scriptures of Israel (the scriptures of Jesus, of Mark, and of Paul), emphasize strongly the requirement to care for the orphan and the widow and others who are poor, I am wary about stipulating that there was a single "true essence of the Law" in either the Torah/Tanak or second temple Judaism (pp. 69, 75, 78, 152, and elsewhere). I was surprised that Professor Moses did not discuss the "great commandment" pericope in Mark 12:28-34 in relation to this claim about "the essence of the Law," especially since—however one interprets it—that pericope itself gives testimony that this was a *live and debated question* among Jews in Jesus' time (and after). And I am just worried about claims of a single "true essence" of a variegated and historically re-instantiated set of religious traditions, texts, and practices, and how one might quite be able to prove it. Is this a historical claim, an ontological claim, a constructive theological claim and, if so, from what or whose vantage point?

Further (on point 3), the insistence—as a historical claim

Gospel Genre(s) [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020], 201-217).

6. So Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), 156-57, who eloquently points to the centrality of the parable in the gospel.

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about second temple Judaism—that the main responsibility or duty of the temple in Jerusalem was to provide sustenance for the poor and vulnerable⁷ seems also to me to be an overly broad generalization, on the one hand, and an incomplete one at least. The temple was a very complicated organization, a carefully choreographed physical space with a set of ritual roles and behaviors, but any account of it must reckon with its being the locus for the sacrificial cult, which gets much less attention here.⁸ In ancient depictions of the temple, such as Josephus' famous description in book 5 of *The Jewish War*, care for the poor and hungry is nowhere in sight (though the opulence of the buildings and furnishings is well on display). In regard to judgments about the main role or duty of the temple and the argument that Jesus' attitude toward the temple and its leadership was entirely negative,⁹ one wonders how to account for Mark 1:44, where Jesus tells the healed leper to go, show himself to the priest, and make the offering for his purification that Moses had commanded.¹⁰

7. E.g., p. 163: "the Temple has failed in its role of care for the marginalized"; p. 164: "What seems clear is that Jesus criticized the Temple for failing in its duty to care for the poor and vulnerable."

8. A similar question about proportionality of attention may be raised about the Dead Sea Scrolls' critiques of the current temple cult and its leadership (pp. 163-64), which can give the impression lack of care for the poor was one of the *main* reasons (without a fuller discussion of the genealogical priesthood, calendrical variations, or other issues). And yet, Prof. Moses shows he is aware of these issues ("Not only were they critical of the Temple's leadership and worship but they were also deeply skeptical of the Temple's ability to carry out its God-given mandate to care for the poor and vulnerable" [pp. 163-64]). The passage he cites, from CD 6:14-17, is apposite, but the reference to robbing the poor contains some stock invective from Isa 10:2 (as cited). Does that matter for the argument that the community at the Dead Sea repudiated the temple specifically for failing in its duty to the poor?

9. "Jesus' first temple act of disrupting trade (11:15-19) and his final temple act of sitting across from the treasury and praising a poor widow amidst ostentatious displays of wealth (12:41-44) both signal a condemnation of the Temple" (p. 168). To be sure, Prof. Moses is dealing with Jesus' time in Jerusalem; and yet, Jesus' first reference to the temple, its priesthood, and cult, is back in the Galilee in 1:44.

10. A passage not dealt with by Prof. Moses, except to insist that the leper, as with Simon in 14:3-9, was "deemed 'unclean' (1:40-42) and marginalized as a result." The connection to the temple cult—both

All textual interpretations depend upon decisions about context, both literary and historical, with part related to whole in some way by the interpreter. Prof. Moses is commendably explicit about this all throughout the book as he proceeds in his exegesis of Mark. One key instance is on the fig tree in relation to the “temple pericope” in Mark 11:15-18. I agree completely that by the sandwiching technique Mark is linking the withering of the fig tree with the impending destruction of the temple. Going further for Moses, Jesus, because he was hungry (*epeinasen* in 11:12) and gets no figs from the tree, curses the temple (with its priesthood) for failing to provide sustenance from its wealth for the poor and starving of the land. I have taken this possibility seriously (and learned from it), and yet I have some remaining doubts. Beyond the literary sandwiching of the two narratives, Prof. Moses appeals to the scripture passages from Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11 that are quoted in Mark 11:17 on the lips of Jesus, and in particular the wider literary contexts of each prophetic passage. But do those words and the prophetic sign act precisely match this critique that the temple failed the poor and hungry, specifically? For instance, why does Jesus go after the money changers rather than the priests themselves, or the temple treasury? How might the action of stopping people from carrying vessels through the temple fit this? And doesn't “house of prayer for all the nations (*pasin tois ethnēsin*)” for Mark pick up on Isa 56:8, that the God of Israel will join proselyte Gentiles to Israel? In terms of Mark, doesn't that connect with the rending of the temple curtain in 15:38, indicating that the God of Israel is now accessible to *Gentiles*, rather than to a generalized group of poor and “outcasts”¹¹ alluded to more generally here as

in the instruction by Jesus and in the temple's role for the leper—is surely an important piece of Mark's view on the temple (as is Mark 14:57-58; 15:29, which we might also wish to discuss! [cf. Moses, p. 177 n. 26]).

