

## LITTLE TRADITIONS IN THE BIBLE AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE BIBLICAL RELIGION

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When the Booker Prize Committee selected *The God of Small Things*<sup>1</sup> of Arundhati Roy in October 1997, there arose a flood of comments about the merits and demerits of this unique creation by a South Indian woman. While some lavished praises on it, others found nothing in it except that it is a palatable mixture of erotic descriptions as well as unwanted criticism of politics. Without going into the intriguing literary characteristics of this book, what impressed me most was the commitment of the author to deal with the small things of life as constituting the major fabric of human life in our society. As we are living in a world where only big persons, big things and big events are of any value, Arundhati Roy sees God involved and interested in small things and small events and also in the life of small persons. The reason is because in small things and small events, in which small persons are involved, there is simplicity, sincerity, transparency, concern, care and love. And God is there, where there are these genuinely human qualities which are gradually disappearing from the society.

The priority of little traditions is precisely the great teaching of the Bible and it is also the basis and content of the biblical religion as a whole. When the disciples of Jesus who were sent out to preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the people and to heal the sick returned to Jesus, telling him that they had experienced even greater powers in them all because of the power they had received from him, Jesus rejoiced with them and promised them protection and assistance throughout their ministry for the kingdom of God (Lk 10:17-20). Realizing the simplicity and sincerity of his disciples, Jesus exclaimed: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will"(Lk 10:21). Here Jesus was referring to the small persons he had chosen to carry on his mission,

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<sup>1</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, New Delhi, 1997: Indialnk, 1997).

while the big and the intelligent persons of the Jewish society were not at all open to the kind of things undertaken by these small persons. This is a theme running through the whole of the Bible and it is on the basis of this approach that the entire religion of the Bible is unfolding itself through the centuries.

### *Leave Your Country and Your People and Your Self*

The history of Israel begins with the stories about the Patriarchs, the first of which is the story of Abraham. According to Gerhard von Rad the story of the call of Abraham is to be understood against the background of the Primeval History in Gen 1:1-11:32, the climax of which is the story of the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), characterized by human pride to build a tower with its top in the heavens, thereby giving the reader the impression that the humankind is determined to safeguard its own future without any dependence on God.<sup>2</sup> For that very reason God thwarts this aggressive act of the humans and disperses them over the face of all the earth. The call of Abraham, which immediately follows, is therefore the author's theological attempt to show how only God can safeguard the future of the humankind and that it is taken care of through the selection of a person who is otherwise the least qualified for such a great task. Abraham was a vagabond having no land of his own or a proper family life and children. It was this Abraham who was asked to leave his land and his people as well as his own self and go to a country which God would show him (Gen 12:1-3).<sup>3</sup> At the same time, he was promised great things: he would be the ancestor of a great nation; his name would be made great and he would receive God's blessings and through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. Whereas in the story of Babel it was the people who wanted to make their name great, here it is God who makes the small man of Abraham big in such a way that he becomes the source of God's blessings for the entire humankind.

The response Abraham gave to God at this critical moment of his life became the basis for his future and also the pattern of behaviour for the biblical personalities. The story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22:1-19) is the climax of this divine-human encounter and it shows the abyss into which Abraham had to travel to keep his faith commitment (Gen 15:6) meaningful for him and for his posterity. It was a temptation which came to this small man from the great God, the God of Israel. The reader is told in advance that the story concerns a temptation given by God, a demand which God did not

<sup>2</sup> G. von Rad, *Genesis, A Commentary*, tr. by John H. Marks, (London: SCM Press, 1961), pp.148-150.

<sup>3</sup> "Throughout the entire story one must always remember that to leave home and to break ancestral bonds was to expect of ancient men almost the impossible" G. von Rad, *op.cit.* p. 157.

intend to take seriously. But for Abraham the command was deadly serious. For him God's command was completely incomprehensible: the child, given by God after long delay, the only link that can lead to the promised greatness of his seed is to be given back to God in sacrifice. Abraham had to cut himself off from his whole past (12:1-4); now he must give up his whole future by sacrificing "his only son, Isaac, the son whom you love" (Gen 22:2). The reward from God for this obedience and faith was great: "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Gen 22:12).

