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## BIBLICAL THEOLOGY IN ASIA: CONTRIBUTION OF JOSEPH PATHRAPANKAL

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### **Abstract**

The churches in Asia have many famous biblical theologians known for their illustrious teaching career, erudite publications and original ideas. Their literary contributions have enriched the treasury of Theology. Some of them have spent their lifetime in the formation of the clergy and the future ministers of the Word. Professor Dr Joseph Pathrapankal CMI (JP) is outstanding among them by reason of his illustrious teaching career, prolific literary contribution, multi-faceted ministry of the Word, dedicated service in different fields of biblical scholarship and Word-centred life. As a biblical theologian, clarity in thought, consistency of views and firmness in opinions are constant features of JP. This article gives a brief sketch of the life of JP, a summary remark about his vast literary contributions and a comment about JP's dominant theological views. In fact, JP's illustrious life as a biblical theologian is an eloquent example how a Bible scholar can be both critical and creative in one's ministry of the Word. This article is also a tribute to this Nonagenarian Bible scholar. It may serve also as a challenge for the new generation scholars to become Word-centred

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persons so as to inspire the coming generations to involve critically and creatively in the mission of the Church today.

**Keywords:** Asian Reality, Biblical Theology, Church, *Dharma*, *Dei Verbum*, Dharmaram, DVK, Inclusive Approach, Liberation, Mission, Proclamation of the Gospel, Proselytism, Spirit of Dominance, Spirit of Openness, Truth, Vatican II

## Introduction

Vatican II was a turning point in the life of the Church. The documents of the council made the church more open and inclusive.<sup>1</sup> As a result there was a more active approach in the evangelization work of the church: an incarnational approach marked with dialogue and mutual respect. Since then this new spirit dominates the church. The church's missionary activities got a big boost. The churches in various Asian countries began to focus on inculturation. They were enriched by a rich variety of initiatives different from the traditional ones. Along with this more contextual theologizing also resulted. In different parts of Asia, the church became more critical and creative in its spiritual life, intellectual life and in its *ad extra* involvements. There was a total transformation in perception and *praxis*.<sup>2</sup> The innumerable initiatives taken by the local churches and the particular churches gave new vitality to the life of the Catholic Church in different countries of Asia. All these initiatives bore fruit and contributed to the wider use and study of the sacred scripture and contextualized theologizing. As more than fifty years have lapsed since the celebration of Vatican II, an appreciative and evaluative study of the Asian contribution to biblical theology is quite opportune.

It is important to note that Pope St John Paul II convoked a Synod for Asia in 1999 and the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* has influenced the Asian Churches very much.<sup>3</sup> *Ecclesia in Asia* stated among other things: "Thus the task of proclaiming Jesus in a way which enables the peoples of Asia to identify with him, while

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, no. 22.

<sup>2</sup>"The local Church is a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated. This means concretely a Church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions, in brief, with all the life realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own." FABC Statement, April 1974. Cf. Gaudencio B. Rosales and Catalino G. Arevalo, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, No. 12, Quenzon City: Claretian Publications, 1992, 14.

<sup>3</sup>It is memorable that John Paul II promulgated *Church in Asia* in New Delhi during his second visit to India.

remaining faithful both to the Church's theological doctrine and to their own Asian origins is a paramount challenge."<sup>4</sup> It encouraged the biblical scholars and theologians to theologize with courage, but in faithfulness to the Scriptures and to the Church's tradition, in sincere adherence to the Magisterium and with pastoral awareness. FABC as well as the bishops' Conferences of different Asian countries have taken various initiatives and promoted this biblical study as well as biblical apostolate.

In the post-Vatican II era, India was in the forefront in every aspect especially in the field of biblical studies. There are so many members of the Church who have contributed to the multi-faceted growth of biblical theology in Asia. Dharmaram College which was established in Bangalore in 1957 is 'the most important theological centre for the Syro-Malabar church which has energetically plunged into the great venture of giving an Asian approach to Catholic theology.'<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy that a vernacular translation of the Documents of Vatican II was first published by the Dharmaram immediately after the Council. At this decisive post-conciliar time, there was a group of relatively young, dynamic and committed scholars who formed the staff of Dharmaram. Each of them was academically highly qualified and competent teachers. Professor Dr Joseph Pathrapankal CMI (JP) is one among them. On the occasion of JP's *Sapthathi* (seventieth birthday) which coincided with the golden Jubilee of his religious profession, a *Festschrift* was published with scholarly articles by his students and friends. In its Foreword, Dr Alphonsus Mathias, emeritus Archbishop of Bangalore, who knew JP very well wrote:

I firmly believe that Prof. Joseph Pathrapankal has done some pioneering works in this regard. Giving the Bible an Indian interpretation was one of his primary concerns. As a professor of Bible for more than three decades, he has shared his knowledge of the Bible to thousands of students. And some of his disciples are themselves eminent professors of Bible now.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>John Paul II, *Church in Asia*, no. 22.

<sup>5</sup>"A generation later emerged a significant movement, mostly Roman Catholic in inspiration, which has formed around the journal *Jeevadhara*, started in 1971. This was intended as a 'progressive' theological journal for the people and theologians of the state of Kerala in South India and was greatly influenced by the new generation of theologians of the Syro-Malabar Church." George Gispart-Sauch SJ, "Asian Theology," in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2001, 459. "Dharmaram College, a Roman Catholic theological foundation is the most important theological centre of the Syro-Malabar church, and is closely associated with the *Jeevadhara* group and Indian Theological Association." (460).

<sup>6</sup>"Foreword," *Indian Interpretation of Bible*, ed. Augustine Thottakara, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications 2000, 19.

JP is an outstanding contributor from Asia to biblical theology. In view of substantiating this opinion we give a brief presentation of the life, writings and dominant theological views of JP.

