



# The Bible and the Third World

Precolonial, Colonial  
and Postcolonial  
Encounters

R. S. SUGIRTHARAJAH

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This innovative study moves briskly but comprehensively through three phases of the Third World's encounter with the Bible – precolonial, colonial and postcolonial. It recounts the remarkable story of how an inaccessible and marginal book in the ancient Churches of India, China and North Africa became an important tool in the hands of both colonizer and colonized; how it has been reclaimed and interrogated in the postcolonial world; and how it is now being reread by various indigenes, Native Americans, dalits and women.

Drawing on substantial exegetical examples, Sugirtharajah examines reading practices ranging from the vernacular to liberation and the newly emerging postcolonial criticism. His study emphasizes the often overlooked biblical reflections of people such as Equiano and Ramabai as well as better-known contemporaries like Gutiérrez and Tamez. Partly historical and partly hermeneutical, the volume will provide invaluable insights into the Bible in the Third World for students and interested general readers.

R. S. SUGIRTHARAJAH is Reader in Biblical Hermeneutics at the University of Birmingham. Dr Sugirtharajah is author of *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism* (1999) and has edited and contributed to a number of volumes including: *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* (2000), *Vernacular Hermeneutics* (1999), *Postcolonial Bible* (1998) and *Voices from the Margin* (1995 and 1991). He won the Catholic Press Association Book Award for *Voices from the Margin*.



# THE BIBLE AND THE THIRD WORLD

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Postcolonial Encounters*

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## *Introduction*

Along with gunboats, opium, slaves and treaties, the Christian Bible became a defining symbol of European expansion. The underlying purpose of this volume is to trace how the Christian Bible, the ur text of European culture, as Stephen Prickett calls it, has been transmitted, received, appropriated and even subverted by Third World people. It narrates the arrival of the Bible in precolonial days, through to its appropriation in the postcolonial context, both by the colonizer and colonized.

Some of the organizing terms in the volume may cause uneasiness and anxiety, hence they need elaboration and explanation. Firstly, the use of 'Third World' in the title: ever since the term gained currency in the public domain, invigorating discussions have been going on regarding its value and limitation. It was introduced by the French economist and demographer, Alfred Sauvy. His intention was to bring out two aspects – the idea of exclusion, and the aspiration of Third World people. He saw in that class of commoners the Third Estate of the French Revolution, which not only suggested exclusion but also stood for the idea of revolutionary potential. However, Sauvy did not see the Third Estate as being in a numerical hierarchy, below the French aristocracy and the clergy, but as being 'excluded from its proper role in the world by two other worlds'.<sup>1</sup> His contention was that 'the Third World has, like the Third Estate, been ignored and despised and it too wants to be something'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kofi Buenor Hadjor, *Dictionary of Third World Terms* (London, Penguin Books, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

At a time when the world is becoming increasingly globalized, with the dismantling of the socialist experiment and the apparent success of the market economy, a place for the Third World may appear redundant. However, naming of the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific has been problematic, and has gone through different processes. In the earlier days, when Europeans were carving up the continents of these peoples, words such as 'primitive', 'depraved races', 'savages', and 'inferior' were freely applied. Later, after these countries gained independence, a new vocabulary was introduced – 'under-developed', 'least developed' and 'low income group nations'. What such descriptions suggested, at the worst, was racist and paternalist; they also hinted that these countries had to be civilized and developed in order to emulate and measure up to the expectations of the West. At the height of the cold war, Mao Zedong, the late Chinese leader, devised his own hierarchy of world order. For him, the First World included the superpowers which dominated international relations – the USA and Russia (at least until now). The Second World consisted of the industrially developed nations who were part of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The Third World consisted of economically worse-off countries. In certain circles the term 'two-thirds' is mooted as a possible option. The trouble with this term is that it gives the impression that these people occupy and own a vast amount of space, but it does not disclose the fact that they neither own, control nor have access to its resources. More importantly, the term does not sufficiently capture the helplessness or vulnerability of the people. Recently, without rejecting the existence of the Third World, some have gone on to postulate a Fourth World. When speaking about the indigenous people of the Americas, Gordon Brotherston revived the *Mappa Mundi's* description of the Americas as the Fourth World, to describe the status and identity of Native Americans.<sup>3</sup> Similarly Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner

