

GOD'S WORD FOR THE INDIAN FOLK

Towards Exploring the Indian Milieu of Biblical Hermeneutics

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1. Preliminary Perspectives

This study presupposes two basic realities which serve as foundations of Indian biblical hermeneutics. Hence, this introductory part is devoted to deal with them in a summary form.

1.1. Traits of the Word of God

The word of God enters human history as a dynamic event. Indeed, the Hebrew term *dābār* does not simply mean 'word' but thing, matter, happening, or event.¹ It is akin to the Indian term *śabda*, which always is related to the speaker. It is his/her voice. The person of the speaker is present in his/her voice. When the word is uttered something takes place. It changes the existing situation. Thus, the word of God is always dynamic, and never static. Isaiah compares it to rain that comes down from heaven and waters the earth, making it bud and flourish (Is. 55:10-11). Likewise, the word that is uttered by God will not return to him empty, but will achieve the purpose for which it is sent. It is ever effective and everlasting ("the Word of our God stands for ever," Is. 40:8).

The biblical *dābār* has an ever growing characteristic.² Once it is uttered, it grows and grows. At the beginning of creation, when darkness and chaos reigned supreme, there clanged the voice of God: "Let there be light, and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). This first word of God ever remains

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¹Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic and Word of God*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966, 1-71.

²Paul Kalluveetil, "The Inner Soul of the Word" (Malayalam), *Bible Bhashyam* 32 (September 2003), 7-15; (December 2003), 8-22, 33; (March 2004), 40-51; (June 2004), 9-14.

effective. Wherever and whenever there is darkness in any realm (physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, spiritual, financial, cultural, cultic, etc.), this word will confront, defeat, and destroy it by bringing the light there. This word of light enters the existential situation in an appropriate form. Thus, it assumes the garb of love in the context of hatred and so on. It remains ever active till the end of the times when the world is transformed into the Word (Jesus Christ).

One may say that the biblical word becomes 'worldly'. It takes flesh (Jn. 1:14), enters history and becomes historical. The biblical text is contextual. Thus, the *dābār* has to become an Asian/Indian word, addressed to our context, as it had earlier spoken to the people of Israel in their language, idioms, culture, and context.

The biblical *dābār* is a provoking and penetrating word. It can disturb the conscience of the selfish and the wicked people. The word is like fire before which human beings are like wood; it will consume them (Jer. 5:14; 23:29). It is like a hammer that could break the rocky hearts into pieces (Jer. 23:29). It is, indeed, a saving and judging *dābār*. Heb. 4:12 poignantly presents the basic traits of the biblical word: "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

1.2. Basic Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics

The word hermeneutics originates from the Greek *hermeneia*. According to popular belief, it is derived from the name of the Greek messenger-god Hermes. It is believed that he invented language and writing, the tools of comprehension and communication. In hermeneutics we could find three basic directions of meaning: expression, explanation and translation.³

1.2.1. Hermeneutics as Expression

To interpret means to express. It is an act of asserting and proclaiming the message to the Indian audience in their existential context. The whole person needs to be involved in this process. One has to vivify the "dead bones," as it is described in Ez. 37, in order to liberate the word from its imprisoned state so that it can become a happening event in the present.

³R. O. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadmer*, Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1969.

1.2.2. Hermeneutics as Explanation

In this second direction of meaning of *hermeneia* we confront the biblical text in the existential Indian context. It is the process of waking up the word in order to release its inner energy so that it can speak to the context. In explanation, one starts from the Indian context and in that light looks to the text, and finally, once again, returns to the context. This context-text-context dynamics provides us with the existential meaning of the word of God. It serves to make the word grow and become 'worldly', i.e., Indian. One may say, this kind of explanation helps us to rediscover the Indian context as biblical.

