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BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND DIALOGUE WITH THE POOR

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Abstract

If the Bible can be understood as a written document of the revelation of God's nature, then an important task of biblical theology is to understand and interpret various aspects of the Divine nature revealed in and through the biblical texts. When we consider God's self-communication in the Bible, we must pay attention to His unfailing attention and involvement in human history, especially in favour of the poor and the marginalised. Any theology to be relevant needs to dialogue with the context. This is true also of biblical theology. Asia, being a continent of diversities and divides on various levels, for a biblical theology understandable and meaningful for her, we need to initiate a dialogue with these pluralities and problems. The Bible, both the OT and the NT, recounts the story of God's listening to the cry of the poor. Of course, the term "poor" is understood as anyone, including nature, which experiences any kind of deprivation and marginalization. Since Asia is a continent with a huge number of poor people experiencing exclusion, a study of the biblical approach to

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poverty as a dialogue of inclusion vis-à-vis exclusion and of participation in the cry of the poor, would help develop a biblical theology for Asia. In this article I try to look at the idea of the poor in the Bible as a dialogue of inclusion and involvement, identifying various models and connect it to the FABC documents, and more specially, apply it to the Indian scenario of poverty and inequalities.

Keywords: Biblical Theology, Covenant, Cry as Prayer, Cry of Mother Earth, Dialogue as Inclusion, Dialogue as Participation, Exodus, Jesus and the Poor, Prophets, Poor in the Bible, Poverty in the Bible

The poor in the Bible is a multidimensional reality, which comprises of all those who are excluded as insignificant, due to economic reasons, skin colour, gender, culture, citizenship, etc., and “whose full rights as a human being is not recognized.” An effort to bring theology and the poor face to face is a grave responsibility of a biblical theologian today. Loving the poor can be a charitable sentiment but dialoguing with them will change the world. Since the Bible gives “priority of the other in relation to me,” as Levinas writes, any study of the Bible necessarily involves a study of its interest in the most vulnerable and discarded of the other, which is given as a cluster “the widow, the orphan and the alien.”¹ That means, any attempt in understanding the God of the Bible is to be done in dialogue with this God who gets involved in the cause of the poor for their uplifting.

The Bible presents a God who breaks himself through the miserable situation of the poor. This breakthrough happens when the social reality necessitates it. Theologizing in Asian context in general, and in India in particular, demands a breakthrough into the social situation where the cry of the millions go unheard every day. Asia is the second largest continent of the poor after Sub-Saharan Africa. The number of people who goes hungry everyday remains alarmingly high in spite of the efforts made in reducing poverty. Economic growth is usually presented as the growth in GDP, etc. However, as various surveys indicate, the beneficiaries of the economic growth are considerably less in number as against those remain displaced and poor. According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index, huge numbers of people still suffer from inequality “in which people experience poverty in their health, education, and standard of living.”² In addition to starvation, “poor” and “poverty” have

¹Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God who Comes to Mind*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988, 91.

² <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/multidimensional-poverty-index-2019-illuminating-inequalities> accessed on 20.08.2019.

multifaceted aspects in Asian scenario, particularly in India which is still having millions of its citizens living in extreme poverty.³ The cry of the poor in India tells the story of unjust structuralism that remains unchallenged and perpetuated. The victims include Dalits, women, children and mother earth. The divide between the rich and poor, even after many centuries of socialistic ideology of equitable distribution, is still looming large as a contentious problem to be addressed. The imbalance is so noticeable in emerging economies like India. As Oxfam International reports, “The top 10% of the Indian population holds 77% of the total national wealth.”⁴ According to the latest survey done by Oxfam, the income inequality is getting wider and wider, which is “a symptom of a failing economic system.”⁵ FABC documents portrays the *locus theologicus*⁶ of Asia:

Regional economic disparities mark the economic landscape of Asia. We see high development levels in some of the countries of Asia such as South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, rising development in Thailand and Malaysia, and the countries of Central Asia, while most countries in South and Southeast Asia generally lag far behind, mired in wide-spread poverty. Exacerbated by globalization, poverty is heightened by corruption, economic and political imbalances and injustices. The underdevelopment of agriculture which makes up the main production and livelihood of Asian countries contributes to this economic malaise. A new form of poverty has also emerged in the wake of globalization, the poverty of those who do not know and are being left behind by the rapid advance of scientific and technological knowledge. In all these we see the need to promote a culture of evangelical poverty in the Church.⁷

In the face of such an alarming situation how do we make a relevant theology that will address the demand of the poor to have a listening heart? Pope Francis in his message for *the Third World Day of the Poor* directs our attention to the God of Scripture who hears the

³ https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/33EF03BB-9722-4AE2-ABC7-AA2972D68AFE/Archives-2019/Global_POVEQ_IND.pdf

⁴ <https://www.oxfam.org/en/even-it/india-extreme-inequality-numbers>, accessed on 20.08.2019.

⁵ <https://www.oxfam.org/en/even-it/india-extreme-inequality-numbers>, accessed on 20.08.2019.

⁶ For details of this concept, Carmen M. Nanko-Fernandez, “Lo Cotidiano as Locus Theologicus.” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. by Orlando O. Espín. Oxford, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015, 15-33. When Jonas Thaliath, CMI explains the deeper meaning of theology as “the confrontation of theology with the problems of modern life and to relate theology to life in such a way that you can harmonize theology with its everyday vicissitudes,” he probably implies the need to pay attention to the context for theological deliberations. Jonas Thaliath, “*Fides Querens Harmoniam Vitae*,” *Asian Horizons* 1, 1 (2007) 94.