<sup>3</sup> See his *Book of the Fourth World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 1–6. According to *Mappa Mundi*, Asia was the first world, Europe the second and Africa the third.

name the poor in the First World as the Fourth World.<sup>4</sup> Any definition has its limitations. For my part, I feel the term Third World is still serviceable because it encapsulates a particular way of existence and experience. It is a suitable semantic metaphor which conveys a relationship, especially the unequal relationship that exists between the strong and the weak. It refers to a people who have been left out and do not have the power to shape their future. It defines a relationship marked by power and mediated through old colonial ties, and currently through the economic and cultural presence of neocolonialism. Such iniquitous relationships exist both globally and locally. In this sense, there is already a Third World in the First World and a First World in the Third World. Ultimately, what is important is not the nomenclature, but the idea it conveys and the analysis it provides. I believe that the redefined term, Third World, does give an accurate picture. As Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, 'whether "Third World" sounds negative or positive also depends on *who* uses it'.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly this volume is not a systematic attempt to cover the entire Third World, nor does it offer a full history of the reception of the Bible. Instead, I envision this project as exploring particular ways in which the Bible has been received throughout the ages. This inevitably reflects my own area of interest and concern, my aim being to show how the Bible interfaces with different historical moments. I have chosen European colonization as a marker to delineate this relationship, and it requires explanation. I admit that this delineation is contestable. I am not saying that European colonization was the only intervention in the past. There were many others,<sup>6</sup> but they were not characterized by the kind of aggressive ethnocentric imposition of one's culture upon the 'other' as practised by European colonizers. In terms of world history, Western imperialism has been the most powerful ideological construc-

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (London, SPCK, 1990), p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> For earlier forms of colonization see Marc Ferro, *Colonization: A Global History*, tr. K. D. Prithipaul (London, Routledge, 1997).

tion of the last four or five centuries. Osterhammel, who studied various types of colonialism, notes:

Ever since the Iberian and English colonial theorists of the sixteenth century, European expansion has been stylized grandiosely as the fulfilment of a universal mission: as a contribution to a divine plan for the salvation of the pagans, as a secular mandate to ‘civilize’ the ‘barbarians’ or ‘savages’, a ‘white man’s burden’ that he [*sic*] is privileged to carry, etc. These attitudes were always premised on a belief in European cultural superiority.<sup>7</sup>

The impact of Western cultural colonialism upon the Other is the chief difference between earlier and modern European expansionism. Most significantly, Western civilization has outlasted the earlier colonialisms and etched itself more indelibly than the earlier ones on the memories, discourses, lives, histories and cultures of the people. To use Western imperialism as the focusing denominator for this study is not necessarily to reinscribe centre–margin binaries or totalize a particular historical experience. Rather, it is to suggest that a dialectical discursive relationship and tension exists between and within the colonized and colonizer.

A word about the method employed here: I have been influenced by the newly emerging postcolonial theory, and I have also enlisted insights from discourse analysis. Postcolonial discourse is not monolithic, and its diverse concerns and stances have not only opened up but also provided a valuable discursive tool to detect and critique colonial intentions embedded in texts and interpretations. How I employ the insights of postcolonialism and how they enter the debate will become clear as the reader progresses from chapter to chapter.