1.2.3. Hermeneutics as Translation

The third direction of meaning is translation. The term translation is derived from the Latin *trans* and *latus*, "having been carried across." The act of translation is not a simple and mechanical matter of synonym finding by consulting a dictionary. Rather, it is a demanding laborious process. The Bible comes to us from a world distant in time, space, language, culture, and beliefs. Thus, for example, the OT text reflects the world of Israel. Hence, it does not speak in the concepts and expressions that are of our world, our medium of seeing and understanding things, persons and events; hence, the need for carrying the OT text across the Indian world. To translate means to make the horizon of our Indian world of understanding meet and merge with the horizon of understanding in the original text. Only in this manner the Bible can come to speak in our own language. If this phenomenon of being carried across does not take place, the word of God will not incarnate itself in the Indian culture. Thus, the translation dynamics is the very heart of hermeneutics.

2. Land and India

Illustration of these preliminary principles disposes us to study the Bible in the Indian context which will make the word of God the Indian Scripture. Both the Indians and Israelites have an inner vision into the in-depth realms of earthly realities. Thus, the material things serve to lead us to the celestial horizons. Nothing is merely material or terrestrial. There

irradiates the face of God in every created reality.⁴ "The heavens declare the glory of God," exclaims the Psalmist (Ps. 19:1).

2.1. Land as a Religious Symbol

For the Indian sages everything is the abode of God, *isāvāsyam idam sarvam*. They have unearthed the mystic consciousness of the convergence of secular into sacred. There vanishes the dichotomy of matter and spirit. The more one could visualize the cosmic-celestial *ēkarūpa* (single form), the more s/he can attain the integral humanity.

In both Israel and India, land stands out as an evocative and provocative symbol which can comprehend the whole reality. Hence, we would like to take land/earth, which is a powerful symbol, to explore the Indian milieu of biblical hermeneutics. Indians consider it as sacred, as *bhūmidēvi*, goddess earth. There pulsates the divine presence in it. For the common folk land serves as the unique medium and the most powerful and effective metaphor of *ātma sāṅśātkāra* (self-realization) and *Īśvara sāṅśātkāra* (God-realization).

One of the most enduring and vital features of the Indian tradition is the concept of earth as motherland. The magnificent *Bhūmī Sūkta* (Hymn to the Earth) of *Atharva Vēda* XII.1 depicts religious impulses of the Indian soul.⁵ The hymn sings praises of the Mother Goddess Earth. She is "the ruling mistress of what has been and what will come to be" (1:1); the "bearer of all things, hoard of treasures rare, sustaining mother" (1:6); "the matrix of all things is Earth" (1:43). The following beautiful prayers addressed to *Prthvī* are worth citing: "Instil in me abundantly that fragrance, O Mother Earth, which emanates from you... that sweet perfume that all celestial beings are wont to emit..." (1:23); "impart to us those vitalizing forces that come, O Earth, from deep within your body... purify us wholly. The Earth is Mother; I am son of Earth" (1:24); "O Earth, O Mother, dispose my lot in gracious fashion that I be at ease. In harmony with all the powers of heaven set me in grace and good fortune" (1:63). "May the earth who is to us in the nature of a mother, hold us her sons close to her life – endowing self, protect us" (1). *Bṛḥdhāranyaka*

⁴James W. Heisig, "Symbolism," in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, vol. 13-14, ed. Mircea Eliade, London: Simon & Schuster, 1993, 198-208.

⁵A. T. Embree ed., *The Hindu Tradition*, New York: Vintage Books, 1972, 45.

Upaniṣad II.5.1 asserts: "This earth is honey for all creatures and all creatures are honey for this earth."

The main Indian ideas (within the Sanskrit tradition) concerning land or earth can be thus summarized:⁶ *Pṛthvī* is the foundation, the basis, out of which emerges all that exists and on which everything rests. It is the basis of life. Man is of the earth and earthly. It is part of man himself so that man can no longer live without the earth than he can live without body. The earth is the mother of all humans, an object of worship and not of exploitation, an object of awe and not of curiosity or research. The relationship of humans to *Pṛthvī* has to be that of experiential, affectional, and devotional orders. One who has not got *Bhūmi* is like one who is illicitly denied the nearness of mother. How that person can find his/her God? Where s/he can live? Thus, earth is the necessary medium for *āthma sāksātkāra* (self-realization) and *Īśvara sāksātkāra* (God-realization). Humans are destined to enjoy the blessings of the earth, because the earth is their home, their own family, and their body.