### 1. A Short Biographical Sketch of Joseph Pathrapankal

Born on 29 September 1930 at Elamgulam in Kottayam District, Kerala, in a traditional Catholic family of deep Catholic faith and reputation, JP joined the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), the first indigenous religious congregation of Kerala, founded by St Kuriakose Elias Chavara and made his profession of vows on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1950. After his basic priestly studies he secured MTh degree from the Pontifical Seminary of Pune. JP was ordained a priest on March 24, 1958. In 1959 JP joined the staff of Dharmaram College and thus started his teaching career as well as the *Sadhana* of the Word of God. From 1960 to 1962 JP studied in the Pontifical Biblical Institute and secured Licentiate in the Sacred Scripture. From 1962 to 1964 JP did doctoral research in Biblical Theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University and defended his doctoral dissertation entitled *Metanoia, Faith, Covenant: A Study in Pauline Theology*.<sup>7</sup>

Having returned from Rome as Doctor of Theology, JP resumed his teaching ministry in Dharmaram. JP was giving lectures on various biblical subjects though the New Testament was his specialization. In the New Testament itself, he was focusing on the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline Letters. JP continued his teaching ministry till his retirement, inculcating academic interest and thirst for the Word of God in hundreds of students every year. Incidentally, 2019 is the sixtieth year of his *Sadhana* (ministry) of the Word, and though he is not active in his teaching ministry he continues his services as a *guru* in his residence at Kanjirappally in Kerala. Glorious in age and wisdom, JP continues to inculcate in many persons passion for the Word and Theology. As JP is in the threshold of his *Navathi* (ninetieth birthday), I have prepared this article on JP as a tribute to this pioneering Biblical scholar.

JP's life as a biblical theologian is inseparably linked to Dharmaram, a prestigious academic institution of the Church in India. As stated above, JP joined Dharmaram in 1959. His services in Dharmaram can be briefly tabulated here: Head, Department of Theology, from 1968 to 1970; Dean of Studies, 1969 to 1972; during this time JP was a visiting Fellow at Princeton Theological Seminary

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<sup>7</sup>*Metanoia, Faith, Covenant: A Study in Pauline Theology*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1971.

U.S.A. from January to August 1972; Dean of Studies in Dharmaram from 1975 to 1976; Vice President, Dharmaram Pontifical Institute from 1976-1979; President Dharmaram Pontifical Institute of Theology and Philosophy from 1979 to 1985; Dean, Faculty of Theology from 1985 to 1991. He continued his teaching in DVK even after becoming *Professor emeritus* by giving lectures for the Licentiate students, and being guide of the Doctoral candidates.<sup>8</sup> Till his changing the residence from Dharmaram he was the highly respected *Guru* of Dharmaram being *Sthithaprajna* (one whose mind is steady and one-pointed),<sup>9</sup> sought after by professors as well as the students for guidance and direction.

When JP joined Dharmaram as a lecturer he whole-heartedly committed himself to the deeper study and specialization of Bible in view of his ministry as a Biblical theologian. To his advantage, there was a group of talented and well qualified team of professors. It was the time when the Servant of God, Fr Canisius Thekkekara, CMI was Rector and professor in Dharmaram. Fr Canisius was the first Asian scholar who became a Doctor of the Sacred Scripture from the Pontifical Biblical Institute.<sup>10</sup> The collaboration of JP and other learned and committed professors of Dharmaram contributed much to the rapid growth and establishment of Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram as a reputed Pontifical Athaeneum in India. Likewise, JP's services are availed by different religious congregations in the form of guidance and direction. He used to oblige himself to take classes for the young religious in different formation houses of religious congregations. JP was very much active in the ecumenical field also. It was JP who took initiative to have collaboration between Dharmaram/DVK and United Theological College, Bangalore, an Institute of higher learning in theology, managed by the Board of Directors from different Non-Catholic Churches in India. JP's relationship with the Ecumenical Christian Centre, Whitefield, Bangalore, needs special mention. The number of students who have attended his lectures and seminars as well as those who sought his guidance for MTh and Doctoral dissertations, will be many

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. Thottakara, "A Short Biographical Sketch," *Festschrift*, 25-41.

<sup>9</sup>cf. B.G. 2:54-61, T.A. Joseph, "The Book of Wisdom and the *Jnanamarga*," in the *Festschrift*, 229.

<sup>10</sup>Fr Canisius, besides being a professor in Dharmaram, was the Rector of Dharmaram, Prior General of the CMI Congregation and held a number of other offices. He is a servant of God whose beatification process is progressing at the diocesan level. John Britto Chethimattam, CMI, Mathias Mundadan, CMI, Kuncheria Pathil, CMI, Vineeth Vadakethala, CMI and Varghese Pathikulangara, CMI were some of the eminent scholars and colleagues of JP.

thousands. He was an ardent seeker. JP took care to update his study tools also so that he could have the latest information. Above all he always situated his reflections and discussions in the plateau of salvation history as well as on today's real life. He never left his field of study of sacred scripture nor deviated from its scope.

JP is a person of clarity of thought and vision; he worked out the details for the realization of his projects and targets.<sup>11</sup> JP was a person of progressive thinking and planning. Likewise, everyone who contacted JP was bold in his thinking and clear in the articulations of his thoughts. Equally important is his critical approach to the topics he discusses and the issues he has to tackle. The convergence of all these noble qualities in JP made him a competent biblical theologian, and a person of achievement and the professor-icon inspiring many young religious and priests who were his students whom he loved in a very human and humane way.