#### OVERVIEW AND ARGUMENTS

The volume contains three parts which are organized around different phases of colonialism. Part I which has a single chapter, ‘Before the empire: the Bible as a marginal and a minority text’, describes the first of the three stages – pre-

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, tr. Shelly L. Frisch (Princeton, Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997), p. 16.



colonial, when the Bible arrived in Asia and Africa. It particularly concentrates on India, China and Romanized North Africa. It narrates the story of how the Christian Bible remained in venerable versions such as Latin and Syriac and was inaccessible to ordinary people, and how biblical materials were indirectly written in works ranging from liturgies and catechisms to theological treatises. Without the support of colonial apparatuses, the Bible remained a minor text in the precolonial phase; it found its place, among the many religious texts of other traditions, as one of the Books of the East and it did so without threatening, surpassing or subsuming them. It strove to carve a niche at a time when, within Christian tradition, other sites such as liturgy and sacraments were seen as the prime medium of God's revelation.

Part II, 'Colonial embrace', contains four chapters. The emergence and dominant presence of European colonialism provide a natural discursive backdrop to these studies. The first chapter, 'White men bearing gifts: diffusion of the Bible and scriptural imperialism', maps out how an inaccessible book in the precolonial phase has now become the most easily available one through the expansionist efforts of the British and Foreign Bible Society. It also maps out the main characteristics and effects of colonial interpretation. The next two chapters narrate the critical counter-discourse undertaken by colonized and colonizer. The principal aim of the former chapter, 'Reading back: resistance as a discursive practice', is to reiterate that the transmission of the Bible was not one-sided, but rather the colonized themselves actively serviced the very canonical texts newly introduced to them. Furthermore, the colonized profitably capitalized on both the language of evangelical Christianity with its appeal to the Bible, and on modernist values which the missionaries themselves had introduced. The chapter provides examples of the discourse of resistance undertaken by the colonized from different continents. It contains critical materials on Olaudah Equiano, William Apess, K. M. Banerjee, Pandita Ramabai, and African indigenous Churches, whose work on the Bible has been neglected, eclipsed and given no proper recognition by mainstream biblical scholarship nor

by Third World theological institutions. Unfortunately, the interpretative practices of these people were not seen as sophisticated enough to be studied within the biblical disciplines and were relegated to church history, mission studies or practical theology. I hope that this chapter will serve not only as a reminder that the techniques employed by these people to read the Bible were as rich and subtle as the current ones, but also as a reminder that their very act of reading in the face of colonial oppression is worth emulating.

The chapter on John W. Colenso deals with an example of a missionary who broke ranks with his colleagues in order to side with the aspirations of the 'natives', and who complicated the missionary hermeneutics of the time by exposing its Eurocentrism. Colenso's hermeneutical activity was a controversial and a creative one for a colonizer to undertake during the colonial period. The chapter demonstrates how Colenso simultaneously disputed and dismantled the interpretative core of the missionaries, and used the very Zulu culture which they derided in order to pose new questions to the text and in turn be illuminated by them. In the controversy over his work on the Pentateuch, often his critical approach to the New Testament was overlooked – namely, his subjection of the New Testament documents to a scrutiny similar to that he meted out to the Hebrew Scriptures, and his unlocking of Paul's letter to the Romans with the help of Zulu cultural nuances. This chapter attempts to redress this omission. An important point worth reiterating is that the hermeneutical output of the colonized and a few colonizers should not be seized upon as noble examples of a radical unshackling of colonialism. Both were engaged in oppositional discourse, one employing the discourse of resistance and the other the discourse of dissidence. The discourses were laden with colonial language, and by nature and content were complicitous discourses undertaken by those who simultaneously condemned the evils of colonialism and complimented its virtues and its indispensability. The last chapter of this section ends with an important and often overlooked aspect of the reception of the Bible, namely its circulation and distribution. It looks at the role played by the cadre of

colporteurs and Biblewomen, and at the type of Bible they tried to disseminate. Their story has been brushed aside, and is now recounted and given wider visibility.