2.2. Land and the Socio-Political Situation

The Constitution of India in its Preamble states: "We the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic and secular to all its citizens: justice, social, economic and political liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status and of opportunity, and to promote them all fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of nation."⁷ In Articles 14-18 it asserts right to equality, in 19-22 right to freedom, and in 23-24 laws against exploitation. Thus, every Indian citizen has a fundamental right for a place to live, for work, for education, etc.

India which is the fifteenth poorest nation in the world remains as the land of massive poverty and miseries. The situation results from systematic exploitations in different fields. In this predominately agrarian and rural society, a good percentage of people (about 50%) live below poverty line.⁷ A great majority of Indians (nearly 75%) depends on land for their livelihood.

⁶Raimundo Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience: Mantramanjari*, Pondichery: All India Books, 1983, 120-122.

⁷Charles Irudayam, "Land: The Root of Poverty in India," *Vidyajyoti* 69 (2005) 340-354; 486-499.

In landmass, India ranks as the seventh largest in the world with an area of 32,87,263 sq. kilometres. In cultivable land, India is the third largest in the world, with 41 percent of her land capable of producing agricultural crops thrice yearly – a feature that is unusual for most countries.

2.2.1. *Rural India*

Land still remains a fundamental asset for the rural folk. It serves as the primary source of income, security, and status. For the tribal people land is not a purely economic asset, but a part of their spiritual as well as economic heritage. The importance these people attach to the land that sustains them is much deeper than mere economic utility would indicate.⁸ They hold land and forests as the centre of their life. They build their religious, cultural, social, and political life around them.⁹ Thus, for the Indian folk, humanness means 'landed-ness' (i.e., to live in one's land).

Almost half of the rural families do not possess land, which is generally the source of the basic necessities like food and water. Eighty percent of land is with the twenty percent of the people in India. Thus, land ownership is concentrated in the hands of a few. In fact, there exist sixty million rural households that are totally landless. This unequal distribution of land seems to be one of the basic and fundamental reasons for the inequality in India. The World Bank Report of 1997, entitled, *India: Achievements and Challenges in Reducing Poverty*, points out that landlessness is by far the greatest predictor of poverty in India, even more than caste or illiteracy.

2.2.2. *A Monstrous Situation*

Unhealthy westernization and blind materialistic tendencies have almost extinguished the original symbolism of land in urban areas. Capricious endeavours to transform India into an industrial and capitalistic country have engendered enormous inequalities and outright injustices. The poor are more and more exploited and marginalized by the landlords. Thus, they, having been deprived of basic and constitutional rights, are condemned to lead a life of abject poverty. The poem *The Mask of Law*

⁸Reddy Prakash, *Politics of Tribal Exploitation*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1987, 14-15.

⁹Felix Wilfred ed., *Leave the Temple*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 13.

and Order poignantly gives articulation to the rampant injustice in the present India:

When a rich man owns hundreds or thousands of acres,
 While there are others who do not own an inch,
 That is not robbery,
 That is because we must, at all costs,
 Safeguard the sacredness of private property,
 Which means just reward for the labour of ancestors
 So that the descendants may not labour.¹⁰

Is not this revolting picture a crying scandal? "It is nothing short of a paradox that we should be poor while our country is and has been described as a poor people in a rich country."¹¹