### *The Rejected and Sold off Joseph*

The patriarchal stories reach their climax in story of Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, the hero of a series of stories, who at last fought with God and earned his great name 'Israel' from God himself (Gen 32:22-32). Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, the beloved son of his old age, becomes the object of jealousy of his other brothers to such an extent that he is sold off to the Midianites for twenty pieces of silver, after fabricating a story that he was eaten up by wild animals (Gen 37:12-36). It was through this rejected person that the entire history of the people of Israel had to be worked out, a pathetic and suspense story, in which the small Joseph becomes the gravitational field and the focal point of the entire history of Israel.

A concluding statement from Joseph sums up how he saw the plan of God in all those events which happened after he was sold off: "Though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (Gen 50:20). Not only the brothers, even Potiphar, the libidinous wife of the official of Pharaoh, played her role to destroy Joseph when she realized that her lustful plans would not get realized through him (Gen 39:1-23). It is through a series of the big and small events constituting the texture of Joseph's story that God brings Joseph to the height of his glory as the saviour of Egypt and Israel. The assurance given to the readers, as they follow these events, is the only consoling factor: "The Lord was with him, and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper" (Gen 39:23). The price Joseph had to pay for this was great, he sometimes playing certain cruel roles against his own liking and at other times bursting into tears and confessing before his brothers: "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.. So it was not you who sent me here, but God" (Gen 45:2-8).

*I have seen the Misery of my People*

Israel and his children, who were brought to Egypt by Joseph with such pomp and fanfare accompanied by the blessings of Pharaoh, had later on to discover that they had been reduced to the status of slaves by a new Pharaoh, "who did not know Joseph" (Ex 1:8). The story of Israel narrated from the beginning of the book of Exodus is all about this oppressed people, how they were treated harshly by the Egyptians and how God wanted to deliver the people of Israel from their cruel hands. But the way in which this story evolves shows how God makes use of the ordinary and the small persons to execute his plans. Thus Moses, providentially saved from the water (Ex 2:10), is called by God in the very broken context of his awareness as a murderer of an Egyptian (Ex 2:11-3:12). God said: "I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians." (Ex 3:7-8). The task entrusted to Moses was far beyond his abilities because he was not eloquent. He was made to realize that it is God who makes the

humans deaf or mute, seeing or blind (Ex 3:11). The assistance of Aaron given to Moses was a human guarantee of God's continued support during the various stages of his leading the people to their destiny.

The leadership undertaken by Moses was a permanent reminder for the people that the ultimate power for their deliverance came from God and not from any human sources. They were made to pass through a series of struggles and trials, which all made them realize their own broken existence. Moses in his farewell speech recalled the inner experience of Israel during the entire period of their life in the wilderness: "Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna... in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut 8:2-3). It is part of the weak human nature that the humans easily forget the ways they have travelled to reach their goal, and consequently Moses exhorted Israel not to forget the blessings they had received: "Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God.. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid

wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made the water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth. But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth..." (Deut 8:12-17).

### *The Little Credo of Israel*

It is against the background of this appeal to remembrance that we have to understand the nature of the "Little Credo of Israel"(Deut 26:5-10a)<sup>4</sup>, a confession made by every member of the people of Israel on the occasion of the offering of the first fruits of his land, when they were to be living in the land of Canaan. The spirit of this credo is basically of a grateful believer who recognizes everything as God's gifts. Here the Israelite recalls the entire history of Israel from the time of Jacob who is presented as a wandering Aramean. The speaker rehearses the chain of the acts of salvation from Jacob onwards up to the entry into Canaan. It confines itself to recalling the most essential and basic facts. In 26:9 the recital of the historical facts comes to an end. With v.10 the speech becomes very personal, for the speaker now puts himself into the situation of which he has recounted the historical background. It is important to realize that the fruits he has to offer come from the ground which the Lord has given him. Thereby it brings out the dynamic meaning and message of remembrance Moses asked Israel to maintain.

