
Wealth and Poverty in Apocalyptic Tension: Reflections on Robert Ewusie Moses, *Jesus and Materialism in the Gospel of Mark*

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I am pleased to comment on Dr. Moses' most recent book.¹ I begin by picking some nits and will end with a few general opinions.

I

Let us turn, first, to the pericope of Jesus' engagement with a prosperous petitioner in Mark 10:17–22.² In Dr. Moses' view "[W]ealth is a powerful force requiring a certain kind of allegiance that will keep people from the trust and dependency on God that traveling on the way demands."³ That reading, with which I agree, jibes with Mark 4:19: the peril of riches, a delight in which chokes the word.⁴ Yet Mark's typical ellipticism leaves exegesis of 10:22 open to other possibilities, as scholars as old as Clement of Alexandria recognized.⁵ While most interpreters, myself included, assume that the rich man's dour exit is tantamount to refusal of discipleship, in fact Mark is not explicit on that point.⁶ Jesus' pronouncement in 10:23 identifies the difficulty of the wealthy to enter the kingdom, not its ultimate impossibility since, "With God, all things are possible" (Mark 10:27).⁷ Dr. Moses concedes

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that this pericope presents "a difficult conundrum," "a difficult tension in the text": "So the conundrum remains."⁸ 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"?⁹ The choice between God and mammon is unequivocal in Q (Luke 16:13b = Matt 6:24b.). Mark seems to indicate this¹⁰ but never so plainly specifies the motives of Jesus' pious interlocutor.

Second: the disruption in the temple in Mark 11:15–19. As we all know, this episode is a genuine mare's nest. Suffice it to say that Dr. Moses demonstrates awareness of the interpretive controversy—we might style it as "the Sanders/Evans debate"—and sides firmly with Craig Evans: namely, that several Jewish texts

1. The following remarks were presented to the Gospel of Mark Group of the Society of Biblical Literature, meeting in Denver, Colorado, on November 20, 2022.

2. Robert Moses, *Jesus and Materialism in the Gospel of Mark: Traveling Light on the Way* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London: Rowman & Littlefield/Lanham Books/Fortress Academic Press, 2022), 106–110.

3. Moses, *Jesus and Materialism*, 109.

4. Moses, *Jesus and Materialism*, 107.

5. *Quis dives salvetur* 9–16, discussed by Andrew D. Clarke, "Do Not Judge Who Is Worthy and Unworthy: Clement's Warning Not to Speculate about the Rich Man Young Man's Response (Mark 10:17–31)," *JSNT* 31 (2009): 447–68, N.B. 450–51. Moses cites both Clement and Clarke before dismissing their proposals' cogency (*Jesus and Materialism*, 129 n. 80).

6. Luke, likely one of Mark's earliest interpreters, leaves the rich ruler's ultimate decision even more vague (18:23–24).

7. While members of the twelve may not have had "great possessions" (κτη/ματα πολλα/), Peter's protest, "We have left everything and followed you" (10:28), may be taken at face value. Jesus never contradicts him and tacitly concurs (10:29–30).

8. Moses, *Jesus and Materialism*, 109, 110.

9. Moses, *Jesus and Materialism*, 109.

10. Whereas the call to discipleship in Mark is repeatedly αθοκο-λου/θει μου (1:17; 2:14; 8:34; 10:21), Jesus' questioner moves away (αθοπη=λθεν: 10:22), apparently rejecting discipleship.

“suggest the belief that the Messiah would one day purge Jerusalem of corrupt leaders, a belief Jesus may have held.”¹¹ Wherein lay their corruption? Their disregard of the needy. “Jesus saw in the Temple a symbol of enormous wealth . . . [which] benefitted only a few associated with the Temple.”¹² Given this book’s thesis, Moses’ deduction is as predictable as it is convenient. He acknowledges E. P. Sanders’ alternative—that Jesus was not attacking priestly abuses but symbolizing the temple’s destruction¹³—but never engages it, much less refutes it. Sanders may be wrong, but his points remain worth pondering. “If [Jesus] actually explicitly opposed one of the main institutions of Judaism, he kept it secret from his disciples. . . . If Jesus were a religious reformer, . . . bent on correcting ‘abuse’ and ‘present practice,’ we should hear charges of immorality, dishonesty and corruption directed *against the priests*. But such charges are absent from the Gospels . . . , and that is not the thrust of the action in the temple. On the contrary, the attack was against the trade which is necessary for sacrifices. . . .”¹⁴ Mark (and only Mark) asserts that Jesus prohibited *anyone* to carry *anything* through the temple (Mark 11:16). Before entering its precinct Jesus discovered, not rotten figs, but no figs at all (11:12–13), then declaring the tree’s interminable sterility. Even if Sanders’ interpretation fails and Mark’s Jesus symbolically shut down the temple’s cultic activity, his reason for doing so is never articulated beyond the abrogation of parochialism: that the temple be “a house of prayer for all the nations” (11:17; cf. Isa 2:2–4; 19:23–25).