2.3. Vinoba and Bhoodan

At this deplorable situation, Acharya Vinoba Bhave gave form to a movement, *Sarvodaya Samag*, a loose brotherhood of those who subscribed to the ideas and ideals of M. K. Gandhi, according to which the members dedicated themselves for the non-violent reconstruction of man and society. Vinoba Bhave preached *Sāmya Yogi* social structure (*sāmya* means levelling the field), which holds that "all land, all property and all wealth belong to society."¹² He says: "As none can claim ownership of air, water or sunshine, so also none can claim that of land. Should somebody claim it that is due to a wrong idea which is irreligious. Hence, I have given the movement the name of moral revolution - *Dharma Pravarthan*."¹³ He stood for "an equilibrium or equality in society."¹⁴ He, therefore, coined a new motto: self-realization through *Bhoodan* (gift of land); *Sarvodaya* through *Gramdan* (gift of village).¹⁵

Unfortunately, this movement, which wanted to extinguish the desire for possession among the rich and poor, failed to bring an enduring change in the mind of the landlords. There was no whole-hearted and organized

¹⁰For more details, see Paul Kalluveetil, "The Indian Hermeneutics of the Word" (Malayalam), in *Mathavam Chinthayum* 66 (1986), 305-325.

¹¹K. K. Dewett, G. C. Sing, and J. D. Varma, *Indian Economics*, Delhi, 1973, 123.

¹²Acharya Vinoba Bhave, *From Bhoodan to Gramdan*, Tanjore, 1957, 5.

¹³Bhave, *From Bhoodan*, 6.

¹⁴Bhave, *From Bhoodan*, 9.

¹⁵Bhave, *From Bhoodan*, 63-67, 74-77.

endeavour to realize the dream of Vinoba Bhave. The fate of the landless poor still remains the same. At this situation a great obligation is laid on Christians who have embraced the ideology of the Bible. They are destined to make the symbol of land as the expression, explanation, and 'translation' of the Biblical word for India.

3. Land as the Biblical 'Text'

3.1. Bible as the History of the Land

The whole Bible can be looked at and presented as the history of land.¹⁶ This concept underlies in the various names such as '*adāmāh*', '*erets*', Israelite Kingdom, the Kingdom of heaven in the parables of Jesus, and the Father's House in John. The limitation of an article does not allow us to deal with the theme in a detailed way. Only few features are pointed out in this study.

3.1.1. '*Adāmāh* Motif in Primeval History

This theme stands out as one of the main concepts in the Yahwistic account of Genesis 1-11.¹⁷ The term '*adāmāh*' literally means ground, soil, dust, earth.¹⁸ However, the normal word to refer to the world in the sense of the whole inhabited planet is '*erets*'.¹⁹ Still, both terms are frequently used as interchangeable words.

In Gen. 1-11 the '*adāmāh*' is seen as fundamental in every way to human life. Indeed, '*ādām*' (human being) is very often understood and defined in reference to '*adāmāh*'. To speak of one is to echo the other, since they are closely and intimately bound together as, so to say, bridegroom and bride, or mother and son. Before the creation of '*ādām*', '*adāmāh*' had no orderly form, since there was no '*ādām*' to care for it, till it, and use it (Gen. 2:5). Then, God made '*ādām*' out of '*adāmāh*' (2:7). Thus, he owes his existence, his 'whence' to '*adāmāh*' as all other living creatures (2:19). To till '*adāmāh*' was the vocation of the human being (2:15). The earth provided sustenance to him (2:9). Finally, he has to

¹⁶See the outline of the Bible from the perspective of land in 5.2.

¹⁷For a study of '*adāmāh*' motif, see Patrick D. Miller, *Genesis 1-11*, Sheffield: The University of Sheffield, 1978, 37-42.

¹⁸P. G. Ploeger, '*adāmāh*' in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, 88-98.