11. Moses argues that “the contexts of the Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11 quotations [in Mark 11:17] shed further light on our discussion.” “Both of the passages Jesus quotes in his action against the Temple concern the house of God as a place where ‘outcasts,’ those who are marginalized and oppressed, those who seek nourishment from their hunger, can find relief” (p. 140). The exegetical conclusion is “... for God is a God who gathers ‘the outcasts’ to Israel (Isa 56:8). Once justice has been established and maintained in conformity with God's inbreaking presence, then all of God's children, irrespective of ethnicity, nationality, disability—will pray together in God's house. Having declared God's plan to gather the outcasts into his presence, the prophecy turns on the leaders of Israel ...” (p. 139). One may question some pieces of this complex contextual argument. For instance, it is true that in the KJV line of translation, all the way down to NRSVue (2022), the clause in Isa 56:8 is translated with the English word “outcasts” (“of Israel”). But the Hebrew in Isa 56:8, *nid hē yisraēl*, means more literally “those who have been cast out,” i.e., the exiles to Babylon after the assault of Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE (and note that the construct chain names these as “those among Israel who have been cast out”). Here JPS translates “dispersed of Israel” (similarly NIV: “exiles of Israel”), which is the understanding also of the Septuagint, *tois diesparmenous Israēl*, “those of Israel who have been scattered.” Hence, I think perhaps too much is being pressed on the English word “outcast” as a stand-in for any number of poor, oppressed, and marginalized people, when the Isaiah text has a more specific referent of “exiles.” But I hope this instance of disagreement also shows the intricacy of Prof.

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“nations/Gentiles”?

Prof. Moses' exegesis in Chap. 5 of his book ends with the very important scene of Jesus' anointment by the unnamed woman in Mark 14:3-9, and an allusion also to the betrayal by Judas—for material gain—in 14:10-11. I must confess I wish this book had one more chapter (something I don't always say about books I read!), treating the rest of Mark, including the final meal, the agony in the garden, the arrest, the trials, the verdicts, the mockings, the crucifixion, the taunting from those looking on, the death, the centurion, the women, the burial, and, of course, those various endings. I would like to hear Prof. Moses work through Mark's passion narrative according to his thesis about Jesus dying as the poor one for the rest of the world's poor and indigent. How precisely Mark scripts this would be so important to the case, connecting also, of course, as Prof. Moses rightly did earlier, to Mark 8:34 and the call to the cruciform life (so Pauline! [cf. Gal 2:19; 6:17; 2 Cor 4:10, etc.]).

A rich and intricate book such as this raises many intense and significant questions about its implications. Space constraints allow for just one consideration: what particular audience might this book reach, and to what ends? The final sentence of the monograph reads: “The power of this message [= “Jesus makes it possible for rich and poor to come together in their shared humanity and create communities of care where each person's need is met within the community”] endures and serves as a warning, encouragement, and guide for followers of Jesus in various communities, including in our time” (p. 196). Who needs to be convinced of this, and what should they do next?

I offer here one concrete illustration. As a student of biblical interpretation, I have for some time tracked the role of appeals to the Bible in Congressional debates on SNAP (The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), popularly known as “food stamps.” Often such debates become canonical cross fires, with Matthew 25:31-46 and 2 Thessalonians 3:10 launched from the pro and con sides at one another. How might Prof. Moses' provocative reading of Mark might be a part of such debates? This is indeed a live and very current issue. On October 31, 2022, an organization that gives Bible studies to members of Congress,¹² Capitol Ministries¹³

Moses' contextualizing readings.

12. All the sponsors listed on their webpage are GOP: 34 Congresspersons and 12 Senators <https://capmin.org/ministries/washington-dc/senate-sponsors/>

13. I have analyzed Drollinger's response to the onset of the

headed by Ralph Drollinger, released a Bible study titled, “Five Biblical Characteristics that Define a Good Person [Proverbs].”¹⁴ While agreeing that in principle a good person should help the poor, Drollinger begins by stipulating that “However, it is important first to distinguish between the genuinely bereft, i.e., those who are *poor* and want to change their lot in life, and bums. A bum is someone whom Scripture describes as slothful or lazy (cf. Proverbs 19:15) and doesn’t want to change his lot in life.” And then comes the predictable appeal to 2 Thess 3:10 and the conclusion: “No amount of personal or governmental programs will ever eradicate those who struggle to attain the basic necessities of life. Accordingly, the complete abolition of the lowest socio-economic class in society is an unrealistic objective.” Again, some usual biblical verses appear in support, such as Deut 15:11 (“the poor will never cease to be in the land,” which is perhaps alluded to in Mark 14:7, and the Matthean parallel in 26:11 [“for you will always have the poor with you”]). Also, we are told, Romans 13:1-8, regarded as “the job description of the State,” makes no reference at all to “welfare responsibilities.” Drollinger does think the Bible mandates care for the poor, but it is to be done by individuals and by churches (not the “distant State”), especially since, he opines, “In many cases the real needs of the poor are spiritual, not economical, and their plight stems from their character, not their environment.”

How would Professor Moses (and I, or others) respond to this, both exegetically—since Drollinger insists that he is just doing Bible study—and programmatically—given that his ministry targets American politicians at the highest level of our government? How might Robert Moses’ interpretation of Mark influence this national conversation? I dearly hope it will!

pandemic in “How Republican Legislators Get Schooled on the Bible” (April 6, 2020): <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/how-republican-politicians-get-schooled-bible>

14. <https://capmin.org/five-biblical-characteristics-define-good-person/> The following quotations are from this webpage Bible study.