In addition to the commendable teaching service JP has rendered for many decades as an accomplished professor of Theology, there are other noteworthy activities he undertook which show the multi-faceted life of JP. The important ones are enlisted here: JP was president of the Society of Biblical Studies, India from 1972 to 1974; Member and Secretary of Bangalore Christian Theological Association, from 1968 to 1970; Member of Catholic Biblical Association of India; from 1975 to 1977 Secretary and from 1984 to 1986 executive president of the Association; Member of Indian Christian Theological Association; Member of Indian Theological Association; Member of Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart, West Germany; Member of Catholic Biblical association of America; Consulter of CBCI Commission for Bible, from 1972 to 1978; Member of Joint Study Group for Faith and Order, appointed by the CBCI in 1969; Member of Society for New Testament Studies from 1975 onwards; Member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, appointed by the Pope from 1984 to 1989; Vice-President of the Conference of Catholic Theological Institutions (COCTI) from 1987 to 1993; President of the Theological Publications in India, from 1990 to 2019; Member of the National Advisory Board, Indian School of Ecumenical Theology, Bangalore from 1988 onwards; Member of the Executive Committee of Ecumenical Christian Centre, Bangalore,

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<sup>11</sup>I approached him with my intention of pursuing a Doctoral programme at DVK when JP was the Dean of Theology. I am grateful that he accepted me as a research student and gave me the proper guidance. As the director of my dissertation, he was always demanding, helpful and encouraging. I could complete the Doctoral programme under him successfully in 1995.

from 1990 to 1991 and from 1992 to 1993.<sup>12</sup> Having been an active member of these associations and boards in India and abroad, JP's platform of rendering service of the Word is very large.

I have mentioned briefly the personal qualities, the professorial merits, the professional attitudes and notable achievements of JP in view of convincing the reader how he has contributed to the service of the Word as a biblical theologian. JP has served the Lord by his multiform ministry of the Word which was mainly Dharmaram-centred, though not restricted to this platform only but extended to far and wide. The commitment to the lecturing and teaching of such a vast audience for such a long period of time itself proves that he is an outstanding biblical theologian from Asia. Many of his students and disciples belonging to different religious congregations as well as different dioceses and even non-Catholics who by one or other way had some impact of JP in DVK or elsewhere, are now rendering service in every part of the world as scholars or teachers or formators. This great fruit of his Word-*Sadhana* is itself a tribute to the Word of God to whose service JP dedicated his life.

"His life, one may designate, is a *tapasya*, an act of religious austerity and intense brooding, and it produced wonderful results. He became a *bodhisattva*, an enlightened one in the sacred scriptures, in 'text and context' and in the meaning of 'Christian life and Christian programme'. There took place a wonderful *metanoia* in him which made him 'critical' and 'creative.'"<sup>13</sup>

## 2. JP's Literary Contributions

In the *Saptathi Festschrift* of 2000, Fr Paul Kalluveetil named JP a 'Word-filled person' and wrote:

Fr Pathrapankal is a voracious reader, prolific writer and gifted speaker. He has written seventeen books, nine of which are in Malayalam language. He has edited two other books, and co-authored another one. There are seventy-four articles in English and in modern European languages to his credit. Moreover, he has penned sixteen articles in Malayalam. Hence it is not easy to make an exhaustive study of his works.<sup>14</sup>

This was a reference to the catalogue of his writings in the Jubilee year 2000. Since then the list is augmented by his subsequent publication of some books and many more articles on a variety of theological themes and current issues. The list is enormous and it is

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<sup>12</sup>Cf. Augustine Thottakara, *Festschrift*, 38.

<sup>13</sup>Paul Kalluveetil, "A Word Filled Person," 46.

<sup>14</sup>Thottakara, *Festschrift*, 38. A list of important works of JP is given below.

beyond the scope of this article to make an exhaustive study of these scholarly productions of JP which in fact has the scope for a Doctoral research.

JP has made a very singular contribution not only for the study of scripture in India but more significantly for the hermeneutical task of the Indian church. He has done this by his contextual interpretation of Scripture and in a special way by courageous research into the meaning and challenge of the Word of God for the transformation of society based on the dialogue and justice. A dialogic and intercultural reading of the Word in view of creating a new society has been his programme.<sup>15</sup> JP's literary contributions are on a wide range of themes related to the sacred scripture, theology, religious life, ecumenism, religious dialogue and current issues in the light of the Word of God. He never deviates from this focus.

Before we consider JP's publications, we have to mention his services as a member and later as the president of the Theological Publications in India for about three decades. Church in India and even in Asia is indebted to JP for his timely involvement and tireless efforts for making arrangements for reprinting RSV and NRSV, and thus making the English version of Bible available to hundreds of thousands of Word-loving people at an affordable price. In this administrative role, JP was instrumental in making available to a large number of Word-loving people a good number of books on bible and Christian theology from India and abroad. Likewise, his contributions to the church, by being in the editorial board of different periodicals of scientific nature such as the *Journal of Dharma*, *Millennium*, *Asian Horizons*, *Vinayasadhana* etc. are to be acknowledged.

JP did not engage in the subtle analysis of structure or meticulous surgical exercises on biblical passages and other technicalities as modern bible-scholars may engage in biblical studies of exegetical nature. His methodological attitude is made clear in an article on "Interpreting the Biblical Text and Beyond."

Ever since the scientific revolution of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries which ushered in the modern era, it was historical criticism that has been the dominant method of biblical exegesis. The scientific revolution during the past centuries, which gave rise to the emergence of empirical sciences, brought in new scientific methods for the study of literature and history.

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<sup>15</sup>Jacob Theckanath, "The Scars are the Proof: Reflections in the Proclamation of Christ in Asia," in *Indian Interpretation of Bible*, ed. Augustine Thottakara, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2000, 469.