Part III, 'Postcolonial reclamations', contains three chapters, each of which is concerned with interpretation undertaken in the aftermath of colonialism. The first of these chapters seeks to address the question of native interpretation. It seeks to provide illustrations of how Asians, Africans and Latin Americans overcame the strangeness and remoteness of biblical texts by galvanising their own cultural resources to illuminate biblical narratives. It makes visible the spectacular ways in which the vernacular has been creatively incorporated into current interpretative practices. It provides a definition of vernacular hermeneutics and illustrates it with examples from different contexts in which interpreters have drawn upon varying cultural resources, such as African trickster tales to Japanese Noh drama, to throw light on biblical narratives. It also deals with exegetical reworkings which are informed by a vernacular heritage and by the indigene's own identity. The chapter connects in part with the concerns of indigenization but also stands at a certain distance from them. While celebrating the arrival of the vernacular, it draws attention to the fact that the vernacular itself can become a conservative tool when it is used to emphasize purity over against plurality and diversity. This chapter itself is an enlarged version of a piece which appeared previously in another volume.

Chapter seven, 'Engaging liberation: texts as a vehicle of emancipation', examines one of the most influential biblical interpretations to emerge in our time – liberation hermeneutics. The chapter sets out the key tenets of liberation hermeneutics and the contexts in which it emerged, and it draws attention to the vibrant internal discussions which have altered the original terrain. It brings to the fore how biblical passages have been retrieved both by mainstream interpreters, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Elsa Tamez, and by various subaltern groups, such as Indian dalits (the self-designated name for those who were once called outcastes), women and indigenous peoples, and it shows how they have opened up fresh ways of interrogating

and interpreting texts. The chapter demonstrates how biblical narratives have become an important means by which trained and ordinary people have been able to define and redefine their subaltern status, by choosing to situate themselves within biblical narratives in order to make sense of and attempt to control the circumstances in which they find themselves. It ends with a critique of liberation hermeneutics for its over-reliance on a modernistic agenda and underlines how such a mortgaging has effectively prevented it from facing up to new challenges.

The last chapter highlights the shift in Third World biblical scholarship, the emergence of a new critical category – post-colonial reading – and how it seeks to move beyond liberation hermeneutics, which was until now regarded as the most distinctive contribution of Third World biblical interpreters. This chapter captures the mood of postcolonial reading practice, identifies the different streams within the field, provides markers of its scriptural readings, locates the place of this new critical category among other intellectual currents of the time – namely, postmodernism, and other liberative discourses such as feminism – and demonstrates how it converges and diverges from them. The chapter seeks to understand the Bible in the postcolonial environment, but at the same time it wants to interrogate both the Bible and postcolonialism in light of each other. The chapter ends with a tentative support for the theory.

Although the volume is chronologically arranged and takes on a linear progression, each of the chapters stands on its own and can be read independently. Each chapter has its own unity, but is nonetheless connected with the Others.

Readers may be troubled by the gender-biased language in the volume. Most of this occurs in the colonial literature cited here. In these days of cleansing anything awkward, the temptation is to remove it. Instead, gender-biased language is left as it is, to indicate that language, too, provided an important tool in the imperial project of incorporating the other.

This volume does not present a complete picture. Scholars who are familiar with the landscape of Third World hermeneutics might like to challenge the choice of topics, interpretation and the over-all organization. What these chapters together

seek to demonstrate is the diversity and the complex range of interpretations which unsettle, negotiate with and, at times, resist colonial forms of interpretations. I hope this volume will contribute to the dialogue that is occurring around us with regard to texts, multiplicity of interpretations and the art of reading.



PART I

*Precolonial reception*





## CHAPTER I

### *Before the empire: the Bible as a marginal and a minority text*

The *Way* had not, at all times and in all places, the selfsame name; the sages had not, at all times and in all places, the selfsame human body. (Heaven) caused a suitable religion to be instituted for every region and clime so that each one of the races of mankind might be saved.

Seventh-century Chinese Imperial Rescript

If all this be true, how is it that God waits over sixteen hundred years before giving us any knowledge of it; how is it that the Chinese are left out, and only the barbarians are mentioned?

The Emperor K'and-hsi

As discussed in the introduction, there are three key junctures at which the Bible reached the Third World – precolonial, colonial and postcolonial. This chapter aims to describe the first phase of its arrival in Asia and Africa. In doing so, it will chart the reception and appropriation of the Bible in these continents.

