

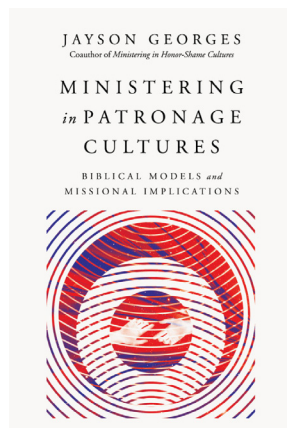
Ministering in Patronage Cultures: Biblical Models and Missional Implications

by Jayson Georges

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Reviewed by Howard Bell

Howard Bell (pseudonym) has worked as a church planter among Muslim unreached people groups since 2010 and as a Church-Planting Movements coach since 2012. He and his family currently live in South Asia focusing on multiplying churches among one people group and geography.



Most cross-cultural workers and virtually all of those working in Eastern contexts will encounter patronage as they seek to form relationships and plant churches. The vast majority of these workers will find themselves subject to unspoken expectations from those around them. Whether they realize it or not, they will be part of the patronage system and expected to be patrons.

Jayson Georges's *Ministering in Patronage Cultures* introduces the reader to patronage—the reciprocal relationship between social “unequals,” or patrons and clients—as central not only to many majority-world cultures but also to the world of the Bible. Emphasizing the biblical text and context, Georges attempts to explain and illustrate how patronage functions from broader cultural expectations to individual and cross-cultural relationships. He then moves on to a biblical evaluation

of patronage and a discussion of applications for those ministering in patronage cultures. Most of the book is spent exploring the Bible, its ancient Near Eastern context, and biblical scholarship. Georges approaches this as an accomplished missiologist and as someone who has served cross-culturally for fifteen years, the majority of that in Central Asia.¹

Summary of Content

Georges opens the book with an introduction to patronage and some of the problems it poses for cross-cultural ministers and ministry, before moving into simple explanations of patronage in Chapter One, “The Meaning of Patronage.” The chapter displays Georges’s gifts as a writer who ably explains difficult concepts in clear and easy language. He deftly moves through defining patrons, clients, the reciprocal and asymmetrical relationship those categories create, as well as key aspects of patronage including social capital, brokers, honor, and shame. Each of these concepts is explored succinctly but with relevant examples from current cross-cultural ministry and the Bible. This first chapter stands out not only for its ability to cover a broad array of key concepts in an accessible manner, but also as the section of the book that most relies on anthropological research.

Georges goes on to look at examples or expressions of patronage from the Bible and the ancient world, prioritizing the ancient Near East. He then elucidates how Westerners misunderstand patronage in Chapter Three, gently reminding the reader that these cultural values are like unwritten rules and come with unwritten assumptions. His explanation of how patronage is misperceived anticipates those who will be itching for evaluation. Is patronage good or bad, right or wrong? Georges gets there quickly and without undue criticism of Western values.

1 Georges holds an MDiv from Talbot Theological Seminary, is a resident missiologist for an evangelical missions organization, the author of several books, and the founding editor of HonorShame.com.

The rest of the book examines patronage relationships and values from a biblical perspective. In chapter four, Georges explains the relationship between Yahweh and Israel as a patron-client relationship. In chapter five, he discusses how Jesus interacted with patronage society and values as he preached and brought the kingdom. In chapter six, he addresses how Paul navigated patronage during early Christian mission. Each of these explains how the biblical text at times assumes patronage, endorses it, and corrects it. Georges also uses the biblical examples to tease out application. Yahweh both accepted and transformed patronage; Jesus did not dismantle but redefined core elements of patronage; and Paul followed Jesus' example leveraging patronage for the kingdom of God.

Having covered a wide range of biblical data, Georges uses the next section of the book to examine patronage as a theological reality. He divides this theology of patronage into three chapters titled "God as Patron," "Sin as Ingratitude," and "Salvation as Patronage." For many this will be an enthralling and eye-opening section, but it also may be the most controversial. Georges's theology of patronage in salvation cannot help but contrast forensic or legal categories of justification and atonement. Those seeking to see and present the gospel with fresh eyes in patronage cultures will be thrilled at the fruit of this study and the different ways this may relate to sharing the gospel. Georges concludes the section with a gospel summary of salvation-history from the perspective of patronage, and it remains the section of the book that I have returned to the most since I first read it at the time of its publication.

It is only after this long study of patronage in the Scriptures that Georges turns to missional applications. This includes recognizing the goodness of patronage while rejecting and transforming the negative aspects of patronage—no easy task and one that Georges approaches with appropriate humility. His main focus is on forming patronage relationships or forming relationships in patronage cultures, while giving practical reminders of how patronage can be misunderstood. Many of his

practical chapters discuss money and financial partnership as well as how patronage impacts work, teaching relationships, and peacemaking.

The final chapter examines how patronage impacts Christian life and spirituality. Georges concludes by giving broad pictures of mission, pastoral leadership, discipleship, and community as part of redeeming patronage. Finally, he exhorts his readers to fully engage in their patron relationship with God, redeem patronage in their context as the Spirit leads, and further the conversation on patronage and their own exploration of patronage in their context.