⁷ *FABC Papers* 138, “FABC at Forty Years: Responding to the Challenges of Asia,” *X FABC Plenary Assembly, December 2013*, 17.

cry of the poor.⁸ Taking cues from Pope, the role of biblical theology is to expose ways in which God of the Bible encounter the poor restoring hope in the face of injustice, suffering and uncertainties of life. Hence, attention to the poor is a socio-political and religious imperative. As the vision statement of the FABC points out, evangelization in Asia necessarily demands a dialogue with the poor (integral liberation and option for the poor).⁹ Hence, in this article attempt is made to identify various aspects of this dialogue based on the Bible, especially, the OT.

1. Understanding the Poor and Poverty in the Bible

The Bible employs various words and groups of people to signify various aspects of the semantic domain “poor”: For example, the needy (*ebiyon*), poor (*dallim ptokos*), the afflicted (*anaw*) (Amos 2:6ff; 8:2). The groups belonging to the poor are: the righteous (*zadiq*); the oppressed (*rezuzim*, Isa 58:6)); the orphan (*yatom*); widow (*almanah*); the alien (*gur*); the broken-hearted, the captives, the bound (Isa 60:1; Lk 4:18-22), the little ones (*ho mikros*) (Mt 18:6; Lk 17:2) etc.; One common trait of all these terms is that they occur mostly in the context of denunciation of the evil of poverty as a non-value and in passages which critically look at the reality of poverty as an outcome of exclusion of these categories by the rich and the powerful. This leads to deprivation and marginalization, and hence advocacy to include them in socio-religious considerations. Soares-Prabhu summarizes well the idea of the poor in the Bible:

All through the Bible the poor are a sociological rather than a religious group. Their identity is defined not by any spiritual attitude of openness or dependence on God, but simply by their sociological situation of powerlessness and need. This need is not necessarily economic need... The poor of the Bible are all those who are in any way... deprived of the means or the dignity they need to lead a fully human existence; or who are in a situation of powerlessness which expose them to such deprivation. The poor of the Bible are this “the wretched of the earth,” the marginalized, the exploited, all those who are actually or potentially oppressed.¹⁰

In this article, I follow the line of understanding of Soares-Prabhu in approaching the poor in the Bible as a semantic domain which

⁸Pope Francis, “The Hope of the Poor shall not Perish forever,” Message of His Holiness Pope Francis-Third World Day of The Poor, art. 4. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/poveri/documents/papa-francesco_20190613_messaggio-iii-giornatamondiale-poveri-2019.html

⁹FABC Papers, No. 138, 7

¹⁰G. Soares-Prabhu, “Class in the Bible: The Biblical Poor, A Social Class?,” *Vidyajyoti* 49 (1985) 332.

refers to all those who are denied of dignified life either by birth or by man-made structures of alienations and exclusions.¹¹ “Violence, exploitation, discrimination, marginalization, restrictive approaches to fundamental freedoms, whether of individuals or of groups: these are some of the chief elements of poverty, which needs to be overcome.”¹² Walter Kasper speaks of fourfold poverty: economic poverty, cultural poverty, lack of relationship, and mental poverty.¹³ As any dialogue is an attempt to find ways of inclusion of the dialoguing partners standing at odds, a dialogue with the poor based on the Bible means also identifying models of this inclusion traceable in the Bible and propose to apply them to similar contexts and events.

2. Dialogue with Poor as Inclusion vs Exclusion

One of the maladies of humanity is the tendency of those who have power to make use of the weaker and more vulnerable to their own advantage, even excluding them from any share of the profitable outcome. The Bible reveals a God who rejects these forms of exclusion and advocates for an inclusive approach.

2.1. Models of Inclusion in the Bible

2.1.1. *Hagar*

The Hagar episode in the Bible (Gen 16:1-16; 21:8-21) warns against the denigration of humans to the realm of a commodity to be excluded once the purpose is met. Hagar, the slave, had to flee from the oppression of Sarai. The harsh treatment was intended to get Hagar out from the house, as she showed signs of emancipation from her status of being subjugated and of assertive attempts for her rights and privileges. It is part of the strategy of the powerful to eliminate or quench any attempt of emancipation of the oppressed dependents. But the messenger of God intervened in the life of the fleeing Hagar to notify Sarai and Abraham of their responsibility to take care of her. Again, fleeing does not guarantee safety for the life of Hagar and the child. Instead it makes her deprived of the basic human needs like food, shelter and dignity.¹⁴ The divine intervention in the life of the

¹¹However, poverty resulting from laziness or by not making use of the avenues and opportunities available is not to be tolerated or endorsed as acceptable.

¹²Pope Francis, Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for The World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2014), “Migrants and Refugees: Towards a Better World,” http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20130805_world-migrants-day.html.

¹³Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, New York: Paulist Press, 2014, 143.

¹⁴However, the command to Hagar to “Return to your mistress, and submit to her” (Gen 16:9) is ambivalent in its meaning, which is explained as “to accept

deprived gave her the courage to answer, explain her situation, her view and argument as we see in v. 8. The divine inclusion transforms Hagar to be an 'answering subject.'¹⁵ While humans try to exclude the marginalized Hagar, God recognizes her as a person and a dialogue partner. The divine agent recognizes the affliction of the expelled due to her status. In this way God gets involved in the life of the excluded person. Inclusion begins with recognition of the affliction of the deprived.