Third: Caesar’s coin (Mark 12:13–17). “Give back to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (12:17).¹⁵ Let’s leave aside the implication that those able to pay poll taxes have not divested themselves of all wherewithal. A larger question hovers over Dr. Moses’ attempt to interpret Jesus’ quizzical directive by way of the parable of the wicked tenants (12:1–12) and the triennial tithe stipulated in Deuteronomy 26:12–13.¹⁶ This is a convoluted argument, resisting concise summary. It arrives at this conclusion: “the only way to survive Caesar’s costly rule is by turning the vineyard into the ‘sacred portion’ set aside for God for care of the poor and marginalized. In this way, the people of the land effectively counter the effects of Caesar’s rule by being a caring community as God intended.” Such care boils down to survival, “without entering into a brutal war that would destroy the land and its people.”¹⁷ This is an ingenious construal. Is it plausible? I am not yet persuaded, in large measure because it requires interpolation into Mark 12:13–17, not only of

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Deuteronomy 26, but also a profusion of other Pentateuchal texts to which Mark never refers.¹⁸ Moreover, I am unable to discern how Dr. Moses’ subsidiary inferences gel. If, as he proposes, the “things of Caesar” comprise “violence, wealth, power, self-interest, honor, idolatry, and oppression,”¹⁹ how can Jesus in Mark advocate that such are Caesar’s due for his disciples to pay?

A thread may run through these pericopae. Mark’s moral attitude toward wealth and poverty is a function of the evangelist’s theology, which situates Jesus and his disciples in apocalyptic tension. Whether we characterize it as the strain between a cosmic–dualistic canopy and forensic responsibility (thus, John Riches)²⁰ or (with Cédric Fischer) a *pôle christologique* and a *pôle anthropologique*,²¹ I find in Mark’s depiction of discipleship a tragic aspect, correlative with Jesus’ own tragic destiny. Traveling light on the way of a crucified Messiah proves arduous in this Gospel, because the disciple is crucified between the summit of faithful aspirations and the pit of demonic assaults.²² At times Dr. Moses seems inclined to relax this tension, to resolve contesting forces within Mark and their inevitably contradictory interpretations. If he continues his study of relief from materialism in the other Gospels, it would be interesting to observe the degree to which Mark stands apart from Matthew, Luke, and John, owing to their differently inflected apocalyptic and christological tendencies.

11. Moses, *Jesus and Materialism*, 144, citing Craig A. Evans, “Jesus’ Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?” *CBQ* 51 (1989): 237–70 (180 n. 54). In n. 55 Moses identifies the passages on which Evans bases his case.

12. Citing T. Menahot 13:22B–D (late second century C.E.; *Jesus and Materialism*, 181 n. 62).

13. Moses, *Jesus and Materialism*, 144; cf. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 61–76.

14. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 66, 67.

15. Moses’ translation (*Jesus and Materialism*, 149).

16. Moses, *Jesus and Materialism*, 155.

17. Moses, *Jesus and Materialism*, 155.

18. Exod 23:10–11; Lev 19:9–10; 23:22; 25:11; Deut 24:17–21 (Moses, *Jesus and Materialism*, 155, 185 n. 111).

19. Moses, *Jesus and Materialism*, 155, 156.

20. *Conflicting Mythologies: Identity Formation in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew*. SNTW (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000).

21. *Les Disciples dans l’Évangile de Marc: Une grammaire théologique*, EB n. s. 57 (Paris: Gabalda, 2007).

22. Most poignantly uttered by the father of the epileptic child (Mark 9:24).

II

That said, Dr. Moses' monograph is a work of merit. Unless memory fails me, this study is the first to be concentrated on the subject of materialism in Mark since that of Fernando Belo's *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*, published in French nearly fifty years ago.²³ Although Moses never cites Belo's work, they share some comparable concerns. Both pay serious attention to Mark's economic and social setting, reminding us that a majority of the inhabitants of imperial Rome—by one classicist's estimate, about 65% of a population somewhere between fifty and sixty million—lived on death's brink almost every day of their lives.²⁴ Both Belo and Moses locate Jesus' ministry and its narration by Mark at the volatile intersection of variegated Judaism and imperial heavy-handedness. In different ways both scholars present the Markan Jesus in conflict with the priestly elite, Zealotry, and alternative juxtapositions of Torah. Both read Mark as a document invested in confronting religious and political powers on behalf of the powerless. Moses offers the better analysis by far: securely anchored in Greco-Roman, patristic, and especially Jewish sources, his book is free of Belo's Marxist preoccupations with class-struggles and modes of production as well as Belo's enchantment by Roland Barthes' structuralist semiotics. Simply put: Dr. Moses writes clearly and never confuses Mark with Marx. One may disagree with some of Moses' conclusions, but I cannot recall any that are downright preposterous. Of Belo the same cannot be said, which may explain why his innovative volume has fallen into obscurity.

III

I conclude with two commendations. First, alongside M. J. P. O'Connor's monograph, *The Moral Life According to Mark*, also published in 2022,²⁵ Dr. Moses rightly extrapolates the Second Gospel's moral discourse from its theological commitments. Second, while prescinding from homiletical observations, Moses' reading of Mark challenges the death-dealing avarice in which our culture is saturated, summoning a timid church to recover its voice and call out our own pleonecīai (Mark 7:22).

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23. *Lecture materialiste de l'évangile de Marc: Récit-Pratique-Ideologie* (Paris: Cerf, 1974); ET Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981).

24. Robert Knapp, *Invisible Romans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 103.

25. LNTS 667 (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2022).