Bonnie Roos
Austin College
Sherman, TX 75090

To suggest that R. S. Sugirtharajah’s *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (2001) and *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (2002) are important books of “hybrid” genre is at once to acknowledge Sugirtharajah’s success in advancing the causes of postcolonial criticism in biblical interpretation and to observe the uneasiness, the disjointedness, of the proximity in which the two subjects continue to lie. Perhaps this is because, as Sugirtharajah argues in his second text, “there has been a remarkable unwillingness to mention imperialism as shaping the contours of biblical scholarship” (*Postcolonial Criticism*, 25). If so, these two recent works—which borrow greatly from each other and function as two volumes—make great strides in redressing this oversight.

We turn first to *The Bible and the Third World*: in chapter 1, “Before the Empire: The Bible as a Marginal and a Minority Text,” Sugirtharajah contextualizes the Bible prior to its introduction to Europe, citing its influence as one among many religious documents.
He describes the Bible’s introduction to India through the simplified text of the Peshitta and the rare, untranslated Syriac version. In a discussion of the Bible’s relationship to China, Sugirtharajah demonstrates how selected portions from the New Testament introduced by the Nestorians were translated and modified: the Monument text, for example, contains Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian references and omits the death of Christ. Thus, Sugirtharajah emphasizes, “the Christian Gospel was seen as validating the ancient social customs of the Chinese—loyalty to the Emperor and fidelity to family” (25). African Donatists, in this account, were able to use the text of the Bible to understand their oppression and to evoke God even as they bypassed the church officials who were also their persecutors. As Sugirtharajah concludes, prior to the alignment of Christianity with Europe, the theology introduced in the Bible often had to be altered in order to signify, was usually known only through small portions rather than the complete work, was understood through liturgy or as a mystical object rather than its text, and was one among many compatible religious documents.

Chapter 2, “White Men Bearing Gifts: Diffusion of the Bible and Scriptural Imperialism,” begins with the Bible’s translation from Latin into English, the British and Foreign Bible Society’s mass distribution of the Bible (at or below cost), the difficult translation of the Bible into foreign languages, and the call for British missionaries. The bulk of the chapter testifies to the Bible’s use as a colonial tool; Sugirtharajah emphasizes the ways in which the Bible was interpreted to “inculcate” European values and customs, and biblical Scriptures were drastically altered to “encroach” upon cultural histories, so that to explain “sin” among the Panare, for example, the Bible was rewritten to make the natives responsible for Christ’s crucifixion. Alternately, local nonauthoritarian leadership might need to be “displaced” before the Bible’s mores could be “properly” understood; through “analogies and implication,” the violence of colonialism could be explained and defended as just punishment for sinful, ignorant lives. Instead of native oral traditions, written communication was privileged, and whereas belief in the Bible was confirmed as historically accurate, other religious tests and artifacts were dismissed as superstitious and inauthentic.

Despite this exploitation, “resistant” biblical readings by colonized people were also possible. Sugirtharajah exposes subversive techniques and recovers several important but overlooked critics in chapter 3, “Reading Back: Resistance as a Discursive Practice.” Sugirtharajah investigates allegory and allusion as activating biblical texts and creating intimacy with the reader. He points to former slave Olaudah Equiano and Native American William Apess as writers who employ those techniques to create historical connections between their own peoples and the biblical Jewish peoples. These works claim, Sugirtharajah argues, a democratization of all humanity before God, the establishment of a biblical heritage, and the condemnation of colonial violence. Other
writers, he explains, connected cultural religious texts and rituals to the Bible, as with K. N. Banerjea’s suggestion, for example, that Hindu texts were commendable drafts of the Bible. Sugirtharajah suggests that other forms of “resistance” came from unusual interpretations of the Bible, such as that of Pandita Ramabai, who was outspoken in her conviction of the Bible as metaphor, expressed distaste for the mediation of the church in interpreting belief, and advocated a new Marathi vernacular Bible that was accessible to her community. Finally, Sugirtharajah speaks of the Bible in African Bantu churches as a tool for insurrection, but one that was dismissed as unreliable when it challenged Bantu cultural practices.