Asia and Africa have close links with biblical Christianity. Africa's connection with the Bible is celebrated in famous courtly and common people who figure in the biblical narratives. These include royal personages such as the Queen of Sheba; the Ethiopian Eunuch; Ebedmelech, another Ethiopian royal (Ebedmelech = son of a king), who helped Jeremiah out of a water tank; and other ordinary people such as Simon of Cyrene who bore the cross and came from North Africa (Luke 23.26).<sup>1</sup> Asia, too, has its claim to biblical connections. India is

<sup>1</sup> There was another Cyrenian called Lucius who was one of those who laid hands on Paul and Barnabas before they embarked on their journey (Acts 13.1–3). Among

mentioned at least twice in the Book of Esther (1.1; 8.9). In Maccabees there is a reference to an Indian mahout with Antiochus' war elephants (1 Macc. 6.8).<sup>2</sup> One often overlooks the fact that, of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, nearly half were either written in Asia Minor or written as letters to Christian communities there. The popular perception is that Christianity arrived in Asia only a couple of centuries ago under the aegis of the European powers, when they were making political inroads into that region. John England, who has studied the expansion of Christianity in Asia, notes that the Christian presence began 'in the first-century spread of the Palestinian and Syrian Church eastward into Mesopotamia', while 'subsequent missions of the Churches of the East extended to at least twelve countries east of Persia by the eighth century. In some cases active churches continued in a number of countries for the first Roman Catholic missionaries to discover.'<sup>3</sup> In a recent study of the history of Asian Christianity, Samuel Hugh Moffett reminds us of some of these often forgotten facts. He points out that before Christianity moved into Europe, its

first centres were Asian. Asia produced the first known church building, the first New Testament translation, perhaps the first Christian king, the first Christian poets, and even arguably the first Christian state.<sup>4</sup>

other Africans was Apollos of Alexandria (Acts 18.24–19.1) who preached in Corinth (Europe) and Ephesus (Asia).

<sup>2</sup> 'And upon the elephants were wooden towers, strong and covered; they were fastened upon each beast by special harness, and upon each were four armed men who fought from there, and also its Indian driver' (1 Macc. 6.37). There were also other indirect references to India: Indian mercantile products such as textiles, linen and fragrances, birds such as peacocks and animals such as monkeys found their way to the court of King Solomon. See Zacharias P. Thundy, *Buddha and Christ: Nativity Stories and Indian Traditions* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1993), pp. 212–17. There is a distinct possibility of a Hindu god figuring in the Hebrew Scripture: when King Ahasuerus is enraged by the refusal of Queen Vashiti to grace the royal assembly, he calls the seven princes and one of them is Krishna (Esther 1.13, 14). I owe this reference to Ari L. Goldman; see his *The Search for God at Harvard* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> John C. England, *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia: The Churches of the East Before 1500* (Delhi, ISPCK, 1996), pp. 1–2.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1: *Beginnings to 1500*, revised and corrected edition (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1998), p. xiii.

## INDIA: LITURGICAL AND ICONIC USAGE

In the precolonial days, just before the advent of modern European colonization, the Bible was transmitted to Asia either through sea-routes or along the 'Silk road', together with commercial merchandise. It was mainly traders, travellers, monks and merchants who carried the 'pearl of the Gospel'. It was those who belonged to the Church of the East, often known as Nestorians,<sup>5</sup> who introduced the Christian Bible to Asia. The scope of this book does not warrant a detailed inquiry into the theological and other issues which led to the division of the Church into different groups. For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that the chief controversies centred around the Churches' Christological beliefs. Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople, defined Christ as one person with two natures, but his ecclesiastical rivals from Alexandria claimed Christ as one person with one nature, both God and man.<sup>6</sup> The Bible that Nestorians brought with them was not the Western canon with its Latin version, but the Eastern Bible in the Syriac version known as the Peshitta.<sup>7</sup> Popularly, the Peshitta (Syriac, 'simple') was often perceived as a common or simple version or as aimed at simple people; alternatively, it was thought to refer to the style of translation. It was, in fact, simple in the sense that its text was free from obeli, asterisks and other marks, and from margins

<sup>5</sup> In this book the term Nestorians will be used rather than the Church of the East.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of the creedal confusion and theological misunderstanding among Nestorians and against their rivals, see Moffett, *History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1, pp. 175–80, 247–51.