¹⁹J. Bergman and M. Ottosson, "*erets*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, 388-405.

return to 'adāmāh (3:19) out of which he was taken: "From dust 'adāmāh you are, and to dust you will return." Thus, 'ādām is defined in relation to 'adāmāh, his 'whence', source of his sustenance, the context of his vocation, and his 'whither'. He worked on it, enjoyed its fruits and lived on it. At the very touch of 'ādām, 'adāmāh, like a loving bride, surrendered to him and fructified. Work was a joy and intoxication for human being. The sin of 'ādām, however, brought a radical change in this relationship with 'adāmāh. She was placed under curse because of 'ādām (3:17). Their relationship was fragmented and subverted. To work on the soil was no more a joy and relaxation. Man, then, had to labour hard in order to earn sustenance. Despite all these 'adāmāh failed to yield good crops; very often it produced thorns and thistles (3:18).

Gen. 4:1-6:7 depict the increase of human sin which worsened 'ādām's relationship with 'adāmāh. The earth turned against him and cried out to God for punishment (4:10-12). Then, God sent a flood, blotted out the sinful humanity, and purified 'adāmāh (6:11-8:17). Noah became the new 'ādām on the new 'adāmāh. The primeval relationship of harmony and union was re-established. The 'adāmāh became once more the loving and faithful mother and bride, who provided rest to the new man.²⁰

History of 'ādām in Gen. 1-11 is, thus, an interpretation of his relationship to 'adāmāh. "The account of creation, of life under God and rebellion against God, of creaturely existence, sin and judgment, of human vocation and community, is all set as a story about 'ādām and 'adāmāh."²¹ They belong together. He is born, lives, works, eats, does good or evil, and dies on 'adāmāh. Thus, the human task gets its primary definition in the care and use of 'adāmāh (2:5,15; 3:17,23; 4:3; 5:29). Humanity cannot escape its involvement with 'adāmāh, nor can human existence be lived out in some other context. The nature of human being demands this definition: *ādām vis-à-vis 'adāmāh*, God has united them; hence, nobody should separate 'ādām and 'adāmāh (Mt. 19:6).

3.1.2. Land in Patriarchal Narratives

The concept of land adorns prime position in the Patriarchal stories. Calling Abraham, Yahweh promised him three blessings: land (Gen. 15:18; 17:8), progeny (Gen. 15:5b; 17:2,6,16,19), and the divine presence

²⁰The root of the name 'Noah' denotes 'rest', 5:29.

²¹Miller, *Genesis 1-11*, 41.

(Gen. 17:7,8b). One should not interpret the first two promises as material blessings. In the biblical vision there is no dichotomy of secular and sacred, material and spiritual, earthly and heavenly. One leads to the other; one is the echo of the other; one reflects the face of the other. Thus, one may say, earth is aureole of heaven. Abraham was called to experience God-realization through the medium of land and progeny. He had to find the divine presence in and through these realities. Thus, land and progeny served as symbols of Yahweh's presence in the life of the patriarch. In the same way, the third promise ("I will be your God") should not be understood as merely spiritual. It has material dimensions as well. Hence, the so-called division into material and spiritual becomes inappropriate in the Bible. The Holy Scripture is concerned with the total man, one who has body and soul, one who lives on the earth.

Yahweh imposed on Abraham certain obligations, only the fulfilment of which will qualify him to receive the threefold blessing.²² He had to leave his country and people, and go to a place Yahweh would show him (Gen. 12:1). The divine command implied a total rejection of the present life of security, self-complaisance and the comfort of religion – the 'opium'-factors that make one insensitive and dull in the search for God-realization as well as self-realization. Practically, God was asking Abraham to become a 'landless' person, an *agathi* (one who has no resources or hope in life), a nobody, one who has nothing and one who is nothing. This 'landlessness' was a necessary condition for receiving the status of 'land-edness' as a gift from God.²³ Abraham was also asked to spend whatever blessing he had received from Yahweh, in the service of his fellow human beings.²⁴

The concept of land in the stories of Abraham (as well as of Isaac and Jacob) illustrates certain facts. Land is a divine gift, for the reception of which one has to become a 'landless' person. God makes one a 'land-ed' person so that the recipient shall make others 'land-ed' beings.