2.1.2. *Exodus and Covenant*

The Exodus narrates the process of inclusion of a group of people who suffered from exclusion due to their social status as migrants. The stigma of being non-citizens made the people of Israel in Egypt an easy prey to the nationalistic aspirations of the Pharaoh, who identified in the Hebrews a source of cheap labour. Even after one or two generations, "sons of Israel" were seen as outsiders and hence always reckoned as a threat to the people of the land of Egypt (Ex 1:9), especially as they grew in number. They were excluded from the social and religious ethos of the land, deprived of rights and privileges of citizens and denied freedom of worship. The Egypt of Exodus represents "oppression and exploitation" of the underprivileged due to ethnicity and citizenship. The Exodus is all about the divine ushering in with power and strength into human history to help those who are excluded by oppressive structures to find a new world of inclusion, where all are taken care of and listened to.

Through the Sinai Covenant, which has its foundation in the Exodus experience, Israel is asked to be herald of this new world order, which "has the agenda of evolving a counter-cultural community of the oppressed."¹⁶ The people were obliged to do justice, protect the poor and the stranger. This command was given to Israel as a nation according to Deuteronomic law.¹⁷ As James H. Cone notes,

suffering as part of covenant theology," as "an interim strategy for survival," etc. For details see Antony John Baptist, *Together as Sisters: Hagar and Dalit Women*, Delhi: ISPECK, 2012, 136-139."

¹⁵ Antony John Baptist, *Together as Sisters: Hagar and Dalit Women*, 190.

¹⁶ A. Maria Arul Raja, "Discriminatory Justice against Discriminatory Injustice: Some Biblical Perspectives," in Joy Philip Kakkanattu and Laurence Culas, ed., *The Preamble of the Indian Constitution: Biblical Perspective*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2019, 221.

¹⁷ Walter Brueggeman, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, 224-228.

The covenant is an invitation to Israel to enter into a responsible relationship with the God of Exodus... To accept the covenant means that Israel must now live as Yahweh's liberated people, becoming the embodiment of freedom made possible through the freeing presence of God. The covenant not only places upon Israel the responsibility of accepting the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh...; it also requires Israel to treat the weak in its midst as Yahweh has treated it.¹⁸

In an era, which on the one hand insists on the centrality of human being, but on the other hand, interprets it for the benefit of the developed world and their profit driven philosophy, the Exodus and covenant vision of human society which insists on equality and dignity of each person including the marginalized is to be highlighted as alternative. For, as FABC states, "The disregard of the luxury, debauchery, illegal gains of some, and the growing poverty and insecurity of others etc. ... indicate that every statement of the centrality of man is false if it is not accompanied by the parallel insistence upon the equality and dignity of each person."¹⁹

2.1.3. Prophets

Whenever there emerged in Israel traits of imperialistic tendencies of oppression and exclusion by the rich and the powerful elites, prophets intervened on behalf of the deprived ones. When King David abused his royal power to take the wife of Uriah, a member of his own army who fought for the country, by eliminating him through treacherous means, Prophet Nathan reprimanded the king for his atrocity (2 Sam 11-12). The episode of the vineyard of Naboth (2 Kings 21) describes the exclusion strategy of lawmakers and political power. The undue desire of the king to grab the ancestral property of a citizen and the queen Jezebel's misuse of the royal powers indicate the tragedy of the law-enforcing power itself becoming the law-breaker. The story clearly illustrates abuse of power, exploitation and injustice done to the weak. The fate of Naboth is repeated today in every helpless person who stands for what is right and pays with his/her life. In the Indian scenario, Naboth can be a representative of the poor farmers and indigenous people, and their land as the vineyard. Mighty influential and exploiting agencies supported by corrupt politicians take the role of executing injustice to the poor farmers and Dalit communities who are robbed of their land.

¹⁸James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, 59.

¹⁹FABC Paper 17: *The Church at the Service of the Kingdom of God (II)*, by the Movement for a Better World, 1979, 7.

The deeds of both David and Ahab were paradigms of the politically and administratively powerful people who wield their power for excluding all those, especially the less powerful, in their way of achieving their lucrative and sensual desires. Uriah, Bathsheba and Naboth are poor victims of lawless power structures and the prophets were whistle-blowers of these abuses. They brought them to accountability for their policy of exclusion of their own citizens through violence and fraud for their selfish gains. The victims of exclusion are often the women, the poor, the migrants and the ordinary citizens.

The advocacy for inclusion of the poor and marginalized is all the more clear in the prophetic utterance of the classical prophets like Amos (5:14-5; 21-14), Micah (6:1-8), Isaiah (1:16-17; 42:1-4; 58:3-9; 61:1-3) and Jeremiah (7:5-7). They emphasized justice for the poor. Prophetic understanding of justice is more than merely giving the other what is due to him/her (retributive justice) but it is restorative in nature, in which the poor and the underprivileged will be given a chance. It is all the more to be shown in sharing the elementary resources like food, shelter and clothing with the poor (Isa 58:7).²⁰ Prophet Amos spared no words in warning the rich minority of his time about excluding the vast majority of the weaker section from the benefit of the economic growth in Israel. He pierced into the administrative and judicial policies which were intended to favour the money mongering elite minority of the covenant community which resulted in lower income strata (the righteous, the needy, the poor, the afflicted) who became poorer and ran out of resources. The prophetic words witness to this:

Thus says the LORD:

For three transgressions of Israel, and for four,
I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way... (2:6-7).