Resistance occurred not only on the side of the colonized, Sugirtharajah suggests in “The Colonialist as a Contentious Reader: Colenso and His Hermeneutics.” In a chapter devoted to the ideas of Bishop John William Colenso, Sugirtharajah explores the dissident potential of the “principled” colonialist. Responding to questions asked by his Zulu translator, Colenso discovered himself to be skeptical of both the historicity of the Bible and, in parts, its ethical message. As Sugirtharajah recounts, Colenso had trouble reconciling a loving God with “depictions of God inflicting punishment on hapless people” (114) and believed that the biblical God was a figure of love. In response, Colenso tried to demonstrate that those portions of the Bible he deemed ethically repellent were historically inaccurate—a move calculated to reinforce his credibility among the Zulus. Despite his view of the natives as childlike, Colenso believed that God was visible to all peoples, and that his words were not confined to a single set of books; this supposed pervasiveness perhaps validated Colenso’s use of “Zulu concepts … to illuminate the Pauline description of the double nature in humankind” (126). Sugirtharajah credits Colenso particularly because he used the Bible to critique the violence and inhumanity of “civilized” colonial practices.

In a return to issues raised previously, in chapter 5, “Textual Pedlars: Distributing Salvation—Colporteurs and Their Portable Bibles,” Sugirtharajah examines the English and Foreign Bible Society’s salespeople, or colporteurs, as their work intersected with other forms of colonialism. These outwardly pious, dedicated men and women recounted their experiences selling or exchanging low-cost Bibles throughout the world. As Sugirtharajah notes, “the simultaneous arrival of colonialism and the Bible” meant that the two projects often functioned together (145). In Sugirtharajah’s description, colporteurs used the Bible to justify to natives England’s national power, while to the English, they told stories of how natives came to faith by reading mere fragments of the Bible. Though, Sugirtharajah suggests, the colporteurs did not encourage interrogation of biblical texts, they described those people interested in the Bible as inquiring and thoughtful, while deeming those uninterested as “proud,” “careless,” “profligate” (152). Colporteurs noted that many people regarded the Bible as a talisman rather than as
Scripture to be read. As Sugirtharajah concludes, despite their efforts to be above politics, the colporteurs worked with other kinds of colonizers to instill love of the Bible, pride in the empire, and gratefulness to the Bible Society and the English for disseminating it.

In chapter 6, “Desperately Seeking the Indigene: Nativism and Vernacular Hermeneutics,” Sugirtharajah examines the strategies used for translating and integrating Christian thought into native cultures through “vernacular hermeneutics.” He explains the effort to draw “conceptual correspondences” between two religious traditions, as Colenso had done by incorporating Zulu ideas to explain biblical texts. The use of “popular culture” provided another useful method for making the Bible accessible and relevant. “Narratival enrichments” connoted the use of similar stories from two different traditions but allowed for the story outside the Bible to complicate and expand the meaning of the traditional biblical story. “Performantial parallels” describes commonalities in the religious rituals between two cultural traditions, such as the idea of sacrifice. For Sugirtharajah, vernacular hermeneutics served as a corrective to rationalist modes of interpretation and allowed Christian interpreters to gain credibility and cultivate deeper contact with their own people. He speaks of it as a positive force when pluralistic, but suggests that it had hegemonic potential and encouraged Christian triumphalism.

Sugirtharajah’s penultimate chapter, “Engaging Liberation: Texts as a Vehicle of Emancipation,” focuses primarily on Latin America and outlines what he calls “liberation hermeneutics,” philosophies that promoted active colonial resistance. Sugirtharajah outlines three phases of liberation hermeneutics. The first phase is the incarnation of a philosophy that acknowledges the injustices associated with poverty, in which the Bible serves to advocate a universalizing discourse of liberation. Sugirtharajah uses Gustavo Gutiérrez’s Job and Elsa Tamez’s Paul as examples: they illustrate God’s love for the poor, define sin as attached to the privileged, generate hope in the search for justice, and connect individual suffering with societal suffering. The second phase is the reading of the Bible by untrained readers to create a grass-roots Christian community, to recover the Bible from its “spiritual” meaning so that it becomes responsive to the immediate needs of that community, and to activate the people. The third phase is the emergence of minority voices victimized by “both internal and external forces,” including “dalits, women, burakumin, [and] indigenous people” (206). In this third category Sugirtharajah emphasizes several writers who reveal oppressive structures within the text of the Bible.

Sugirtharajah uses his final chapter, “Postcolonializing Biblical Interpretation,” to define postcolonialism as the most recent manifestation of resistant writing and to lay out a prospectus for postcolonialism’s use in biblical studies. Such an interrogation, as Sugirtharajah sees it, would include unveiling ideological and cultural assumptions of Bible critics (so that we would consider Esther a Persian woman and a member of a
specific class, for example); engaging in reconstructive readings of biblical texts (the confrontation of Elijah with Baal might be read as a complex issue of intermingling communities); examining colonial and metropolitan interpretations (to involve a rereading of critical studies of Jesus and the tribute money, for instance); and investigating interpretations that contest colonial interests and concerns. Sugirtharajah also proposes the need for an intersection between postcolonial biblical scholarship and liberation hermeneutics.