The most significant nature of this recital is the profound awareness the Israelites had about their low and little beginnings and the readiness on their part to attribute all what they were and all what they had to their God. They acknowledge that they were only a marginalized group of people who had nothing to claim for themselves. They do not forget their roots even as they harvest their fruits. They confess: "The Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression". Now that they enjoy the blessings of a land flowing with milk and honey, it is only natural that they bring the first fruits of the land to their God as a mark of their gratitude to God and also to experience for themselves how much they depended on their God for what they were and what they had. It was a joy for them to recall and recount the blessings of God they had received throughout their history. It is another story whether they kept up this spirit of gratitude towards God. But the basic point

<sup>4</sup> It was G. von Rad who suggested this name for this passage, meaning thereby that it somehow corresponds to the Christian Credo, in which the salvation events related to Christian faith are confessed and summarized.

is that the biblical writers have taken pain to establish the foundational realities of their religion through such a bold and inspiring confession.

### *The Rustic Saul and the Shepherd Boy*

As we come to the period of the kings, the same pattern of God's dealings with Israel is evident even in the selection of the kings who were appointed to take care of Israel. We do not enter into the two opposing traditions about the origin of kingship in Israel, whether it was acceptable to God or not. Whereas one tradition presents the origin of kingship as something pleasing to God (1 Sam 9:1-10:16; 11:1-15), the other tradition (1 Sam 7:3-8:22; 10:17-27) understands the request for a king by Israel as a rejection of God and something displeasing to Samuel. The latter source seems to be a later one influenced by the Deuteronomic tradition. Whatever be it, it was Saul who was selected to be the first king of Israel, a man of simple origins but having the spirit of God to guide him. He was called not a king (*melek*) rather a leader (*nagid*). He levied no taxes, made no military conscription, had no hierarchy of court officials and no harem. His only army was a band of volunteers whom he recruited from his supporters (1 Sam 13:2; 14:52). Excavations at Saul's fortress of Gibeah have confirmed the biblical picture of the rustic simplicity of his court.<sup>5</sup> He was a man of sincere and passionate faith in God, but he was too quickly taken up by his whims and fancies. When he went wrong, he was ready to accept his faults. He made several mistakes; he was jealous and he wanted to destroy David. But when he realized the goodness of David, he was sincere enough to appreciate David (1 Sam 24:17-21). It is with all these limitations and weakness that God had called Saul to take care of his people. It was a choice of the simple, the sincere and the humble, the small person with a big mission. But he proved himself to be unworthy of that mission and presented himself as a rejected person, and this prophetic rejection preyed upon his mind and drove him to the edge of insanity.

It is in the light of these events that we have to look at how David, a shepherd boy, came to the throne of Israel. Prophet Samuel had the difficult job of finding out the right person who should be anointed to succeed Saul. As he was trying to choose Eliab, the son of Jesse, God said: "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as humans see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). The entire exercise of selection ended in bringing in the youngest son who was busy keeping the sheep, and it is probable that he was not very smart like his brothers, though he was ruddy,

<sup>5</sup> Gibeah was excavated under the direction of W.F. Albright.



had beautiful eyes and was handsome. The story of this David is the story of how a person can grow to the height of his glory and at the same time sink to the bottom of human frailty. David killed Goliath, defeated the Philistines; but he was aware of his being a "poor man and of no repute" (1 Sam 18:23). Nathan reminded him of his low origins as he was planning to build a house for God: "Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel". Though Saul hated David and wanted to destroy him, David was gracious and magnanimous towards Saul (1 Sam 24:10; 26:6-25). He conquered Jerusalem and made it the capital of Israel; but he also committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and had him killed (2 Sam 11:1-27). When he was condemned by the prophet Nathan, he confessed: "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam 12:13). All the same, David was considered the best of the kings of Israel for his simplicity, honesty, humility and allegiance to God.

These little traditions of the rustic Saul and the shepherd David were reversed when Solomon, the son of David's sin, made his big tradition characterized by wealth, prosperity, foreign trade, building programmes and his mining and smelting operations. To him was credited the introduction of the chariot as a military weapon (1 Kgs 4:6; 10:26). The heavy taxation he introduced to finance his building programmes, especially in the form of forced labour, earned for him the hatred of the people. The somewhat astonishing harem of Solomon, 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kgs 11:4), is no doubt exaggerated by popular tradition, but it is a clue to the life style of the grand monarch. The wealth attributed to Solomon and his court did not permit much to slip down into the general population. This must be considered as a factor in the rebellion of Jeroboam. The existence of a small class of extremely wealthy people and the grinding poverty of the majority, mentioned so often by the prophets, should be attributed to the reign of Solomon for its origin. The delivery of twenty towns of Galilee to Hiram of Tyre (1 Kgs 9:10-14) indicates that Solomon had badly overextended himself. Modern historians are generally adverse rather than favourable in their judgement of Solomon. He inherited a strong kingdom from David and maintained it; but its collapse after his death leads to suspicions that it was not well maintained. The increase in Israel's wealth was matched by an increase in extravagance, and the benefits of David's conquests and Solomon's trade were not diffused. Though he was known for his wisdom, he did not have any practical wisdom, and his reign was a failure. His attempt to unify Judah and Israel obviously failed, and it is suspected that his treatment of the northern tribes exhibited favouritism to Judah.