The prophets rejected religiosity, manifested in cult and sacrifices without any attention to the marginalized as unacceptable to Yahweh. It implies, without including the care for the poor, no worship would be pleasing to the God of Exodus. A cosy attitude of religion as merely pleasing God through sacrifices, and pilgrimages, without any attention to social commitment for uplifting the poor

²⁰Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, 189.

and the downtrodden is rejected as burdensome and even repugnant to God (Isa 1:12-17; Jer 7:1-15; Am 5:21-27; Hos 6:6 etc.). This social commitment involves both exclusion and inclusion: exclusion from every activity that is oppressive towards the underprivileged like “subversion of judicial process, especially bribery,” violence, land-grabbing, etc. and inclusion of activities that promote dignified life.²¹ As Isaiah (1:17) as a protest against the emphasis on the exteriority of religiosity manifested in cult, says, “Inner change must be certified by action in the sphere of social and political relations, especially by action on behalf of the marginal – the oppressed, and among those, the orphans and widows.”²²

In the context of Asia in general, and India in particular, where cultic religiosity is very vibrant, but without much resonance in the efforts to address issues of deprivation and marginalization due to gender, caste, economy, education, health care, etc., it means, as Arul Raja puts it, elaborate worship to cover up injustice must be replaced by interior worship in terms of promotion of justice with centrality to the agenda of the majority poor.²³ A pietistic religiosity devoid of empathy toward the suffering of the poor, which is manifested in a “social relationship of justice to “those in the community who are weak, vulnerable, without an advocate, and so subject to political exclusion and economic exploitation”²⁴ is not to be promoted. George Koonthanam wrote about this more bluntly decades ago: “If the church makes of God a cultic chimera, then the true God is to be found, not in the church, but in the market place, slums and suburban areas.”²⁵ What is needed is more pro-poor policies in our institutions, which are intended to reduce the inequality between the rich and the poor through giving the poor opportunities to emancipate themselves.

3. Dialogue as Sensitivity to and Participation in the Cry of the Poor

Poverty produces cry. Or cry becomes the expression of the suffering of poverty. It is both a sign and a protest: sign of deprivation and protest against the oppressive structures that produce this cry.²⁶ Hence, Sensitivity to the cry of the weaker sections

²¹ See Joy Philip Kakkanattu, “Old Testament Prophets and the Call for a Corruption Free Society,” *Asian Horizons* 6, 1 (2012) 109-122.

²² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 19, Doubleday: The Anchor Bible, 2000, 184.

²³ Arul Raja, “Discriminatory Justice against Discriminatory Injustice...,” 207.

²⁴ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 19.

²⁵ George Koonthanam, “An Indian Understanding of Prophet Amos Today,” *Jeevadhara* 12 (1982) 122.

²⁶ A. Mariaselvam, “The Cry of the Dalits,” *Jeevadhara* 22 (1992) 124.

of humanity is an imperative to be a Christian derives from the revelation of God in the Bible as somebody who has a preferential option for the cry of the poor in all its aspects. No prayer is more efficacious than the voice of the cry of the afflicted from the locus of oppression and deprivation. This implies that any prayer without attention to the voice of this cry would be inefficacious. As the *Instrumentum Laboris* of Pan Amazonian Synod states, “Aggression and threats against life generate cries both from the people and from the earth. Starting from this clamour as a theological topic, one can initiate paths of conversion, communion and dialogue, paths of the Spirit, of abundance and ‘good living.’”²⁷

3.1. Cry as Prayer – Hope for the Oppressed

Richard Nielson Boyce, in his monograph on *The Cry to God in the Old Testament*, identifies the cry of the people of Israel, who became slaves in Egypt, as a vocalization directed to God. It is not merely a cry of protest or a cry seeking help from another, but a petitionary prayer seeking help from God. This Exodus cry is so fundamental for the Yahweh-Israel relationship, and hence, it is appropriated to various situations by the redactors.²⁸

The story of Jacob and his sons in Egypt narrates the deprived situation of migrants. Although the family of Jacob lived in Egypt for many years, they still carried the tag of ‘foreigner.’ The tragedy of being a non-native was that their whole existence depended on the good will of the people and the ruler. As Ex 1:8 states, when there came a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph, he saw the people of Israel as a threat, and consequently, he adopted oppressive policies toward them. This paved the way for many existential crises for Israel: oppression, forced labour and death (killing of the first-born). This crisis of not-knowing and bondage produced “the cry (*zaaq* and *qara*) of the afflicted, and the oppressed.” The basic meaning of these roots in Hebrew is “the loud and agonized ‘crying’ of someone in acute distress, calling for help and seeking deliverance with the emotion-laden utterance.”²⁹ Nonetheless, this cry equally becomes the hope of the oppressed for liberation.

²⁷ Pan-Amazon Synod, *The Working Document for the Synod of Bishops*, #18, <http://www.sinodoamazonico.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/pan-amazon-synod--the-working-document-for-the-synod-of-bishops.html>.

²⁸ Richard Nelson Boyce, *The Cry to God in the Old Testament*, SBL Dissertation Series 103, Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1985, 71-79.

²⁹ G. Hasel, “*za’aq*,” in G. Johannes Botterweck and Hermer Ringgren, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 4, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980, 115.