²²Paul Kalluveetil, *Vachanabhashyam* (Malayalam), vol. 1, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2003, 94-108.

²³The terms landlessness, land-edness, and land-ed man, etc., are borrowed from W. Brueggemann, *The Land*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977.

²⁴This is the meaning of 12:2c ("you will be a blessing") and 17:1b ("be integral"). See Kalluveetil, *Vachanabhashyam* (note 22).

3.1.3. Land and Israel

Israel claimed themselves as the children of Abraham, the authentic being of both 'landlessness' and 'land-edness.' Yahweh called them when they were living in Egypt as 'landless', oppressed and exploited 'non-entities'. He liberated them and led them to a 'land-ed' life. The Book of Deuteronomy presents the theology of land in the life of the liberated Israel.²⁵ Their call was to live in the land of God, celebrating the divine praises. They were asked not to pollute the land by becoming unfaithful to Yahweh. They should not consider land as an end in itself. Rather they should hold land, which reflects the very face of God with awe. There they are destined to enter into the divine rest, which is the call of every human being. At the same time, land has to become a place of service for the unfortunate 'landless' persons. Israel was bound to dedicate themselves to the task of making others 'land-ed' persons. Their 'land-edness' had a necessary dimension of making others who are 'landless' 'land-ed' beings.

Thus, Israel's liberation denoted their 'land-ed' status. Yahweh liberated them so that they liberate others from the situation of 'landlessness'. Unfortunately, the people of the covenant failed to live up to their call. They held the God-given land as their private property, instead of acting as tenants of Yahweh, who declared in Lev. 25:23: "The land is mine and you are but aliens who have become my tenants." Since the land became a temptation²⁶ for self-service, self-assertion and self-glorification, it was taken away from them. Once more Yahweh made them 'landless' persons in Babylon. The exilic prophets demanded from them a re-commitment to Yahweh, who would, then, make them once more 'land-ed' persons. The post-exilic prophets, in their messianic utterances, foretold the coming of the Anointed One who would establish an eschatological kingdom/land.

3.1.4. Jesus, the Land-Giver

Jesus, the Son of God became Son of Man in order to show us how to live on earth as authentic human beings. In him the call of Adam, Abraham, and Israel found its complete fulfilment. The land metaphor, in fact, got its total realization in Christ. He became a 'landless' person in order to make

²⁵Kalluveetil, *Vachanabhashyam*, vol. 1, 269-287.

²⁶Brueggemann, *The Land*.

us 'land-ed' beings. His very person embodies, so to say, the biblical metaphor of land. The main ideas are presented here in a summary form.

3.1.4.1. Jesus, the 'Landless' Person

The concept of 'landlessness' is embedded in the personality of Jesus. Although 'land-edness' belonged to his essential nature (he was in the divine form and equal with God, as Phil. 2:6ff. state), he emptied himself by assuming the form of a slave. The Son of Man became the poorest of the poor (a totally 'landless' person) at his birth and death. This prophet embraced the life style of a 'landless' pilgrim, which challenged the 'worldly' perspectives on building up a 'land-ed' life on earth. The very purpose of Jesus' words and actions was to make the so-called 'land-ed' people 'landless', and the 'landless' ones of God the 'land-ed' beings.

3.1.4.2. 'Landlessness' as Land-edness'

Jesus began his ministry by announcing coming of the kingdom of heaven (land) on earth (Mk. 1:14-15). He demanded from everyone who would wish to enter God's land to become a 'landless' person (Mt. 16:24-27). Jesus' disciples have to become, like the Master, 'landless' persons (the last and least ones, servants of others, the poor, the mourners, the hungry, the oppressed, and the afflicted). Like him, they have to make suffering as glory, cross as crown. The only way to enter the land of God is through the path of suffering (Lk. 24:25,46).