Kingship and priesthood were the two pillars on which the social, religious and economic structure of Israel was built up. They worked in collaboration and they should have been the basis of the social and religious strength of the people. But the fact was that both these traditions were a burden for the people because they were selfish and corrupt. They sided with the rich and contributed their share in the oppression of the poor. It is in the context of this corrupted and corrupting situation in the divided kingdom that we see the origin of authentic prophetism in Israel. The early origins of prophetism in Israel are obscure; but it did not have any vital significance during the earlier periods of Israel's history. Shortly before the establishment of the early monarchy there appear groups called "the sons of the prophets". It seems they were groups organized for worship in cultic song and dance and often it was characterized by frenzy. Often they had a leader, as was in the case of Samuel, Elijah and Elisha who were known for their religious authenticity, although there are also instances of exaggerated religious enthusiasm attributed to them. There were also professional prophets who prophesied on the basis of the payment they received and it naturally led to abuses with the result that there were also false prophets who were misleading the people (cf. Jer 23:9-40).

The evolution of true prophetism as a critical movement in the history of Israel is believed to be during the history of the divided kingdom and it is here that the prophets played their critical and creative roles. They had to stand alone against the kings and the priests who, instead of taking care of the people, were misleading and neglecting them. The prophets had a strong sense of being called by God and they stood on the side of God and spoke in his name. They did not have any hereditary background as was the case with the kings and the priests. They belonged to the category of the simple and marginalized ones. The typical case is that of Amos who was a shepherd of Tekoa and a dresser of sycamore trees. But he was asked to go to Samaria and to prophesy at Bethel against the king and the priest for their destructive roles among the people. Amaziah, the priest asked Amos to go back to his place and do his business and not to speak against the king and his shrine. To this Amos replied: "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to the people of Israel' (Am 7:14-15). The great contribution of the prophetic movement in Israel was that it was through these prophets that the authentic and simple religion of Israel was safeguarded when it was being destroyed by religious and socio-economic malpractice. For that very reason the prophets were disliked and persecuted by the strong and



the mighty, and the experience of every prophet was that he was not welcome in his own country and his own people (Lk 4:24). At the same time, it was these prophets who held up the faith of the people and promised the inauguration of a new era either as a New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34) or as a time when God would give a new heart and a new spirit to the people (Ez 36:26-28). The author of the Second Isaiah presents the future of Israel as taken care of by a rejected Servant of the Lord who through his sufferings brought salvation to the people (Is 52:13-53:12).

### *The Poor of the Lord*

The Babylonian captivity through which the people of Judea were punished and purified constitutes one of the critical events of Israel's history. This event once again established the true nature of the people of God as a community to be characterized by simplicity, humility and trust in God's care and providence. The returnees from Babylon recalled the meaning of what Moses had told Israel before they entered Canaan: "It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you - for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept his oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deut 7:7-8). It is this awareness that forced the prophets to exhort, challenge and warn the people to improve the quality of their relationship to God. But most of the prophets were disappointed in their efforts and some of them turned to the future and saw the possibility of a remnant of the people who would revive the spirit of the early Israel. The expression 'remnant', as such, is a little confusing because it is used with different nuances by the prophets. But a closer study of this concept would reveal that remnant is the object of the promises made to Israel. Isaiah wrote: "On that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on the one who struck them, but will lean on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. For though your people Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return" (Is 10:20-22). Micah refers to them as the lame, meaning thereby their lack of power and strength (Mic 4:7). The remnant that is scattered in distant countries will be gathered and restored to the land of Israel (Is 11:11; Jer 23:3; Mic 2:12).