There are four texts in Exodus (2:23-25; 3:7-8, 9-12; 6:2-8) which mention Israel's cry (*zaaq/tasaq*) to Yahweh in the context of Egyptian tyranny. In all these texts, "the cry" of the people against the violent and oppressive structures created by Egypt becomes the compelling reason for God to enter into human history to ameliorate the situation of the oppressed people. In other words, Exodus was the response of God to the cry of the afflicted for liberation. The various verbs used to show God's response to the cry in 2:23-24 and 3:7-9 (I have heard, I have remembered, I have seen, I know, I have come down, I am sending you) indicating "Yahweh's resolve, intention and action" highlights the active Divine participation in the suffering of humans.³⁰ This Exodus cry to which God responded with a concrete act of liberation, becomes a paradigm of hope for all those who are oppressed and denied justice. God's decisive intervention in human history reversed the situation of affliction, and included judgment and punishment for the perpetrators of injustice and violence.

God listened to the cry of the innocent blood of Abel, which made Him ask Cain uncomfortable questions and demand answers for his cruel deed in order to make him aware of the injustice and to make him accountable for the act (Gen 4:10). The blood of Abel that cries out from the ground represents the segment of humanity who are denied of their right to life. It is a cry for greater sensitivity to respect for human rights, especially the right to life. The increasing farmers' suicides, rapes, mob violence, terrorism, genocides, etc. provoke the same divine question "where is your brother or sister?" which is a protest against the insensitivity of the powerful to the weaker ones of human race. Baffled by the insensitive response of Cain "am I the keeper of my brother?," God's reply becomes judgemental inviting punishment towards all such cold-blooded acts. The voice of the cry of the innocent blood of Abel became so powerful a prayer which prompted God to intervene on behalf of him to punish Cain, the cause of the cry. This is a warning to all oppressive structures, totalitarian regimes and fascist ideologies which subjugate weaker sections that even their silent agony can be a powerful prayer which can topple their designs and nullify their power (Ps 8:3).

The divine attention to the cry of the slave woman Hagar shows God's preferential option for the despised outcasts and the wretched and His readiness to enter into human life-situations marred by

³⁰Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, 364.

oppressive attitudes. God's listening to the cry of Hagar's child and intervening to help the mother save her child again asserts that He does not endorse acts of cruelty, even from His chosen ones, Abraham and Sarah (Gen 21:8-21).³¹ The hope that God will listen to the cry of the afflicted becomes an enduring faith conviction of the people of Israel as reflected in the story of Susanna in Daniel 13, and as in many psalms (Ps 18:6; 34:15; Ps 39:12; Lam 3:56, etc.). In the Psalms the deprived persons prayed to God who is known to them as having an inclination to the cry of the poor and the oppressed and executes justice for the poor and hungry (Ps 146). The Wisdom Literature exhorts the people to be careful not to harm any poor because offending the poor is equal to offending God, their creator (Prov 14:31). As Book of Sirach clarifies, the prayer in the form of cry of the orphan, widow and the poor "pierces the clouds, and it will not rest until it reaches its goal" (Sir 35:16-21). The prophets speak of God who becomes increasingly annoyed with the voice of the prayers of those who cause cry of the poor through their injustice (Isa 5:7). When God listened to the cry of Susanna and saved her in her affliction, "the whole assembly shouted and blessed God for helping those who hope in him" (Dan 13:60).

In the NT the breakthrough of Jesus happens to the life and situations of people who were considered to be socially ostracized. He never by-passed the cry of any despised or marginalized and had always time for them. His ministry was primarily a ministry to the less privileged of the society due to various reasons: sickness (Mt 4:23-24; Lk 4:18-22), profession and social status (Mt 9:9; Lk 19:1ff.; Jn 4), money (Mt 5:3; Lk 21:1-4), sin (Jn 8:1-10). He intervened in all these situations to reintegrate them into the society and thus elevated their dignity. Jesus identifies his entrusted mission as proclaiming the acceptable time of God's favour by taking care of the poor, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed (Lk 4:18-19).³² If the Bible points to a God who listens to the cry of the poor and decides to make a breakthrough into their midst, it is my conviction that the right orientation of biblical theology is to make this God known to the entire humanity.

³¹Joy Philip Kakkanattu, "Steadfast Love (*hesed*) and Mercy (*rahamim*): Ways of God's Enduring and Positive Presence," in Thomas Kollampampil, et al., ed., *Power of Positive Presence, Festschrift in Honor of Prof. Dr Thomas Aykara CMI*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 440 [435-446].

³²David Stanley Kumar, "Jesus, the Youthful Prophet, Model for Youth," in A. John Baptist and M. David Stanley Kumar, ed., *Youth, You are Precious: Contextual Reflections on Youth and Youth Ministry*, Bengaluru: ATC Publishers, 2019, 63-65.

3.2. Legitimate Protest – Cry as Prayer

When we consider the Exodus Cry, which later consolidates into a form of prayer in the Bible, we should note that the locus of the Exodus Cry was not a place of worship, but the place of toil and bonded labour. It was a collective cry probably in the form of legitimate protest against all situations which produce or worsen the status of the poor. “Those who suffer unjustly have the right to complain and protest.”³³ God accepted this protest cry as a true prayer and responded to it in the form of decisive intervention in their history to grant them liberation. In Egypt, as they have neither a place of worship, nor any possibility to go to a privileged place of worship like the temple, “there is still a gateway that remains open: ‘the gateway of tears and oppression,’ for they go directly to God without passing through the Temple. The cry of innocent blood poured out and the moans of the downcast ceaselessly assail the throne of the Judge.”³⁴

When people are chocked by sheer injustice and insensitive oppressive structures, this possibility to go to God directly from the existential predicaments of various life situations gives real hope for all those who are denied access to the power centres, both religious and administrative, to make the voice of their cry listened to with a sense of justice and compassion. It provides “a message of encouragement and a beacon of hope for all those who are in despair.”³⁵ If a cry of the poor becomes a prayer, then the locus of prayer is not a place of worship, but the context and life situations, which produce the cry. Hence, anyone who produces a cry through violence, injustice, subjugation, ill treatment, harassment, sexual assault, should know that even before the victimizers reach the place of prayer, place of cry becomes a *locus orandi* of the victimized, and the painful outcry of the oppressed poor, feeble it may be, will never be missed by the inclining ears of God of the Bible.