<sup>7</sup> This version, which contains all canonical books of the Old Testament (except Chronicles), was translated straight from the Hebrew, and corresponded closely with the Massoretic text; parts of it had been influenced by LXX (Genesis, Isaiah, the minor prophets and Psalms). The Syriac New Testament, which was known as the 'queen' of all Bible versions, excluded 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation and also John 7.53–8.11 and Luke 22.17–18. It superseded Tatian's *Diatessaron*. Since it has been cited by Ephrem, one of the fathers of the Church of the East in the fourth century, the version must have been in existence before that time. The five originally omitted were books included when the Philoxenian version, probably the first Syriac version which can be traced to a single translator, Bishop Philoxenus of Mabbug (485–523), appeared in 508 CE. It was Moses bar Kepha who first called it Peshitta. See Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans, 1987).

with various readings in Greek. The Peshitta was unencumbered with textual notations and glossorial expositions. 'The Peshitto copies', in Isaac Hall's view, 'were free from all this apparatus,' or 'simple' in this sense:

The name never could have meant 'for simple people', although Harclenian, in contrast, was intended for, and was most profitably used by scholars; or it could well have referred to the style of translation. It was a 'clear text' edition, and 'simple' in that sense.<sup>8</sup>

The Peshitta was used by all Syrian Christians without exception – Nestorians, Jacobites, Maronites, Chaldeans, Melkites and St Thomas Christians of Malabar. It was this version which was found in one of the Churches of the Syrian Christians by Claudius Buchanan (1766–1815), the provost of the Fort William College in Calcutta, who, using the colonial authority of the time, surreptitiously spirited it away from the hapless Indian Syrian priests.<sup>9</sup> However, the Peshitta was not the first version of the Bible to reach the sub-continent. There were copies of the Gospels and other portions of the sacred writings already available in India. Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, speaks of the visit of Pantaenus, a teacher in the catechetical school of Alexandria, to India in 190 CE. On his arrival there he found that Christians were acquainted with the Gospel of Matthew, a copy of which had been left by the apostle Bartholomew, who 'had preached to them, and left with them the writing of Matthew in the Hebrew language which they had preserved

<sup>8</sup> Isaac H. Hall, 'The Syriac Translations of the New Testament', in *The Syriac New Testament Translated into English from the Peshitto Version*, tr. James Murdock (Boston, MA, Scriptural Tract Repository, 1893), p. 490.

<sup>9</sup> Westcott in his *The Bible in the Church* informs his readers that it was presented to Buchanan by an Indian Syrian bishop; Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Bible in the Church: A Popular Account of the Collection and Reception of the Holy Scriptures in the Christian Churches* (London, Macmillan and Co., 1887), p. 233. For the rather dubious way in which Buchanan acquired manuscripts, either through bribery or using the power of the British government at that time, see Reinhold Wagner, 'The Malayalam Bible', *Indian Church History Review* 2:2 (1968), 119–45. The copy he acquired was written in the Estrangelo character, without points, but its date has not yet been accurately determined. The copy at Milan is probably the only complete ancient manuscript of the Syrian Bible in Europe which has the enlarged Syrian canon. But even this copy has only twenty-six books and does not include Revelation; Marshall Broomhall, *The Bible in China* (London, The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1934), pp. 185–6.

until that time'.<sup>10</sup> Jerome, too, attests that Pantænus was sent to India by Demetrius, the then bishop of Alexandria, at the 'request of delegates of that nation'. There he 'found that Bartholomew, one of the twelve Apostles, had preached the advent of the Lord Jesus Christ according to the Gospel of Matthew, and on his return to Alexandria he brought this with him written in Hebrew characters'.<sup>11</sup> Copies of this were still in existence when Buchanan travelled down to Travancore in 1806 to collect ancient manuscripts, as part of his project of acquiring precious texts.