It is in continuation of this concept of the remnant that we have to look at the prophecy of Zephaniah about the remnant of Israel as the "poor of the Lord" (*anawim Yahweh*), who are presented as the cream of the purified Israel

for the future of God's plans. He wrote: "On that day you shall not be put to shame because of all the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the Lord - the remnant of Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. They will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid" (Zeph 3:11-13). The humble and insignificant people to whom God shows his favour will be those who have sought refuge in his name and who have learned not to glory in their own strength. For the prophet religion means humble conversion which turns away from all earthly powers and which honours God alone as the Mighty One.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Marginal Ruth*

During the post-exilic Judaism once again we see the efforts made by the leaders of the returnees from Babylon to constitute the people as a segregated community committed to their system of the law and devotion to the temple. Through this cult of exclusivism characteristic of the post-exilic Judaism many laws were introduced, one of them being the prohibition of intermarriage with the neighbouring religions. In fact, Ezra, who is known as the father of Judaism, had the dismissal of the foreign wives as a major part of his agenda for religious reformation. For him, the most objectionable element obstructing the authenticity of Jewish religion was the presence of women from the neighbouring nations married to the Jews. He tried to convince the people that this was the most serious problem to be dealt with for any meaningful restoration of their religion. The people responded through their leader Shecaniah: "We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord (Ezra) and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Take action, for it is your duty, and we are with you; be strong and do it" (Ezra 10:2-4).

Though this step was taken up by the officials of Judaism, it was seen by some others as a deviation from the real spirit of the chosen people of God, who were called to become a medium of God's blessings and salvation to the whole humankind. Abraham was called to become the bearer of God's

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (tr. by J. Baker), vol. 2. (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 286.

blessings to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:3). Israel was chosen as a witnessing community in the family of the nations. This they had to exercise not through exclusivism and ghetto-mindedness, but rather through openness and appreciation of others. The author of the book of Ruth did precisely the same. This charming story, which the narrator placed in the rural setting of the ancient Tribal Confederacy, was told to show that Ruth, a Moabitess, was an ideal wife characterized by love, generosity, commitment which, in fact, must have surpassed these qualities of the Jewish wives themselves. The humble background of Ruth and her profound commitment to the faith of Israel was rewarded through her becoming the ancestress of David, Israel's greatest king. In other words, the author subtly contends that God's greatest favour was bestowed upon Israel through a mixed marriage, the very thing that Nehemiah and Ezra frowned upon. Here we find an attractive piece of propaganda against the assumption that one's position within Israel was dependent solely upon purity of blood or correctness of genealogy.<sup>7</sup> In fact, it is from this questionable genealogy through a Gentile woman, Ruth, that later on Jesus was born (Mt 1:5-16).<sup>8</sup>

The astonishing fact about this book of Ruth and the ideology it stands for is that, when the official list of the books of Jewish Bible was finalized, the religious authorities of Judaism did not consider it necessary to exclude this controversial book verging on heresy from the official list, but had the honesty and openness to accept it also as an alternative approach to the problem of intermarriage and relationship with other religions, an approach which we cannot expect even during these times of inter-religious dialogue and openness to other religions. The basic approach upheld by these official theologians of Judaism was to leave such issues open in order to safeguard the freedom of theological thinking. Basically, the book of Ruth was a challenge to the arrogance of the official religion of Judaism which was not ready to face and accept the small things and the marginalized persons of the society as equally valid and necessary for the healthy growth of that religion and its theology.

### *A Voice in the Wilderness*

The person and message of John the Baptist stands at the threshold of the New Testament with an enigmatic statement by Luke that "he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel" (Lk 1:8)). Apart from

<sup>7</sup> B.W.Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc. 1963), p.452.