Another aspect of the cry of the poor is that it becomes a tool for them to protest against the injustice and abuses they suffer and make their voice heard. Hence joining in their legitimate protest is an aspect of dialogue with the poor. Moses, the prophets, and Jesus raised their voices as protest against the inhuman and unjust

³³Gustavo Guitérrez, *On Job. God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994, 101.

³⁴Dominique Barthélemy, *OP, God and His Image*, San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007, 198.

³⁵Eryl W. Davies, “Political and Advocacy Approaches,” in John Barton, ed., *The Hebrew Bible. A Critical Companion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016, 514.

attitudes, which produced cry. When there arise many voices of laments and weeping due to natural disasters and disregard of the state and the powerful towards the plight of the poor, if the Church adopts a policy of stoic or diplomatic silence of neutrality, it is far away from the core of the character of God of the Bible. As A. Mariaselvam notes, “silence or indifference is as grievous as the crime of oppression itself.”³⁶ For example, when the Church in India failed to join the massive protest voice giving audibility to the groaning of the rape victim, Nirbhaya³⁷, it missed representing God of the Bible. When it lacks courage to join the farmers’ protests for better welfare schemes it misses a chance to become a prophetic voice which champions the denunciation of market-driven and profit oriented capitalistic economic policies of globalization which promotes the corporates and “the exclusion of a part of humanity from the economic loop and from the so-called benefits of contemporary civilization.”³⁸ When in its own institutions, policies are made without sensibility to the cry of the least ones, the Church fails to live the prophetic ideal of restorative justice. As a result, it may become an abandoned vineyard because any vineyard that thrives on injustice to the poor, actively or passively, will be abandoned as God listens to the cry of those who suffer injustice (Isa 5:1-7). To listen to the cry of the poor, and join hands to wipe off their tears and to ameliorate their living conditions, which produce cry, is pleasing to God, because He has a preferential option for the poor to the extent of permitting his son to be born poor having the luxury of a manger as birth place, and having no home in which to stay (Lk 9:58).

4. “The Land Mourns” (Hos 4:3): Poverty as a Cry of the Mother Earth

When we discuss biblical understanding of the poor, it is unfair not to include nature, which suffers human oppression and violence together with the poor.³⁹ Pope Francis clearly indicates this when he writes:

This sister [Mother Earth] cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her... The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in

³⁶A. Mariaselvam, “The Cry of the Dalits,” 139.

³⁷https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Delhi_gang_rape.

³⁸Gustavo Gutiérrez and Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Mueller *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015, 48.

³⁹Gutiérrez and Mueller *On the Side of the Poor*, 50.

the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22).⁴⁰

The cry of the poor and the earth are to be considered together as they form two sides of the same reality (LS 49, 91).

Creation suffers as a consequence of humanity’s sin and the moral depravity is an important theme of the Bible (Gen 3:17-18). This is derived from the fact that the humans stand in interrelated existence with the rest of creation. As Christopher Wright rightly observes God’s covenant relationship with Israel is, indeed not between two parties, but is triangulated between three – God, Israel, and the land. When humanity represented by Israel abuses its relationship with the land and rejects covenant obedience, creation is afflicted. For example, Prophet Hosea very categorically places the responsibility of the cry of the mother earth on the people of Israel and accuses them of failing in faithfulness (*emet*), kindness (*hesed*) and knowledge of God (*data-elohim*) (Hos 4:1-3). These three values are core values of covenant community, which are expected to be practiced for a well-ordered society. However, only when there is knowledge of God the other values can be lived because they are ways of God’s dealing with humans and only by knowing God and his ways we are able to emulate them in our ethical living. As a result of this moral degradation caused by absence of knowledge of God, not only humans are thrown into disarray, but the land in which they live is also in great agony. As Hos 4:3 says, “therefore the land mourns and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.” Any act of thwarting God’s will can have an implication for destroying the God-created order of the universe.⁴¹ Therefore, the web of relationships between God, humanity and the creation must be maintained for a harmonious well-being.

A correct knowledge of God, then, implies respecting the creator’s intentions of creation and fostering the inherent order He placed in creation. It is to recognize that the biblical vision of creation is a harmonious interrelated existence where human beings are placed in a pivotal role. It is also to acknowledge that we share in making the earth groan and that we are gifted with the graceful power to reclaim

⁴⁰Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2.