Historical criticism applied these methods to the study of the Bible. Side by side with this scientific method there has been also what is known as the fundamentalist approach to the interpretation of the Bible whereby the literal sense of the Bible was defended, and it was seen as a safeguard against the liberal interpretation of the Bible. It is to be maintained that both these approaches subscribe to an objectivist, one dimensional hermeneutics, which assumes that the text of the Bible has only one true meaning, wholly independent of the cultural conditioning of the reader and the interpreter.<sup>16</sup>

By way of methodology, therefore, JP insisted that real exegesis consists in the interaction of the text and the community. The biblical text was written in a particular context in the life of the people of God in the salvation history. "These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11; cf. Deut 29:29). The true meaning of the biblical text evolves in the interaction between the text and the reader/church of today. The biblical text, being the Word of God and therefore "the lamp for our feet and light for our path" (Ps 119: 105), has that inner richness. JP distinguishes between the 'author meaning' and the 'text meaning.' The author meaning does not exhaust the meaning of a text. JP and George Soares-Prabhu (1929-1995), another innovative theologian of Asia, had much agreement in theological thinking, critical views on the attitudes of the present church, and above all, far-sighted reflections and theological contributions.<sup>17</sup> JP's biblical hermeneutics and his theologizing are in perfect harmony with what *Verbum Domini*, the

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<sup>16</sup>Joseph Pathrapankal, "Interpreting the Biblical Text and Beyond," *Theology for Our Time* 12 (July 2009) 1-2. For JP "The inspired word of God has within itself a dynamism to take new meaning and open new horizons of ideas through its encounter with new contexts." *Text and Context in Biblical Interpretation*, 6. Here I would like to recall an intervention of Pope Benedict XVI in the Synod on the Word of God in 2008. "When exegesis is not theological, Scripture cannot be the soul of theology, and *vice versa* when theology is not essentially interpretation of Scripture within the Church, theology no longer has a foundation." *L'Osservatore Romano* 48, November 26, 2008, 14.

<sup>17</sup>In a guest lecture given by Soares Prabhu in the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, in 1983, this author heard him criticizing the Historical Critical Method of the Interpretation of the Bible. The Pontifical Biblical Commission has, however, highly recommended this method as a necessary method of finding out the literal meaning of the scriptural passages. Cf. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Bangalore: NBCLC 1994, 31, 34, 78. "Soares-Prabhu developed a method in theology in order to understand the Indian and Asian problems to which he sought to respond from a Christian perspective" Mathew Illathuparambil, ed., in *The Contemporary Theologians: Context and Contributions*, Bangalore: ATC 2006, 482. Cf. Also G.M. Soares-Prabhu, *Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today*, ed. I. Padinjarekuttu (*Collected Works of George M. Soares-Prabhu S. J.*, Vol. I), Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 1999.

post-synodal apostolic exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI says: "The word of God, like the Christian faith itself, has a profoundly intercultural character; it is capable of encountering different cultures and in turn encountering them to encounter one another."<sup>18</sup>

JP was greatly encouraged by the emphasis given to the Bible by the Second Vatican Council. We may say that the point of departure of JP as a biblical theologian is *Dei Verbum*. JP's literary service of the Word of God began with an article in the *Indian Journal of Theology* in 1967: "The Problem of 'History' in the Gospels in the Light of Vatican's Constitution of Divine Revelation."<sup>19</sup> JP published his doctoral dissertation in 1971 under the title *Metanoia, Faith, Covenant*. In this thesis JP tries to fathom the theology of Paul and analyses the biblical concept of *metanoia* in its relation to the Pauline concept of faith as these two concepts have their origin and growth within the framework of covenant.<sup>20</sup> Since then JP continued without break his literary *sadhana* of the Word. The title of one of the latest articles of JP published in *Asian Horizons* is "Revelation, Sacred Scripture and the Church as Tradition: Dynamic Understanding of Tradition in *Dei Verbum*." This simple fact shows how JP's scholarly mind is guided by the Vatican II and its teachings.<sup>21</sup> He truly imbibed the spirit of

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<sup>18</sup>Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, no. 114. "The Church is firmly convinced that the word of God is inherently capable of speaking to all human persons in the context of their own culture: this conviction springs from the Bible itself, which right from the Book of Genesis, adopts a universalist stance (cf. Gen 1:27-28)" (no 114).

<sup>19</sup>Cf. *Indian Journal of Theology*, 16 (1967), 86-96.

<sup>20</sup>Kalluveetil, "Word-filled Person," 46.

<sup>21</sup>A complete list of the books and articles written by JP up to the year 2000 is given in the article by Augustine Thottakara CMI, "A Short Biographical Sketch," in the above-mentioned *Festschrift*, 30-39.

The important books and articles after 2000 are the following. "Bible and World Religions Perspectives on Biblical Pastoral Ministry in a Pluralistic world," *Word and Worship*, 33, 01 (2000) 32-51; "Being a Religious Minority: A Lesson from the Diaspora Jews," *Word and Worship*, 35, 03 (2002) 207-227; "Making Disciples (Mt 28:18-19) in the Early Church and Its Contemporary Challenges," *Third Millennium* 05, 04 (2002) 6-25; "Bible and Missiological Challenges - A Critical and Contextualized Study of Missiological Texts," *Mission Today, A Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research* 05, 02 (2003) 101-120; "Understanding History: Emerging Christian Perspectives," *Journal of Dharma*, 28, 02 (2003) 175-195; "Making Disciples (Mt 28:16-20) and Being Witnesses of Christ (Acts 1:8): A Re-Reading of the Theology of Mission," *Vidyajyothi* 69, 8 (2005) 556-584; "Nazareth Manifesto in the Evangelizing Mission of Jesus," *Indian Theological Studies* 43, 03 (2006) 291-308; "Christian Evangelization in the Context of Religious Pluralism," *Third Millennium* 10, 04 (2007) 27-50; "Christological Perspectives of John Chethimattam," *Jeevadhara - A Journal of Christian Interpretation (English)* 37, 4 (2007) 347-367; "Theological Contributions of Francis Acharya Towards an Indian Christian Theology," *Third Millennium* 11, 2 (2008) 53-66; "Women in Pauline Theology: A Realistic Appraisal," *Asian Horizons - Dharmaram Journal of*

openness and universalism which is the characteristic of the Word of God.