3.1.5. Christians as Hermeneuts of Land

Christ's community is entrusted with a sacred duty. Like their Master they should live a life of 'landlessness' in order to make humans 'land-ed' people. Church is supposed to be a communion and communication of this proclamation. Their words and deeds must be expressions, explanations, and 'translations' of the 'text' of land in the context of India. Each Christian has received the sublime task of interpreting (*hermeneuîn*) the symbol of land. Like Christ they have to become the personifications of the land-metaphor. The history of the early Church bears witness to this fact, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles and various other Letters. In the Book of Revelation, Christians are depicted as being engaged in waging a war against those who uphold the ideology of the worldly 'land-edness.'

3.2. Land as a Biblical Symbol

The study of the Bible as history of land in 3.1 has brought to light the symbolic nature of the land concept. For Abraham it meant an explicit sign of the divine presence in his life. The people of Israel discovered, experienced, and enjoyed the presence of Yahweh through the medium of land. Later, in the New Testament, we encounter Christ as the personification of the kingdom, which is God's own land. Thus, the biblical concept of land is the most expressive metaphor of the divine presence on earth.

4. 'Land' as God's Word for India

As we have seen, the land stands out as the most powerful symbol in India and the Bible. It expresses, explains, and 'translates' the inner soul of human being in both cultures. Land serves as the medium and metaphor of self-realisation and God-realisation.

In the Indian context, Christ, the 'text', has to assume an Indian garb; in fact, biblical hermeneutics demands it. Christ proclaimed the coming of the kingdom on earth. This kingdom has, then, a terrestrial dimension. We may call the land its symbol. Christ himself is the personification of the kingdom, God's land.

In the parable of leaven Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough (Mt. 13:33). This can be applied here. The land-leaven of Christ has to ferment the Indian land, thus, transforming India into God's land. This is the mission, task and goal of the Indian Church. The teaching of Bible in India has to be oriented towards achieving this goal. Otherwise, Christians will be failing in their sacred duty; the Indian Church will be committing a grave sin, which will not be easily forgiven by the God of justice.

5. Towards an Indian Reading of the Bible

5.1. Preliminary Observation

Here is an attempt to present in a summary form a tentative methodology for studying, teaching, and proclaiming message of the Bible in India from the perspective of *Land* symbol. This outline needs to be carefully studied, discussed, perfected, and finalized.

5.2. Thematic Outline of the Books of the Bible

Part I: The Old Testament

(1) *Introduction*

a. Context: 'Landlessness' as the basic evil in India. In this situation we look to the 'text' (the Bible).

b. The land is the symbol of God's presence in the life of Israel, the medium of God-realization, the proto-type of the kingdom of God in Synoptic Gospels, and the Father's House in the Gospel of John.

(2) *The Book of Genesis*

a. Primeval History (Gen. 1-11)

i. The Priestly Creation Account (1:1-2:4a): creation as liberation from the chaotic, 'landless' situation. Man is created to lead a life in the land of God in the company of the entire creation.

ii. Yahwistic Creation Account (2:4b-25): goal of human creation is to 'cultivate' the land and live in it.

iii. Sin as rebellion against the divine design. It alienated humans from the whole creation. As punishment they were expelled from God's land.

iv. Chapters 4-11 tell the story of the cursed humans who multiplied on earth, polluted the land by their sins, and were punished for them.

b. Patriarchal History (Gen. 12-50): The promise of land as the blessing and the main theme of covenant in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

(3) *The Books of Exodus and Numbers*

a. Israel as landless slaves in Egypt.

b. Their struggle to become 'land-ed' people of freedom.

c. Sinai Covenant as the manifesto of God's children who are called to live in the land as celebrative beings.

d. The march of the liberated people towards the Promised Land.

(4) *The Books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy*

These books prescribe the covenant life-pattern of the 'land-ed' people.

(5) *The Books of Joshua and Judges*

a. Possession of the land.

b. Distribution of the land among the 12 tribes.

c. Israel's life in the land as the tenants of Yahweh in the tribal period.