⁴¹See, Joy Philip Kakkanattu. “Solidarity to be Teachers of Knowledge of God: A Priestly Mission Beyond Cult,” in Stanislas Savarimuthu et al., ed., *Like a Watered Garden vol 1: A Festschrift for Prof. Rev. Dr Lucien Legrand MEP on his 90th Birthday*. Bengaluru: TPI, 2017, 180-193.

its harmony if we repent and convert from our profit-oriented culture to a culture of sharing and solidarity with the earth and the poor.⁴² This invites us to develop a biblical eco-spirituality as a response to the ecological crisis all have become growingly aware of. It can “restore the dignity of the created order, saving the cosmos from being merely a convenience for humankind and its barbaric exploitation and destruction of natural world for making the cosmos its consumer paradise.”⁴³ As Joseph Pathrapankal prophetically wrote in 2010, eco-spirituality can also play an important positive role in dialogue with religions in Asia.⁴⁴ He wrote:

Inter-religious dialogue is not primarily meant for sorting out our differences in religious concepts in view of all religions eventually becoming a single religion. Rather it is a coming together of religions to face the common enemies of all religions. Ecological crisis is one of those horrible enemies and all religions have to become aware of it and they have to come together in order to have some action plans.⁴⁵

A spirituality which has an inclusive approach to ecology is the need of the hour because down through the centuries we have failed to hearken to the “groaning of creation” (Rom 8:23), and the meaning of stewardship as “crown of creation” (Gen 1:26-28). Instead the humans plundered the planet earth without respecting the creator’s designs, which necessitates an ecological conversion as the first step to develop a sound eco-spirituality.

5. Jesus in Dialogue with the Poor: A New Testament Approach to Poverty

Jesus was a man of inclusive approach. He tried to uplift the dignity of socially excluded people by respecting them and listening to their voices. Throughout his life on earth, Jesus’ close companions were not the influential and powerful of the society but the people who were considered to be from the lowest rank. In fact, they were an

⁴²See Joy Philip Kakkanattu, “Recovering the Biblical Vision of a Harmonious Creation,” *Sanyasa* 11, 2 (2016) 17-28.

⁴³ Joseph Pathrapankal, CMI “The Chance and Challenge of Biblical Eco-Spirituality in the Asian Context,” *FABC Papers* 132a: *Word of God in the Life & Mission of the Church, 5th FABC - OE & CBF Asia-Oceania Biblical Congress and Bishops’ Institute for the Biblical Apostolate (BIBA) III*, by FABC Office of Evangelization in collaboration with The Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF), December 2010 (2010) 68.

⁴⁴Inter-religious Dialogue is a declared policy of FABC from its beginning and FABC tried to promote it as its very evangelizing mission, Vimal Tirimanna, ed., *FABC Papers* 133: *On Being Human in the Changing Realities of Asia*, by Fr. Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR, FABC Office of Theological Concerns, March 2011 (2011) 55-56.

⁴⁵ Joseph Pathrapankal, CMI “The Chance and Challenge of Biblical Eco-Spirituality in the Asian Context,” 68.

expression of the mission and message of Jesus. Throughout his ministry Jesus' actions demonstrate an abolishment of the divide between insiders and outsiders, poor and rich and Jew and Gentile.

Jesus' inclusive approach to the excluded of the society is evident in his table fellowship. It transcended all socio-economic and religious barriers of his time. For Jesus to have fellowship meal meant to rise above all social inequalities. Jesus said, "When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind" (Lk 14:13). The fellowship meal was an important event of Jewish life as a community.⁴⁶ Those who dined together were to be treated equally. Against the background of the exclusive meals of the Pharisaic associations, Jesus welcomes a "woman, who was a sinner" (v. 37). Jesus welcomes her back into the fellowship and salvation of God's people. Meals establish community by bringing people together. Jesus welcomed sinners and those in need to the table to experience community fellowship. This anticipates a future banquet, which would include all peoples.

Another significant act of Jesus in connection with the similar intention is that he deliberately chooses a despised man, Levi (Mk 2:13-17; Mt 9:9-13; Lk 5:27-32). By dining with the tax collectors and sinners, Jesus proclaims that the grace of God is radically liberative and inclusive. Jesus met people in the midst of their chaotic mess of life. The meals, which Jesus took part in, included the helpless, the poor, and the tax collectors. Jesus' meals were an act of gracious openness to those who needed a physician.⁴⁷

Feeding the multitude in a way reveals Jesus' compassion.⁴⁸ Jesus' compassionate invitation to hungry crowds to dine with him, gave them hope. He said, "They have nothing to eat. I don't want to send them off hungry, or they might collapse on the way" (Mt 15:32-33; Mk 8:1-10). Sharing from what you have, even if it is as little as five loaves and two fishes with joyful magnanimity is an expression of solidarity with those who have less.⁴⁹ In India, where social segregation is very high due to the caste system, table fellowship can

⁴⁶When any group of people in the ancient Mediterranean world met for social or religious purposes, their gatherings tended to be centred on a common meal or banquet. Jacob Neusner, *Formative Judaism: Religions, Historical and Literary Studies*, Chicago: Scholars Press, 1985, 76.

⁴⁷Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus*, Wheaton, Illinois: Cross Way, 2011, 23.

⁴⁸Kurien Kunnumpuram, ed., *Jesus: Selected Writings of Samuel Rayan, SJ, Vol. 1*. Bombay: St. Pauls, 2011, 84.

⁴⁹Leonardo Boff, *Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence*, San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989, 150.

be a good means of abolishing this evil and thus making the message of Eucharistic fellowship more socially realistic.