Evaluation

Jayson Georges has written a much-needed book. Many, perhaps even most, cross-cultural workers are immersed in patronage societies, and understanding patronage changes the way one sees the world forever. Georges's book is a short and highly accessible introduction that emphasizes what the Bible has to say about patronage. His writing style is accessible and easy to read, and he has a gift for introducing and illustrating these cultural concepts in ways that Westerners will understand.

Georges knows his aim in this book is a tall order, and he disarms potential criticism by acknowledging that in writing a short, introductory, and practical book he had to make compromises (4). One of those compromises is the choice to make this a very broad study. Transforming patronage is no an easy task, and Georges does not always present a clear vision of what that should look like. Some readers may be disappointed that the book does not explore more anthropological data or ethnographic studies to give a picture of what patronage looks like across modern cultures. Georges touches on this through illustrations and stories, but even though the book is titled *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, most of the book is actually on biblical models of patronage (as the subtitle might suggest).

This reviewer has only two significant criticisms of the book. One is that while Georges approaches many of the topics within the book with humility, he presents a strong case that understanding patronage is necessary to understand the Bible. As an example, he writes: The common English translations of “salvation,” “grace,” and “faith” carry subtly different meanings than their Greek counterparts. This impacts the meaning of Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace you have been saved through faith.” A paraphrase with fresh terminology might better capture Paul’s original intent: “God’s generous benevolence has rescued you from peril, by means of steadfast loyalty to the relationship.” (104)

This is a fascinating insight, but it is not a modest claim. When I look at the Greek text of the New Testament, I am skeptical that consistently translating *soteria*, *charis*, and *pistis* this way is sustainable, though I would be eager to read such an experiment. Georges is enamored with ancient Near Eastern studies, but many wonder if our insights into the ancient Near East have gained an oversized weight in our theological method and have de-emphasized other elements of exegesis and canonical context.²

This concern is minor compared to the practical concern I have over his recommendations on using money in ministry. Georges tells a story of a man who was meeting with him for discipleship (116). The young man asked Georges to pay his college tuition. Georges was not comfortable with mixing discipleship and money, so he declined. The young man stopped meeting with him shortly thereafter. It seems like Georges expresses regret that he did not pay the young man’s tuition fees or use money more in discipleship. I am deeply concerned about this kind of recommendation—not because it is always wrong, but because I live in

2 These kinds of discussions invariably show up in debates over the *New Perspective on Paul* and methodology discussions between biblical theologians and systematic theologians.

a context saturated with the consequences of misusing Western money in ministry.

When I first arrived on the field where I currently serve, I accompanied an acquaintance on a trip to a church-planting training where he had paid each of the attendees a day's wage and travel expenses to attend. Eagerly expecting more patronage, each attendee filled out the reporting form he gave them saying that they had planted a number of churches. He later confided in me that virtually all of this reporting was false.

Similarly, I was once contacted by a stranger who claimed to lead a network of churches and wanted me to train him in Church-Planting Movements methodology. I wondered why this apparently successful church planter wanted a stranger to coach him. I asked some questions of colleagues and soon found that he had at least ten foreigners already coaching him, several of whom were funding him and all of whom thought they were his only coach.

Georges writes:

Mixing discipleship and patronage can be dangerous, so one must be mindful and cautious. In the history of Christian missions, patronage dynamics have produced many "rice Christians"—people who profess to be Christian for material benefits rather than genuine spiritual reasons. Such nominal Christians agree to anything a patron says to get help, food, or medical benefits. Short-term mission trips are most vulnerable to this reality. Being oblivious to patronage dynamics, they misinterpret the response of the client-recipients. (148-49)

The more I learn about patronage, the more eager I am to be personally generous and the more grateful I am for the Father's generosity. But I feel the weight and reality of Georges's words of caution far greater than I do his recommendation to leverage financial patronage

in discipleship. Understanding patronage is important in understanding the use of money in ministry, but it may also mislead cross-cultural workers into seeing patron-status as a way to use money to achieve or motivate ministry objectives.

Recommendation

I enthusiastically recommend *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, but not without some caution. I know of no better introduction to patronage. The book is short, easy to read, practical, and immensely relevant for practitioners. Understanding patronage on some level is necessary in order to maintain healthy relationships in patronage cultures; our cross-cultural discipleship, church-planting, and leadership development cannot be healthy if our cross-cultural relationships are not. Patronage can change how you see the gospel and how you proclaim it. It can change how you understand the role finances play in relationships and what your role is in the culture. All those things can change how you plant churches and help others plant churches. Georges's book is an important introduction to the world of patronage where those revelations and changes can occur. However, when it comes to issues of money in ministry, I would only recommend this book in conjunction with other books and articles that emphasize greater caution and give a picture of the consequences and potential issues that money can create. In spite of this concern, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures* would be on my short list of the most helpful books for cross-cultural workers to read.

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