<sup>8</sup> The same is true also of three other women in the genealogy of Jesus, Tamar (Gen 38), Rahab (Jos 2), and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:2-27) (Mt 1:3,5,6), all having something irregular in marital union.

the fact that his birth was a miraculous and unexpected one, we do not know much about his early childhood. But the picture the New Testament writers give about this man is one of a rustic person leading an austere life, wearing a garment of camel's hair and a leather girdle around his waist, eating locusts and wild honey (Mt 3:4). More important about him was the identification he made about himself as "a voice of one crying in the wilderness" (Mt 3:3 and par.), thereby acknowledging his own limitations and retreated to the marginalized desert areas. According to scholars, it is probable that John was a former member of the Essene community of Qumran which was leading an austere life, away from the sophisticated life of official Judaism. The tradition they were trying to build up was one of a marginalized community in preparation for an apocalyptic advent of a New Covenant. It seems that John had to part with the ideologies of this group and stand up for a new mission of preparing the way for a new beginning of religious authenticity characterized by inner conversion and baptism. He was prepared to play a lesser role in so far as he became a voice crying out in the wilderness of Judea (Mk 1:3), asking the people to be converted and baptized.

The Gospels speak about John with great respect. In the words of Jesus himself "among those born of women none is greater than John" (Lk 7:28). He confessed that he was not worthy to stoop down and untie the sandals of Jesus. He sent his disciples to Jesus to make them experience the inspiring personality of Jesus (Mt 11:2-6). Seeing Jesus coming toward him, John said: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). He considered Jesus as ranking ahead of him. At his words of recognizing the greatness of Jesus, his own disciples left him and followed Jesus (Jn 1:37). When John's disciples complained to him that many more are going to Jesus, John said: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). It is this diminishing personality of John which made him the great forerunner of Jesus, thereby constituting a paradigm for many of Jesus' followers to choose the way of being small and allow others to grow.

### *The Lowliness of a Servant*

Christian theologians are divided in their approach to and the understanding of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the New Testament. While some give her a place very close to Jesus as a co-redemptrix, others want to see her greatness in the inner being of her personality, and it is this latter perspective which the New Testament writers highlights, especially in the Gospel of Luke. Here Mary is presented as an ideal disciple, submitting and committing herself to God and to his plans, fully aware of her limitations and

the need of dependence on God. The encounter between Mary and the angel Gabriel narrated by Luke (Lk 1:26-38) is a typical case of divine-human encounter in which the humans are made aware of God's power beyond all what they can achieve through their own power. As it happened in the case of Abraham, Mary also received a call to go out of herself and her human security to the realm of divine power and there to discover the meaning of her mission as planned by God. The words of Mary "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:38) summarize the sublimity of Mary's personality and in it lies the profound meaning of the role she played in God's plans. That is the reason why Jesus himself in his response to the woman from the crowd (Lk 11:27-28) referred to the greatness of Mary not in terms of her biological privileges but in terms of her theological role.

In his book *Mary and Human Liberation*<sup>9</sup> Tissa Balasuriya has referred to some radical issues concerning the personality of Mary. Through the hymn attributed to Mary known as the *Magnificat*, she has sown the seeds of a cultural revolution in which the proud-hearted and the haughty are got rid of in favour of the poor, the simple and lowly, a political revolution in which the political power passes from the mighty to the masses of the people; and an economic revolution by which the hungry and starving get the good things instead of their being monopolized by the rich who are sent away empty.<sup>10</sup> But the Christian tradition has succeeded in domesticating Mary in such a way that she is presented here more as the comforter of the disturbed than as the disturber of the comfortable. Her words should be the inspiration for radical action and change of mentalities for persons and structures of societies. Fortunately modern theology, especially liberation theology, sees in the *Magnificat* a spiritual support for the struggles of the poor and the oppressed for freedom and justice. This places Mary on the side of the needy, the weak and the exploited. Consequently, in recent times it has been a great inspiration to the Christian movements for social transformation throughout the world.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Shepherds, the Fisher Men, the Tax-Collectors and the Sinners*

The Jewish society at the time of Jesus had divided people into sects and categories on the basis of religious ideologies as well as social and professional commitments. Thus there were the various sects of Judaism, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees and Zealots, as well as socio-economic groups, such as the shepherds, the merchants, the peasants and the tax-collectors. The Pharisees, who were known for their strict observance of the law of Moses,

<sup>9</sup> Tissa Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation*, Logos Vol 29, Nos 1&2, Colombo, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p.52.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 52-53.

classified most of the socio-economic groups in the category of 'sinners', for the simple reason that the people belonging to these groups were not very much committed to the observance of the various prescriptions of the law of Moses. The in-built spirit of repudiation towards the ordinary people characteristic of these Pharisees is clearly illustrated in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector (Lk 18:9-14). It is into this society that Jesus of Nazareth had to enter and carry on his ministry with his strong accent on the abba-hood of God, through which all were to be seen as the children of God and also as brothers and sisters among themselves. For Jesus all these established divisions were meaningless and his task it was to create a new order of relationship and a new kind of a society. There was need of a total transformation of the society.