The Syriac version, especially of the New Testament, naturally reflected the theological position of the Nestorians. When the Portuguese arrived in India in the sixteenth century, they soon discovered to their astonishment a local Christian community totally different from themselves, and possessing a New Testament which was not completely identical to their own Latin version. They found a number of small variants reflecting the Nestorian theology. The Synod of Diamper<sup>12</sup> in its Actio III, Dec. 1-3 observes that

in Acts 20,28 the 'Nestorian heretics' changed in an impious way the words 'the Church of God' into 'the Church of Christ', to give another meaning to the passage . . . because the Nestorians 'incited by the devil' do not want to acknowledge that God has suffered for us, shedding his blood. In 1 John 3 they changed the words *caritatem Dei* to *caritatem Christi* not to say that Christ died for us. In Hebrew 2,9 they added the words *praeter Deum*, instead of *gratia Dei* because of their Nestorian heresy. In Luke 6,35 . . . they substituted *mutum date, et inde sperate*, to defend the practice of taking interest.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast with the Protestants' preoccupation with the Bible during the colonial phase, in the precolonial stage, especially in India, little use was made of it and it was rarely read as a book. Buchanan recalls in his memoirs the words of

<sup>10</sup> *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius*, tr. C. F. Cruse (London, George Bell and Sons, 1908), vol. v, chapter 10, p. 178.

<sup>11</sup> Jerome, 'Lives of Illustrious Men', chapter 36, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* vol. III (2nd series), p. 745.

<sup>12</sup> The Synod of Diamper was convened in 1599 to settle theological and ecclesiastical disputes between the St Thomas Christians and the Roman Catholics.

<sup>13</sup> J. P. M. van der Ploeg, *The Christians of St Thomas in South India and Their Syriac Manuscripts* (Bangalore, Dharmaram Publications, 1983), p. 55.

one of the elders of the Church, Abraham, who summed up the position which the Bible held among Indian Syrian Christians: 'For years we have been quarrelling with the Romish Church about supremacy, rites and ceremonies; but the Bible has been out of the question.'<sup>14</sup> The faith of Syrian Christians was not nourished by private reading or study of the Bible. It remained for the people a numinous object denoting the nearness and presence of God. A deep sense of reverence was accorded not necessarily to its contents but to its mystical and magical powers. The Bible must have had a powerful hold on the people quite distinct from any possible practical benefit to be derived from reading its detailed accounts of events and people and its religious and moral content. It was privileged because of its holiness and transcendental properties. Each of the churches of the St Thomas Christians in Kerala had a Bible adorned with gold, silver and precious stones. They were taken out occasionally in procession and people would kiss them; they rarely left the confines of the church precinct since it was felt dishonourable to take the Bible, 'the foundation of the faith'<sup>15</sup> out of the sanctuary. Furthermore, 'Priests used to bless the sick, read the Gospel over them and attach to their bodies pieces of palm leaf or paper on which were written versicles from the Sacred Scripture.'<sup>16</sup>

The fact that the Bible came in a language unfamiliar to the people further distanced it from the faithful. The ecclesiastical lingua franca remained Syriac. In a precious colophon to his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Isho'dad (425 CE) wrote: 'This epistle has been translated from Greek into Syriac by Mar Komai with the help of Daniel, the priest, the Indian',<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Claudius Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia, to Which Are Prefixed a Memoir of the Author, and an Introductory Sketch of Protestant Missions in India: With an Appendix Containing a Summary of the Subsequent Progress of Missionary Operations in the East* (London, The Society for the Promotion of Popular Instruction, 1840), p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Placid Podipara, 'Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship', in *The St Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India*, vol. II: *Apostle Thomas, Kerala, Malabar Christianity*, ed. George Menachery (Trichur, St Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India, 1973), p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: The Story of a Church on Fire* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 88.

indicating that the ecclesiastical language of Indian Christians at the beginning of the fifth century was Syriac, and not any of the many Indian languages.