The preferential attention of Jesus towards the people who are considered least is highly visible in Mt 25:31-46. It comprises respecting the dignity of those who suffer from lack of respect and rejection. Jesus takes the inclusion of these people to a newer realm of symbiotic reciprocity between him and the excluded – which includes all those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, the imprisoned. By identifying himself with the least of the brethren, he makes “doing ‘acts of charity’ on behalf of brothers and sisters... constitutive of a relationship with God.”⁵⁰ The Last Judgment indicates what mercy concretely means: “it is a matter of attentiveness and sensitivity to the concrete needs of [people] we encounter... It is a matter of dissolving the hardening of our hearts to God’s call that we hear in the encounter with the adversity of others.”⁵¹ The last judgment will be based on our inclusive or exclusive attitude towards the least, because Jesus “identifies himself with the least in such a way that he is affected virtually corporally when the least is shown or denied goodness.”⁵² Thus the least of the brethren becomes “a sacrament” of the presence of Jesus Christ, together with the Eucharist. The poor becomes the face of Christ.⁵³

Conclusion

In a world where more and more patterns of exclusion (like anti-migrant walls, census on nationality, job reservations) are getting political and administrative upper hand and becomes vote-bank populist rhetoric, the patterns of inclusion in the Bible are to be insisted as healthy alternatives both in theoretical discourses and practical implementations.

We may be able to draw some inspiration from the suggestions given by Nobel laureates Abhijit V. Banerjee and Ester Duflo in their book *Poor Economics*⁵⁴ to deal with multifaceted poverty in understanding the Biblical approach to the same. First, the poor often lack critical pieces of information and believe things that are not

⁵⁰Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology* Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011, 308.

⁵¹Kasper, *Mercy*, 143.

⁵²Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God of the Living*, 490.

⁵³Enrique Nardoni, *Rise Up, O Judge: A Study of Justice in the Biblical World*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2004, 233-234.

⁵⁴Abhijit V. Banerjee and Ester Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*, New York: Public Affairs, 2011.

true.⁵⁵ So a dialogue with the poor based on the Bible would imply imparting correct information regarding the nature of God in the Bible as someone who is always on the side of the poor. This theoretical knowledge should lead all those who follow the Bible to engage actively in eradicating poverty, which should be taught as an essential component of prayer, in imitation of their God. Second, “the poor bear responsibility for too many aspects of their lives.” The richer you are, the more the “right” decisions are made for you.”⁵⁶ The Church with all its institutionalized set up can help the poor to find simpler and better solutions for their everyday needs. Third, “there are good reasons that some markets are missing for the poor, or that the poor face unfavorable prices in them.”⁵⁷ When the ecclesiastical institutions make policies of various ministries, much care should be taken not to imitate uncritically the market-driven and profit oriented patterns of the corporate sector, which does not include the impact on the poverty trap of people. Instead their policy discussions should pay attention to include the poor and those who are left out by markets – be it in education, medical care, environment, etc. As Asia, in general, and India in particular, suffers from social and economic stratification based on birth and wealth, we need to chalk out plans which help to dismantle the status quo of poverty created by this stratification through strategic planning of inclusion.

Fourth, “Small changes can have big effects.” In Asia and in India Christianity is a minority. However, small initiatives in eradicating poverty can become a butterfly effect, in making the lives of the poor much better than they are today. For example, giving a few more percentage of admissions in Church’s educational institutions to the poor but eligible students would surely emancipate many more families from utter poverty.

Methodologically, this would mean “a commitment to read the Bible from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed.”⁵⁸ Encountering God of the Bible who listens to the cry of the oppressed and encountering oppressed humanity becomes a necessary choice of a biblical theologian of Asia today. It is about a radical involvement with the poor and the oppressed which gives meaning and relevance of biblical theology in Asian context. As Gustavo Gutierrez states,

⁵⁵Banerjee and Duflo, *Poor Economics*, 486.

⁵⁶Banerjee and Duflo, *Poor Economics*, 488.

⁵⁷Banerjee and Duflo, *Poor Economics*, 489.

⁵⁸ M. Mani Chacko, “Interpreting the Hebrew Scripture: Prospects and Challenges,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 23, 1 (2009) 144.

“sensitivity to the rights of the poor brings us closer to the God of life.”⁵⁹ It is an option for theology of simplicity and participation rather than power and domination. This is important because the Bible is particularly concerned with the cry of widows, orphans, women, strangers, the handicapped, the poor and the oppressed. This would help the Asian Biblical Studies to be freed from the clutches of Western biblical interpretations with colonial and purely academic interests.⁶⁰

A Biblical interpretation in Asian context should ultimately make the God of the Bible a tangible and transformative reality and experience for the underprivileged classes, who continue to struggle because of abject economic poverty and denigrated human dignity. If the OT pictures a God moving with the oppressed to move them out of their enslavement and if the mission of Jesus was to work with the least in society to restore their dignity, then certainly the role of biblical theology is to begin with the poor, to expose their cry and exhort the world to listen attentively to the cry of the poor, thus making our specific contribution to the healing of our world.

A worshipping community without having sensitivity to the cry of the poor and nature may not be able to please God of the Bible who readily listens to the cry of the poor and nature, especially when it is the result of injustice and rejection. As the Bible teaches, any believer in Jesus Christ should never forget that the true worship of God is always expressed in love of one’s neighbour.

⁵⁹Gustavo Guitérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, Translated by Matthew J. O’Connell, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990, 115.

⁶⁰Joseph Pathrapankal mooted this idea way back in 1982 when he wrote, “God’s word is not meant for the abstract academic exercise of scholars, it should be the basis and support for creative thinking and action for evolving a just and human society.” “Editorial,” *Jeevadhara* 12 (1982) 92. See also Paul Kalluveetil, “Editorial: Social Thrust as a Prophetic Call,” *Jeevadhara* 119 (1989) 85-88.