In one of his latest writings, *Living Way: Meditations on the Letter to the Hebrews*, JP makes a meditative reading of the Word of God. In his theologizing process, there is an evolution in JP, the biblical theologian; from being critical and creative JP moves to be meditative. In this process, an abiding interest, concern and consistent effort to interpret the Word of God to make it relevant to the multi-religious context of India are the hallmarks of JP's books and numerous articles.<sup>22</sup> In recognition of his laudable contribution to biblical theology an honorary PhD was conferred on JP by the University of Uppsala, Sweden, in 1997.

From the beginning of JP's teaching career, he began to write books and articles on Bible and biblical topics. In the beginning he was writing in Malayalam language, and these publications were of popular nature. But that was the beginning stage of an illustrious writing career which demonstrated JP's theological acumen and biblical scholarship. The theological focus of JP emerges from his major works, springboard of which was his doctoral thesis *Metanoia, Faith, Covenant* published in 1971. The major works of JP are the following: *Christian Life: NT Perspectives* (1982); *Critical and Creative: Studies in Bible and Theology* (1986); *Text and Context in Biblical Interpretation* (1993) *The Christian Programme: A Theological and Pastoral Study on the Sermon on the Mount* (1999);<sup>23</sup> *New and the Living Way: Meditations on the Letter to the Hebrews* (2012); *Turning to the Other Sides: Biblical and Theological Studies* (2019) is his latest book.

*Christian Life* is a collection of studies on various aspects of the earthly existence of the followers of Christ. One can find "the emergence of a critical and creative JP who delves deep into the

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*Theology*," 3, 1 (2009) 17-30; "Interpreting the Biblical Text and Beyond," *Theology for our Time - The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, 12 (July 2009) 1-13; "Christian Priesthood: In the Footsteps of the Faithful and Merciful High Priest," *Jeevadhara - A Journal of Christian Interpretation* (English) 40, 4 (2010) 270-286; "Universality of the Human Spirit; A New Focus for Asian Theological Reflection," *Asian Horizons - Dharmaram Journal of Theology*," 5, 1 (2011) 10-23; "Biblical Eco-Concerns in the Context of Asian Religions," *Asian Horizons - Dharmaram Journal of Theology*," 6, 2 (2012) 229-247; *The New and the Living Way: Meditations on the Letter to the Hebrews*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation 2012; "Revelation, Sacred Scripture and the Church as Tradition: Dynamic Understanding of Tradition in *Dei Verbum*," *Asian Horizons - Dharmaram Journal of Theology*," 7, 1 (2013) 59-75; "The Church at its Origins in the Jewish Milieu" in *Church on Pilgrimage. Trajectories of Intercultural Encounter*, ed. Kuncheria Pathil, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications 2016, 33-52.

<sup>22</sup>Alphonsus Mathias, "Foreword," 14.

<sup>23</sup>Kalluveetil CMI, "A Word-filled Person" 48.

contextual texts of the Bible and finally could evolve a comprehensive programme for Christian life in our times of religious pluralism and secular humanism.”<sup>24</sup> In *Critical and Creative* we see the prophetic boldness of JP, similar to that of prophet Jeremiah. In this book one can find a new way of theologizing in the existential context. JP invites the readers to become creatively involved in the evolution of a dynamic Christian life. *Text and Context* discusses the power and vitality of the Word of God to guide, inspire, encourage and warn the human beings about the relationship they should have to God and His living images. The *Christian Programme* is the *magnum opus* of JP. It articulates freshly a blueprint of an authentic programme of life for the followers of Jesus on the basis of a new *dharma* declared by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in the context of the challenges posed by the religious pluralism and secular humanism and even by the threat of religionless Christianity in the different parts of the world of this post-modern era.<sup>25</sup> *Dimensions of the Word* is in fact a Jubilee gift of JP in 2000 and in it he deals with a wide range of vital issues for the life and activities of the people of God. In *New and the Living Way*, JP observes that the Christian life today, is not far away from the experience of the first and early second century Christians. There prevails a feeling among the Christians that they are exhausted in living the Christian faith. They today need a lot of encouragement and persuasion, assistance and acceptance. In the evening of his illustrious life of service of the Word, these were the concerns which prompted JP to venture on a spiritual and homiletic reading of the Letter to the Hebrews. This work is neither a pious and spiritual meditation nor a purely scientific theological treatise. In fact, the author has beautifully blended these two aspects in this book and thus presents before the readers the rich and deep dimensions of the Word of God that invites the readers towards an authentic Christian life. JP is giving some hermeneutical clues to clarify how there occurred a kind of negative attitude towards life and the world. He goes further to state that this negative outlook towards life and the world is not at all a biblical contribution.<sup>26</sup>

We can find in the scholarly books and articles JP’s treatment of a vast number of biblical, historical, theological, spiritual, pastoral,

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<sup>24</sup>Kalluveettil CMI, “A Word -filled Person” 49.

<sup>25</sup>Kalluveettil CMI, “A Word-filled Person,” 63.

<sup>26</sup>Benny Nalkara CMI, “Book Review,” *Asian Horizons* 9, 1 (March 2015) 249-252. With regret I have to acknowledge that I could not get as I was working on this article a copy of JP’s latest book *Turning to the Other Sides: Biblical and Theological Studies* (2019).

cultural, inter-cultural, economic, national, international and socio-political topics. There is a vast spectrum of themes which will sustain the interest of the reader. He discusses them in a factual and contextualized way. The reader will find ease in reading his works. JP elaborates his arguments in a logical but critical way. His treatment is always with masterly competence in the light of the Word of God situating himself in the real context of the Church and the people. Since he writes placing himself in the midst of the people there is a direct appeal to the sensitivity of the reader. JP has fruitfully used a lot of his mental energy in a critical and creative way. Much of his writings will be read by readers even a century later with curiosity and sustained interest.