I see this earlier work as defining Sugirtharajah’s commitment to postcolonial theory particularly through his connection of religious/cultural imperialism with economic colonization and in his recovery of minority writers and perspectives. His methodology in *The Bible and the Third World* is more consciously articulated and scrutinized in his later text, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, where he speculates on the possible approaches biblical scholars might take.

In chapter 1 of *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, “Charting the Aftermath: A Review of Postcolonial Criticism,” Sugirtharajah presents postcolonial criticism as a new methodology for biblical scholars. He introduces postcolonial criticism’s history, highlighting Edward Said’s “orientalism” and Homi Bhabha’s “hybridity” as particularly useful tools. In evaluating this history, Sugirtharajah points to postcolonialism’s traditional emphasis on nineteenth-century “colonialism.” He implies that this overly narrow focus is a place where biblical scholars might contribute to an expanding discourse on the topic.

For its own part, as Sugirtharajah demonstrates in chapter 2, “Redress, Regeneration, Redemption: A Survey of Biblical Interpretation,” that the Bible has been involved in discussions of colonialism almost since the inception of Western expansionism. Sugirtharajah systematizes the history of biblical interpretation as it intersects with various colonial contexts. In what he describes as “dissident” and “resistant” responses to colonization, Sugirtharajah provides examples of critiques advanced by missionary and subaltern writers who saw the Bible used unjustly to defend colonial slaughter or oppression of innocents. He demonstrates how the Bible was appropriated by subaltern writers to intertwine biblical ideologies with those of the colonized culture in what he calls “heritagist” readings. Through “liberationist” and “nationalist” readings, Sugirtharajah conceives of the Bible as a force of communalism and as instructive in the democratic and humanitarian aspirations of postindependence governments. Finally, through what he describes as “dissentient” readings, Sugirtharajah investigates the role of subgroups within postcolonial criticism—especially third world feminists and dalits—in this critique. Not only does this chapter “set the scene for postcolonial biblical interpretation” as he suggests (5), but it also implies that there is a precedent for postcolonial studies
already implicit in biblical scholarship if we would only put our resources into recovering it.

The possibilities for this kind of scholarship abound, as Sugirtharajah reveals in chapter 3, “Coding and Decoding: Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation.” Sugirtharajah lays out several directions for postcolonial criticism of the Bible, which are united by one “singular aim”: “to put colonialism at the centre of biblical scholarship” (74). In beginning this chapter, Sugirtharajah notes certain exoticizing and condescending practices (what Said calls “orientalism”) in the teaching of the Bible to subaltern peoples and borrows four terms from Stuart Hall to introduce a series of readerly responses. Sugirtharajah introduces the idea of “hegemonic” readings that reveal structures within Bible stories that allow for claims to domination—the defense of King Solomon’s assumption of power, for example. He demonstrates “professional” readings as attentive to resistance (and lack thereof) from within the system, generally ascribed by Sugirtharajah to writers and scribes who transformed verbal edict into law and were thereby able sometimes to create reforms. “Negotiated” readings still confirm the hegemonic powers, but alter details to speak to a variety of issues, as in the case where Gospel stories told by more than one witness maintain different relationships to “empire.” Sugirtharajah uses the idea of “oppositional” reading strategies to recognize various covert methods of marginalized protest (silence, deception, sabotage). Anomalous, but useful in this section, are further suggested readings and potential course assignments. Sugirtharajah goes on to consider briefly various aspects of Christ’s life and its relationship to colonialism. He provides two unique, oppositional readings of the Markan Gerasene demoniac using postcolonial critical methods, and he posits visual representation as an overlooked area that offers potential for postcolonial critical inquiry. He argues that the contextualization of early Christian “confessional” writings is imperative to understanding the relationship of their project to empire. As he insists, “Subjecting the Christian Bible to a postcolonial scrutiny does not reinforce its authority, but emphasizes its contradictory content” (101).