The Infancy Gospel of Luke takes particular care to show the birth of Jesus as taking place in the poorest possible condition with not even a lodging place in Bethlehem for the poor couple from Nazareth (Lk 2:1-7). The paradox of the divine meeting the human is further heightened through the story of the shepherds, to whom the "the good news of great joy for all people" (Lk 2:10) is communicated. In fact, the song of the angels giving glory to God in the highest heaven is matched by the promise of peace to those whom God favours, meaning thereby the poor and the unsophisticated shepherds who alone could better understand the meaning of God's actions in this world (Lk 2:14). Hence they were ready to go to Bethlehem and see for themselves and experience the inner meaning of God's gift and they went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.

At two levels Jesus started to work out his new understanding of the society of which he was a member: in his close association with the marginalized and in his choice of the simple people as his close associates. We read in the Gospels that Jesus associated himself with the sinners and the tax-collectors and that was one of the major issues for his enemies to criticize him (Lk 15:1-2; Mt 9:9-13). He went with the tax-collector Zacchaeus to stay in his house (Lk 19:1-10). An even more daring exercise of Jesus' preference for the poor and the marginalized is had in his choice of his disciples. All the Gospels contain accounts of the "call of the disciples" (Mk 1:16-20; Mt 4:18-22; Lk 5:1-11; Jn 1:35-51). Though we do not know much about the background of these disciples, it is clear that all of them were from among the lower economic and social strata of the Jews and none of them came from the official circles of Judaism.



The real beneficiaries of Jesus' ministry were the poor and the sick who all thronged to him to receive the blessings of the kingdom of God. He healed the sick, forgave the sinners, fed the hungry and made them realize that they are great in the eyes of God and that they have a right to live in dignity. He was a wounded healer and the words of the evangelist Mathew is apt: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Mt 8:17). Jesus healed the son of the widow of Nain, realizing the tragedy of her forsaken existence. He praised the generosity and good will of the widow who deposited two copper coins into the treasury because the rich did it out of their abundance and the poor widow did it out of her poverty (Lk 21:1-4). In the understanding of Jesus the tax collectors and the prostitutes, who were supposed to be the dregs of the society, were going into the kingdom of God before the self-righteous people (Mt 21:31). For Jesus the prodigal son, returning to his father through an inner conversion is far better than the self-righteous elder son (Lk 15:11-32). In the parable illustrating to the lawyer who the real neighbour is, it is a Samaritan who is presented as the ideal neighbour and not the priest and the Levite (Lk 10:30-37). The lawyer is then asked to go and live like the Samaritan. Jesus went to Galilee through Samaria, against the existing conventions, precisely to meet a Samaritan woman and through her to bring the community of the Samaritans to a better understanding of their place before God (Jn 4:4-42). To the Centurion who confessed his nothingness before Jesus he said: "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith" (Mt 8:10). The repentant sinner at the feet of Jesus is a better person for him than the self-righteous Simon who had invited him for a sumptuous dinner (Lk 7:36-50).

### *The Low and the Despised in the World*

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, nor many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:26-29). As the first Christian missionary engaged in preaching the gospel in the eastern part of the Roman empire, Paul realized for himself the way God deals with the humans. He had several challenges to face in his apostolate which he undertook at the cost of his own self-respect and sense of pride which he had earned as an outstanding Pharisee. In his becoming a disciple and apostle of Christ Paul had to relinquish much of his past glory and become a vulnerable person, experiencing in himself the pain of a "thorn in his flesh" (2 Cor 12:7) which made him realize that human

weakness is the right disposition for receiving God's power (2 Cor 12:10). This experience became the basis of the evaluation of his own ministry and also the way God acts in this world of ours.