### **3. The Core Message of JP's Biblical Theology**

Now we come to the *crux* of this article. What is the outstanding contribution of JP as a reputed biblical theologian from Asia? As a student of theology, I attended JP's lectures on the Acts of the Apostles in St Joseph's Pontifical Institute, Alwaye, in the year 1976. I still recall how forcefully and convincingly JP showed us that Acts 1:8 is a roadmap given to the Apostles by the risen Lord himself before his ascension for the most important task of the proclamation of the Gospel to the *eschaton*. Being a passionate admirer and scholar of St Paul, JP cherished the mission of the Church as a dominant theme of his theological reflection even in the initial years of his teaching career. JP's view is that just as the Apostles plunged into the missionary activity, Church must be always fulfilling its mission of bringing the good news to the nations. But as a biblical theologian, JP critically observed the history of the Church and began to point out the flaws which crept into the Church's understanding of mission itself. He began to speak and write boldly about the deviation from the true meaning of mission as given by the Lord and point out the flaws in church's missionary involvement among the peoples of the different parts of the world.

In this context, we have to take note of the complex reality of the means and methods of 'propagation of faith' employed by the Church in the past. The fact is that in the course of time, especially since the emancipation of the Church under Emperor Constantine, church drifted away from the self-emptying spirit of Christ and imbibed an imperial and triumphant attitude, imposing Christian doctrine, articulated in the post-Constantinian era and its praxis as demanded by the emancipated Church. We are not referring to the providential articulations of Christian dogma and doctrine which

enriched the deposit of faith which is to be preserved intact by the Church always. The basic attitudes of the Gospel such as Prophetic spirit, servant-leadership, leaven hidden in the dough, little-flock, cross as a mystery, etc. and more secular attitudes dominated in the Church in its every aspect of her life. Proselytism, conversion, establishment of a powerful Christian community, etc. became priorities and ambitious projects in the life and mission of the church. Since these developments are facts of history, we see the providence of God in them. We need not lament about them but we have to assess them in the light of the Word of God.<sup>27</sup>

Vatican II was a momentous ecclesial event for such an assessment of the past in every aspect and it gave great impetus for a radical paradigm shift. The Council, which is hailed as a new Pentecost, gave a clarion call for a return to the original spirit of the Gospel in every area of ecclesial life. It was an invitation to the church to march to the clear Christian roots in the Pre-Constantinian era and to liberate itself from the imperial trappings, external pomp, undue dogmatism and pageantry. This, in fact, was a call to a much-needed *metanoia* for a people of the divine covenant bound to lead a life of faith. We have pointed out above that the starting point of the scholarly life of JP as a biblical theologian was the search for meaning of *Metanoia, Faith and Covenant*. That shows how academically JP equipped himself for his task as a biblical theologian. JP and people like him, having imbibed the spirit of the Council, and having ascertained the unshakable platform of Truth in the Word of God, began to make bold statements echoing and re-echoing the call of the Council to return to the original spirit of the Gospel. Here we can observe the emergence of JP into the mainstream of the Church as a prophet equipping himself with the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God' (Eph 6:17). We can see also a blending of prophetic action and biblical theology which makes an honest believer critical and creative as expressed in the Call-narrative of prophet Jeremiah: "I appoint you over the nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer 1:10). That is the task of a real theologian in the Church – prophetic action.

In the first stage of the teaching career of JP as a biblical theologian he was pursuing a descriptive approach, namely, he wanted to know

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<sup>27</sup>For critical views on the topic, cf. S. Kim, "Reflections on Being a Bishop," *FABC Papers*, 35, 1983, 13-20; F. Wilfred, "Some Tentative Reflections on the Language of Christian uniqueness: An Indian Perspective," *Vidyajyothi Journal of Theological Reflection* 55 (1991) 652-72; S. Anand, "Universally Unique and Uniquely Universal," *Vidyajyothi Journal of Theological Reflection* 55 (1991) 393-424.

and explain what the Council teaches in the dogmatic constitutions, especially *Dei Verbum* as far as interpretation of the Bible, biblical theology and missionary activity are concerned.

In a short time, the critic in JP began to appear. I have mentioned above how JP was critical about the exclusive type of exegesis of the Word of God. He had his own opinion about biblical hermeneutics. Like a loving mother Church needs to be inclusive and open to listen and appreciate whatever is good and whatever is noble among the people of all nations, because Church is certain that wherever truth is found, it is from the Holy Spirit. This demand for being 'more inclusive' is made frequently by JP in his writings. According to JP,

the uniqueness of Christianity does not consist in its exclusiveness and claim for superiority over other religions, rather on its capacity to transcend the categories of historically determined religious traditions and in its broad-based approach to all other religions through which it can impart the doctrine of the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of humankind.<sup>28</sup>

A person who is lover of truth will be passionate with the truth but impartial and inclusive of all because as St Thomas Aquinas has said, "Whatever its source, truth is of the Holy Spirit."<sup>29</sup>

JP boldly affirmed that

the task of the Church is to announce Jesus' Gospel to the whole world not primarily to bring people into the structure of a new religion but to make them aware of the human destiny according to God's plan... The mission of the church is to continuously discover the incarnational and soteriological roles she has to play in the world.<sup>30</sup>

Inclusiveness is a familiar term in the theological circles now, thanks to the repeated demands of scholars like JP. The critic in JP, like the biblical prophets, constantly raised the need for conversion from the part of the church in its attitudes and praxis in liturgy, theology, spirituality, missionary activities, ordained ministry, consecrated life, ecumenism, etc. It was not a clamour from an interpretation of the Word accommodated to the situation but the

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<sup>28</sup>Pathrapankal, *Text and Context in Biblical Interpretation*, Bangalore, Dharmaram Publications 1993, 55; here I wish to mention similar insights found in the writings of scholars like Subhash Anand. E.g. *Hindutva: A Christian Response*, Indore: Satprakashan, 2001. See the insightful remarks in the final chapter of the book, 87-107, which the author acknowledges in the book as presented in the 23<sup>rd</sup> annual meeting of the Indian Theological Association, held in DVK in 2000.