(6) *The Books of Psalms and Wisdom*

a. Israel's life with God in the land as singers of the divine praises, as protesting, lamenting (of sins), and beseeching persons.

b. The norms for Israel's life with God in the land as beings, "wise as serpents" (Mt. 10:16) and not as wicked persons who are fools.

(7) *The Books of Samuel and Kings*

a. Israel's life in the land of God, under the kings who were called to make them "lie down in green pastures" (Ps. 23:2) and to enjoy the divine rest.

b. Land as temptation and threat: disloyalty of Israel, and the warnings of non-literary prophets as Elijah, Elisha, etc.

(8) *The Books of Pre-exilic Prophets (Amos, I Isaiah, Hosea, Jeremiah)*

a. The prophetic indictments against using 'land' (in literal and symbolic sense) as an end, birth-right and private property, instead of a medium for service, memorial, and celebration.

b. The loss of the land and the life of 'landlessness' in exile.

(9) *The Books of Exilic Prophets (II Isaiah, Ezekiel, etc.)*

a. Call for repentance and words of consolation.

b. Oracles of salvation and return to the Promised Land.

(10) *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*

a. Return to the Promised Land.

b. Norms for new life in the land.

(11) *The Books of Post-exilic Prophets (III Isaiah, Haggai, Malachi, Zechariah, etc.)*

a. Call to rebuild the temple, the symbol of God's presence in the land.

b. Exhortations on living in the land as children of God.

c. Messianic prophecies concerning paradisiac land as God's future for His people.

PART II: The New Testament

A. Gospels

(1) *Introduction:* Jesus as the new Adam, who brings back the original order, rhythm and harmony in creation, who leads humans back to the paradise, the land of God, the heavenly kingdom and the Father's house.

(2) Poverty, the 'landless' context of Jesus' birth, infancy, and life in Nazareth – a challenge to the concept of a 'land-ed' and glorious Messiah.

(3) The temptation of Jesus as that of becoming 'land-ed' person according to the worldly ideology.

(4) Jesus' mission as that of *Ebed Yahweh* of Is. 42:1-4 and 52:13-53:12, who proclaims a life of freedom in the land of God for the marginalized, the oppressed, the exploited, and the outcast.

(5) The life style of Jesus as a 'landless' pilgrim.

(6) The pedagogical method of Jesus, the prophet

a. *Verbal*:

i. *Parables* of kingdom, servanthood and eschatological feast and banquet, which present the life in the paradisiac land.

ii. *Sharpe sayings* which challenge the worldly perspectives which focus on an easy and comfortable life in this earthly land.

b. *Actional*: Miraculous healings, feeding, etc.

c. *Purpose*: To make the 'land-ed' people 'landless,' and the 'landless' the 'land-ed.'

(7) The passion Narrative

a. Jesus' total *kenosis* (the abject and wretched 'landless' state, rejected by humans and Deity), which was seen as the only way to make humans 'land-ed' people.

b. Descent as ascent: 'landlessness' as 'land-edness', death as life with God in His land.

B. *Acts and Letters*

(1) *Acts*: Stories of the origin and growth of the Church as the community of Jesus which strives to live a life of 'landlessness' in order to make others land-ed people.

(2) *Letters*: Paul, James, Jude, and John exhort, encourage, and admonish the Christians how to live here on earth as citizens of God's land.

C. *The Book of Revelation*

The author depicts the life of the Christians who are destined to live on this land as members of the heavenly land, as a struggle against the forces of evil who try to transform the earth as the land of the devil.

6. Conclusion: Indian Land as the Land of God

We were trying to explore the Indian milieu of Biblical hermeneutics. A preliminary attempt was made to express, explain, and 'translate' God's word in the Indian context, and make it an Indian Word. The symbol of land served as a medium and metaphor for it. It is our hope that this endeavour may help to release the *élan vital* of the ever-living, ever-growing, and everlasting Word of God and make it an existential text for India.