Paul had a challenging task to fulfil. In the growing context of a sectarian understanding of the Christian movement, when its official leaders were trying to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ as meant only for the Jews, who were considered as a higher caste, Paul had to break open the world of the Greeks as equally important for spreading the good news of the kingdom of God. He had to fight against the centripetalism of the Jerusalem Church. Again, in his encounter with the Greek world he had to critically evaluate the human disposition necessary for receiving the gospel. The Greeks were known for classifying themselves as the wise and the rest of the world as barbarians and uncultured. The risk he undertook in preaching the gospel to the Corinthians after the failure he experienced in Areopagus (Acts 17:16-32), prepared for him another challenge, namely, the problem of facing the divisions in that Church created by the sophisticated Christians of that community. Paul understood the danger of the cult of human knowledge which could destroy the very the foundation of Christian life. Paul's statements about the poor quality of human wisdom in comparison with the divine wisdom in 1 Cor 1:18-25 are precisely to bring home to his readers that what counts is not the human power but the power given by God.

The entire history of the early Church is the revelation of how God is on the side of the poor and the marginalized. The Hellenistic Christians were considered second class citizens by the Palestinian Jewish Christians. The ideal life lived by the Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35) was disturbed by the superiority complex of the Palestinian Jewish Christians who neglected the poor widows of the Hellenistic Christians (Acts 6:1-6). This was all a struggle between the powerful and the weak, the big and the small. The Jewish Christians demanded that the Greek Christians must also undergo the Jewish rite of circumcision as obligatory. Paul had to fight single-handed to defend the cause of the Greek Christians. The powerful lobby of the Jerusalem Church managed to frame regulations for the Greek Christians which reflect the superiority complex of the Jewish Christians (Acts 15:23-29). The false apostles from Jerusalem went about criticizing Paul and his doctrines, and Paul had a hard time to establish the authenticity of his divine commission. Even the collection for the poor Christians of Jerusalem, which Paul had managed to make from the Churches of Macedonia and Corinth, was in danger of being rejected by the authorities of the Jerusalem Church because he was becoming more and more a *persona non grata* among the leaders of the

Jerusalem Church (Rom 15:30-32; Acts 21:17-26). In fact, the beginnings of a Church history which was to be characterized by the ongoing struggle between the powerful and the weak, the mighty and the lowly, the so-called holy and the unholy were already visible during this critical period of the growth of the Church.

### *The Citizens of the New Heaven and the New Earth*

The Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, was written at a time when the Christians were undergoing bitter persecution from the Roman rule, and it was written to increase the courage, hope and determination of the infant Christian community. Jesus had said: "Be brave: I have conquered the world" (Jn 16:33). In the same way as God liberated his oppressed people of Israel from the oppressors and restored their freedom so also he will liberate the believers in Christ now decimated by persecution, the persecuted Christians were assured. God will not give up and he cannot give up. A history he has created, of which he is the author and the owner, is to be guided by him towards its final realization. The apparent victory of the powers is only transitory and the persecuted believers were encouraged to persevere. The persecutors may harden their evil determination and invent new ways of destroying the innocent and the weak. But the Christians are exhorted not to give up. Ultimately all powers besides the power of God have to come to an end. Only God's ultimate plans have to guide the history of the humankind and the world. God will never become a party to join the side of the powerful, he wants to enter into a cosmic covenant with the entire humankind. It is with this happy news that the author of the book of Revelation concluded his reflections on the fate of the persecuted Christians in the Roman empire: "Behold the dwelling place of God is among the humans. He will dwell with them as their God, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more; for the first things have passed away. And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new'" (Rev 21:3-5).

The significance of this book of Revelation is wider than this primary and basic message derived from its historical interpretation. The book portrays the unchanging realities on which faith relies in any period of history. God's promise to be with his people, protecting them and saving them, had always been the foundation of the confidence of the people of Israel and it is continued in the history of the early Church in the midst of the various crises through which the Church had to carry on its mission. The most significant

truth about this divine guidance of history is that God is always on the side of the weak, the marginalized and the less powerful. The apparent victory of the mighty and the powerful does not remain for long. The words of Jesus to his timid group of disciples should become the source of courage and consolation for all his followers: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Lk 12:32). It is imperative that the entire Church becomes conscious of this basic truth and become converted in order to place their trust and hope in God who created the world out of nothing and who will bring it to its ultimate fulfilment.