<sup>29</sup>St Thomas Aquinas, "*Omne verum a quocumque dicitur a Spiritu Sancto est.*" *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 109, 1 ad 1. Pope St John Paul II quotes it in *Fides et Ratio*, no. 44.

<sup>30</sup>Pathrapankal, *Text and Context*, 35.

fruit of a contextualized interpretation of the Word of God, that is, giving due emphasis to God's *chairoi* and its demands.<sup>31</sup> It was a far-sighted prophetic call. JP is perhaps the first biblical theologian of Asia who constantly raised the 'wake up' call to the Church by his prophetic type of criticism, but never succumbing to any kind of 'negativity-syndrome.' Constant and bold prophetic criticisms are most needed for a community which has the universal mandate for proclamation of the Gospel to the *eschaton* inviting and persuading individuals to true *metanoia*. "The Church has had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times, and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel."<sup>32</sup>

What is the creative contribution of JP as a biblical theologian? I think, the *Christian Programme*, which elaborates the Sermon on the Mount in the multi-religious and multi-cultural context of Asia and in the complex world scenario at the end of two millennia is the most resourceful and helpful contribution of JP as a biblical theologian. *The Christian Programme* can be considered the most comprehensive articulation of JP's theological vision. In chapter one of *The Christian Programme* JP describes the characteristic of the Sermon on the Mount as a 'discourse' and shows it as a welcome setting for a theological dialogue with the different peoples of Asia. JP comments on the discourse traditions in religious scriptures such as Upanishads, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Buddha-vacana* and Qu'ran, thus setting a common platform for dialogue.<sup>33</sup> Then he turns his attention to the discourse traditions of the Old and the New Testaments. JP lays foundation for his presentation of the Christian Programme by giving an original exposition of the beatitudes (Mt 5:3-10) with emphasis on the all-inclusive nature of the beatitudes by the Lord. All are invited to create the necessary dispositions which would qualify them for receiving the blessings of Jesus. This emphasis on the inclusiveness of

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<sup>31</sup>Cf. "Time and Eternity in Biblical Thought," *Journal of Dharma* 1 (1976) 331-344. Cf. Also JP's reflections on "Time and Eternity in the Biblical Thought," in the third chapter of *Critical and Creative*. JP invites biblical scholars to become more and more committed to the task of making Bible a liberating force. In this context his warning is noteworthy. "Any hermeneutics that pretends first to discover general, time-and-space transcending interpretation which are then adapted and applied to particular situation, is not deluding itself but is actually failing to fulfill the very task to which it is in fact, called, and cannot possibly lead to any kind of real contextuality." *Critical and Creative: Studies in Bible and Theology*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications 1986, 7-8.

<sup>32</sup>Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4. Eng. Tr.: *The Documents of Vatican II*, Bombay, St Paul's Publications, 174.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Kalluveetil, "A Word-filled Person," 64.



all as explained above is a constant element in JP's writings on the basic disposition of the people of God.

The Sermon on the Mount announces 'The New *Dharma*' of Jesus' disciples. It is for the purpose of making humans free that Jesus spells out what will give religious identity of his disciples and motivation for their commitment to laws and regulations (Mt 5:17-19).

In Mt 5:20 Jesus is presenting his new *dharma* in negative terms which JP explicates with all his eloquence. *Dharma*, which is the qualifying characteristic of discipleship, is a gift and task at the same time. It is one of freedom, relationship, altruism and radical trust in God. This *dharma* is to be practiced with its vertical and horizontal dimensions. Reinterpreting six human realities in antithetical sense (murder, adultery, divorce, swearing, retaliation and love for enemies) as found in Mt 5:21-47, Jesus throws light on the various dimensions of the new *dharma*. The Sermon on the Mount in Mt 6:19-7:12 highlights the new attitudes of the New *Dharma*. Jesus enlarged the horizons of the concept of the kingdom of God to include the whole humankind within its framework.<sup>34</sup> JP shows the inner, deeper and comprehensive meaning of Christian programme as demanded by Jesus, the divine *Guru*. The disciples of Jesus must enter into the inner spirit of this new *dharma* and regulate their actions accordingly. "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48) is the supreme mandate and absolute standard of this new *dharma*.

I believe that the writings of JP are revolving around this new *dharma* announced by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and theologically explained by JP in *The Christian Programme*. There is no book or article of JP without an explicit or implicit reference to this *dharma*. All his writings are elaboration of this radical vision of Christian religion highlighting its various dimensions. In his elaboration of the new *dharma* JP sticks to his hermeneutical method and pastoral approach as highlighted above. He maintained a steady attitude of inclusiveness and forcefully advocated openness for dialogue which is bequeathed to the Church by the Word of God and reiterated by Vatican II. JP maintained all through his expositions, not a confrontational but a dialogical attitude, be it with people of other religions or Christians of various denominations. Having based his theological vision on the new *dharma* spelt out in the beatitudes of Jesus as the unshakable ground and the Sermon on the Mount as its elaboration as well as the proclamation of it, JP's vision has a solid

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Joseph Pathrapankal, *The Christian Programme*, Bangalore: Dharmaram publications 1999, 251.

biblical foundation and his insights of biblical theology has a perennial relevance. Maintaining an inclusive attitude and a spirit of dialogue JP has thought, taught and wrote, sharing with his students, disciples and readers his theological vision on the new *dharma*. No sensible and believing person in human community can ignore this new *dharma*. In the contemporary world scenario where fundamentalism, terrorism, consumerism, individualism and the like are rampant in different parts of the world, JP's projection of the new *dharma* itself is an act of proclamation of the Gospel.