A full translation of the Bible was never undertaken in Malayalam or in any other vernacular language until it was translated into Malayalam by Protestant missionaries in 1811. Unlike in the colonial period, when serious efforts were made to translate the Bible into various vernacular languages, the Syriac Bible remained untranslated. Two anecdotes from the memoir of Claudius Buchanan are relevant. The aforementioned Abraham told Buchanan: 'The Bible, Sir, is what we want, in the language of our mountains. With the Bible in his hand every man can become the Priest of his own family.'<sup>18</sup> The other was Buchanan's encounter with the Rajah of Travancore in 1806:

When I told the Rajah that the Syrian Christians were supposed to be of the same religion with the English, he said he thought that could not be the case, else he must have heard it before; if, however, it was so, he considered my desire to visit them as very reasonable. I assured his highness that their *shaster* and ours was the same; and showed him a Syriac New Testament, which I had at hand. The book being bound and gilt after the European manner, the Rajah shook his head, and said he was sure there was not a native in his dominions who could read that book.<sup>19</sup>

Even if the Bible was available in translation, it had only limited purposes. As the Synod of Diamper noted, a vast majority of Malabar Christians were ignorant. More significantly, they were proud of their own Syriac version, and distrusted any new textual intrusions. One of the priests told Buchanan:

But how shall we know that your standard copy is a true translation of our Bible? We cannot depart from our own Bible. It is the true word of God, without corruption – that book which was first used by the Christians at Antioch. What translations you have got in the West, we know not: but the true Bible of Antioch we have had in the mountains of Malabar for fourteen hundred years, or longer. Some of our copies

<sup>18</sup> Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia*, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

are from ancient times; so old and decayed, that they can scarce be preserved much longer.<sup>20</sup>

The Bible continued to be unavailable in Indian languages even during the time of the Dominican Martyrs of Thana (1321) and throughout the Jesuit mission of Francis Xavier.

The inaccessibility of the Bible to ordinary people was due to the paucity of copies as well as the language in which it was written. At the beginning of the nineteenth century no printed version was in circulation. A Syrian priest told Buchanan: 'The learning of the Bible is in a low state among us. Our copies are few in number; and that number is diminishing, instead of increasing; and writing out of a whole copy of the sacred scriptures is a great labour, where there is no profit and little piety.'<sup>21</sup> Before the mass production of the Bible, every copy had to be transcribed by hand. The Christian faith in Malabar survived, as Buchanan pointed out and as he as an evangelical Protestant understood it, because it 'enjoyed the advantage of the daily prayers, and daily portions of scriptures in their liturgy', and if these were not available, 'there would have been in the revolution of ages, no vestige of Christianity left among them'.<sup>22</sup> One of those liturgies which sustained the Malabar Christians was the *Liturgy of the Apostles Addai and Mari*, with its subtle allusions to the New Testament. This liturgy is still in use with little variation. Though it played a crucial role, one should not overstate the biblical elements in it. The liturgy omitted the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus and its oft-repeated theme was: 'Who didst appear in the body of our humanity, didst illuminate our soul by the light of Thy life-giving Gospel.'<sup>23</sup> George Nedungatt draws attention to the fact that when one speaks of the Bible and the liturgy celebrated in Syriac as 'sources of the spirituality of the Syro-Malabar Church', it should be with the proviso that these were conveyed and expounded 'in homilies, catechesis, symbols, etc.'<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 77–8.

<sup>23</sup> J. M. Neale and R. F. Littledale, *The Liturgies of SS. Mark, James, Clement, Chrysostom, and Basil, and the Church of Malabar* (London, Griffith Farran and Co., 1869), p. 158; see also, England, *Hidden History of Christianity in Asia*, p. 120.

<sup>24</sup> George Nedungatt, 'The Spirituality of the Syro-Malabar Church', in *East Syrian*