As such, postcolonial scrutiny allows one to create dialectic in the Bible, rather than certainty. In chapter 4, “Convergent Trajectories? Liberation Hermeneutics and Postcolonial Biblical Criticism,” Sugirtharajah distinguishes this aspect of postcolonialism’s project from “liberation hermeneutics,” though he advocates for their alliance. Liberation hermeneutics reflects a method of interpreting the Bible actively to affect the real conditions of poverty. Sugirtharajah returns to Gustavo Gutiérrez’s On Job and Elsa Tamez’s Amnesty of Grace as exemplars of liberation hermeneutics. Their cause is of importance to postcolonial scholars because it takes marginalized peoples seriously, but, as Sugirtharajah points out, it universalizes the issues. He explains that the project of liberation hermeneutics “does not preclude reifying the poor, and it functions within the
Enlightenment paradigm of dichotomous thinking—rich/poor, oppressed/oppressor, and have/have-nots. Moreover, it is prone to romanticize the poor” (115). Therefore, Sugirtharajah argues, it reenacts the very structures and oppressions it hopes to evade. Postcolonialism, by Sugirtharajah’s account, provides a needed corrective to these issues. A more developed reading of the way the two projects might work together successfully is discussed in chapter 8 of *The Bible and the Third World*.

Fascinating to me, as a postcolonial literary critic, is the amount of attention Sugirtharajah devotes to issues of the English home front, as he does once more in chapter 5, “The Version on Which the Sun Never Sets: The English Bible and Its Authorizing Tendencies,” which describes the Bible as a tool and manifestation of British Empire. He links the creation and rise of the King James (or Authorized) Version of the Bible to a project of English nationalism. As he explains, this Bible, written in vernacular English and inexpensive enough for almost anyone to purchase, functioned to endorse the power of the monarchy over that of the church (and of English Protestantism over that of Roman Catholicism) by giving people access to God’s word without the intermediary of church officials. He continues, suggesting that this version, translated into foreign languages by the British and Foreign Bible Society, was used not only to “civilize” native cultures (and used in English to teach them English), but also by the monarchy to confirm its own rule over its own subjects. Such an unusual juxtaposition suggests, though he does not say it directly, that British domination over colonized countries resonated in limited ways with its domination over its own people. Such a claim would mitigate the potential disconnect between this chapter and others in the book, though it might also bespeak a problematic universalism that Sugirtharajah criticizes elsewhere.

In chapter 6, “Blotting the Master’s Copy: Locating Bible translations,” Sugirtharajah considers the complications surrounding the translation of the Bible into the various languages of the colonized. These translations, as Sugirtharajah points out, enforced vernacular standardization of languages, eliding dialects and idioms. He gives examples of phrases and ideas that posed particular difficulties to translators. He also indexes particular biblical passages about “justice,” or land possession, and the variety of ways they might be and have been translated. Sugirtharajah argues in this chapter for an Indian methodology whereby numerous translations are better than an “authentic” one. In a persuasive moment, he explains an injustice of Western approaches to translation: “In the process of translating, nonbiblical languages should be allowed to interrogate and even radically disrupt biblical languages. Biblical languages must be willing to be affected by the ‘other’ rather than merely affecting the ‘other’ ” (173).

In his final chapter, “Hermeneutics in Transit: Diaspora and Interpretation,” Sugirtharajah advocates for what he calls “diasporic hermeneutics,” which speaks to a state of physical
and cultural “homelessness” resulting from any number of political or socioeconomic circumstances. He traces the root of the term “diaspora” through Jewish biblical “homelessness,” and suggests that a methodology of diaspora would be possible only through a “hybrid” system of interpretation, particularly exemplified by Gandhi. As Sugirtharajah suggests, simplifying and, I think, optimistically spinning Bhabha’s sense of the term, “The postcolonial notion of hybridity is not about the dissolution of differences but about renegotiating the structure of power built on differences…. Hybridity is a two-way process in which both parties are interactive so that something new is created” (191). As a “discursive practice,” he goes on, “hybridity is concerned with the fluid and shifting base of cultures and their interaction” (194).

The great strength of Sugirtharajah’s ambitious books *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* and *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* is their breadth: the sheer number of geographies and moments he investigates and the arenas of biblical scholarship he exposes to postcolonial critique is impressive and should serve as a rallying call to postcolonial biblical scholarship. This strength is also at times a weakness. I find Sugirtharajah to devote disproportionate space to the role of the colonizers—England, Colenso, and the British and Foreign Bible Society—instead of expanding on the very critics he works to recover. Because he cannot spend the time to enrich his readings of colonized responses to the Bible in general overviews, they are instructive but cursory, and they lack the historical context upon which a traditional postcolonial scholar might well insist. Finally, Sugirtharajah seems torn between his role as surveyor and critic. He works to present postcolonial criticism as having many valuable applications and venues for Bible scholars and yet finds himself more persuaded by some methodologies than by others. When Sugirtharajah invests in a particular theory, as he does in the last two chapters of his second book, he appears almost unaware that these are his most compelling discussions. Certainly, however, Sugirtharajah has created a hybrid methodology. As indications of the possibilities of postcolonial criticism in biblical interpretation, both are auspicious works.