In the life of the Catholic Church of the twenty first century, we can see an enduring struggle to maintain this openness and spirit of dialogue in every sphere of the ecclesial life. JP has advocated this through his innumerable lectures in the classrooms and lecture halls of the ecclesiastical institutions in India and abroad and written in his numerous books and articles. Though the Church is *Mater et Magistra*, she does not use any more the language of dominance and triumphalism which have become obsolete in the theological dictionary of the church, a pilgrim community. Thanks to the pastoral and charismatic leadership of Pope Francis in our time, Church is showing to the world inspiring and attractive example of Servant-leadership.<sup>35</sup> She is reaching out to the fellow believers in different churches as a dialogue-partner. Church is revisiting its own pronouncements, as needed. Church is ready to join hands with leaders of world religions for the realization of the beatitudinal bliss of God's children. Church is encouraging its children to collaborate with the initiatives of the human community to remove illiteracy, poverty, oppression, exploitation of every kind, bondage, etc.

Church is redefining its idea of mission: 'Church is a mission.' "I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world."<sup>36</sup> Evangelization is not a process of proselytism and simple

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<sup>35</sup>Pope Francis, ever since he became the supreme pastor of the Catholic Church, by his presence, words and deeds, has become a model for servant-leadership. The very first appearance of the newly elected Pope Francis in balcony of St Peter's Basilica was a Gospel proclamation; how he bowed to the people gathered in the Square and asked for their blessing and prayer for him before he imparted his *Urbi et Orbi* blessing. His first encounter with the world ushered in a new era in the missionary life of the Church. Pomp and pageantry were dispensed with. In his interview with Eugenio Scalfaro, the founder of Italian daily *La Repubblica* on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2013, Pope Francis stated: "The leaders of the church have been often narcissistic, flattered and wrongly incited by their courtiers. The court is the plague of the papacy." *L'Osservatore Romano*, October 9, 2013, 15.

<sup>36</sup>Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 254: "Our mission as baptized persons is not really determined by the number or size of spaces that we occupy, but rather by our capacity to generate change and awaken wonder and compassion. We do this by the

propagation of faith but is proclamation of the Gospel by radiating the joy of its living by her children. The Church grows not through proselytizing but through attraction, that is through witness. Pope Benedict XVI said this. What is evangelization? It is living the Gospel; it is witnessing to how one lives the Gospel; witnessing to the Beatitudes.<sup>37</sup> Pope Francis was more vocal in his demand for inculturation in his address to the Clergy, Religious and Seminarians in St Peter's Church at Wat in Bangkok on November 22, 2019. Pope invited them to give faith a Thai face and flesh which involves much more than making translations. It is about letting the Gospel be stripped of fine but foreign garb; to let it sing with the native music of their land and inspire the hearts of our brothers and sisters with the same beauty that set our hearts on fire. "The Lord did not call us and sent us forth into the world to impose obligations on people or lay heavier burdens than those they already have, which are many, but rather to share joy, a beautiful, new inspiring horizon."<sup>38</sup>

One can notice big change in the attitudes and perspectives in theology in the post-Vatican II era. Always radically rooted in Truth of the Word of God, Church stoops down to save the wounded human beings in different parts of the world. We can see a convergence of thought expressed in the writings of JP in these past many decades and in the magisterial writings of our time! JP's critical but prophetic views expressed in his scholarly books and erudite articles on different topics of Biblical Theology are finding perennial place in the vocabulary of the Catholic Church in the twenty first century. This is in fact, the satisfying result which will gladden the heart of JP, a person who has spent his whole life as a passionate lover of God's word who had imbibed the spirit of openness of Vatican II and constantly advocated a *metanoia* leading to authentic mission.

## Conclusion

JP himself made an assessment of his uninterrupted ministry of the Word for so many years as a biblical theologian in his reminiscences in the *Saptathi Festschrift* in these words:

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way we live as disciples of Jesus, in the midst of those with whom we share our daily lives, joys and sorrows, sufferings and hopes (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 1). In other words, the paths of mission are not those of proselytism." Pope Francis' address to priests and religious in St Peter's Church in Morocco (Rabat), *L'Osservatore Romano*, April 5, 2019, 9.

<sup>37</sup>Pope Francis, Interview in the aircraft during Pope's return from Myanmar and Bangladesh, *L'Osservatore Romano*, December 22-29, 2017, 5.

<sup>38</sup>J.D. Flynn, Catholicnewsagency.com 38122.

It was God's providential care that guided me to this stage of life and enabled me to devote myself to the ministry of the Word. It is a ministry full of charm and challenge because it is exercised within the specific context of India with its two challenging parameters of religious pluralism and socio-economic complexities.<sup>39</sup>

JP has spent his whole life for this ministry of the Word and has enriched the church in the decisive post-Vatican II era. I conclude this article on JP hailing him as a great Asian contributor to biblical theology with the words of Paul Kalluveetil, another genius in the same field.<sup>40</sup>

Prof. Dr Joseph Pathrapankal CMI intensely loved the Word of God from an early age. Studied it passionately all throughout his life, assimilated it consciously, taught and preached it for almost four decades<sup>41</sup> with love and passion, integrated it continuously to his style and motive of life, and let it become the guiding light, principle and goal of his existence. He was permeated and saturated with the Word of God and consequently it spilled and flowed over very powerfully as selfless service to the world.

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<sup>39</sup> Joseph Pathrapankal, "Reminiscences," in *Indian Interpretation of Bible*, ed. Augustine Thottakara, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications 2000, 489.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Kalluveetil CMI, "A Word-filled Person," 68.

<sup>41</sup> Evidently, this was written in a book published in 2000. JP continued to teach until 2019, and hence we can say that he taught for about six decades.