

## **Dalit Hermeneutics : A Proposal for Reading the Bible**

Dr. J. Susaimanickam  
St. Paul's Seminary, Tiruchirapalli

### ***The Need for a Hermeneutical Reading of the Bible***

Biblical interpretation a few decades ago moved from an author-centred historical criticism to a text-based literary criticism and is now moving towards a reader-oriented hermeneutical reading. As a result the focus of its hermeneutical interest has shifted from the author and the text to the contemporary reader.<sup>1</sup>

Under the pressure of economic, social and political oppression and exploitation in the early 1970s, the people of Latin America, particularly the uneducated and the unsophisticated who formed the Basic Christian Communities, began to show a tremendous interest in the Bible. Instead of interpreting the Bible, they, aided by liberation theologians, engaged themselves in interpreting their lives with the help of the Bible and thereby tried to weave together their story with the biblical story, each illuminating the other in the process of interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

This way of reading the Scriptures cannot simply be dismissed as naive and uncritical, because it gives primacy to a kind of critical

---

1. G. M. Soares-Prabhu, "Laughing at Idols: The Dark Side of Biblical Monotheism" in F. F. Segovia and M. A. Tolbert (eds), *Reading from This Place 2*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995, 109.

2. C. Mesters, *Defenseless Flower*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989; *God, Where are You?*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995. This is known as 'people's exegesis'.

self-reflection.<sup>3</sup> In so far as it engages in a dialogue between the reader and the text, or rather an encounter between the 'lived bible' and the 'written Bible', it is, properly speaking, a 'hermeneutical reading'.<sup>4</sup> Through this practice, the Bible brought them to an awareness of their condition as an oppressed and exploited people like the Israelites of old, and of the God of the Bible as a partner in their struggle for liberation. It also inspired their attempts at their own liberation.<sup>5</sup> Hence this new way of reading the Bible is known as the 'liberationist approach'.<sup>6</sup>

### **A Dalit Reading of the Bible**

Inspired by the Latin American liberation theology, the Dalit Christians have started to read the Bible for what it is, a 'Dalit book', and to unlock its message of liberation. To quote G. M. Soares-Prabhu, "Written for an oppressed people, the Bible is truly part of a dalit literature, with an unmistakable message for both the victims of oppression, and for all those who, like us, have actively or by default contributed to their distress."<sup>7</sup>

In the quintessence of Israel's faith (Deut 26:5-10) the Dalits, considered by Indian society as 'non-people' or to be precise

- 
3. S. S. M. Kwan, "Asian Critical Hermeneutics amidst the Economic Development of Asia," *Asia Journal of Theology* 13 (1999) 361-362.
  4. "We indeed read the Bible, but we can also say that the Bible 'reads us' " - G. Gutiérrez, *We Drink from our own Wells*, London: SCM, 1984, 34. Rightly therefore the Bible is called a 'talking book' which invites dialogue. See K. Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995, 40-43. For a penetrating discussion on the hermeneutical reading see G. M. Soares-Prabhu, "Commitment and Conversion: A Biblical Hermeneutics for India Today - A Proposal for Discussion", Unpublished Paper presented at the XIV Conference of the Society for Biblical Studies, Bangalore, 29 April-1 May 1990. Also A. M. A. Raja, "Towards a Dalit Reading of the Bible: Some Hermeneutical Reflections," *Jeevadhara* 26 (1996) 33.
  5. A. R. Ceresko, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992, 8-10.
  6. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1995, I.E.1.
  7. G. M. Soares-Prabhu, "Editorial [Biblical Reflections on Dalit Christians]," *Jeevadhara* 22 (1992) 94. However only a tiny minority of the Dalits are presumably familiar with the Bible. See A. M. A. Raja, "A Dialogue between Dalits and Bible: Certain Indicators for Interpretation," *Journal of Dharma* 24 (1999) 41-42.

'non-humans', experience freedom and dignity worthy of a people created in the image of God.<sup>8</sup> The Nazareth manifesto of Jesus (Lk 4:16-27) is a manifesto for the Dalits, because his two illustrations - the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:8-16) and Naaman the Aramaean army chief (2 Kgs 5:1-14) - indicate that the liberation he was talking about was for the oppressed people like the Dalits.<sup>9</sup> One special manner in which Jesus lived his 'option for the poor' was his table fellowship with the Dalits of his day, namely the social and religious outcasts (Mk 2:15-17; Mt 11:16-19; Lk 15:1-2). It is only against the background of the exclusive meals of the Pharisaic associations and the Essene community which scrupulously avoided contact with polluted persons, places and things, that the table fellowship of Jesus with people who were judged to be in a state of pollution, permanent or temporary, like the tax collectors and the notorious sinners, stands out as the heart of the Christian message of liberation.<sup>10</sup>

By Dalit reading we do not mean a reading adopted by the Dalits alone, but by the whole people, the non-Dalits included, who, on account of their own option for the Dalits after the praxis of their God and his Christ, insert themselves, transcending caste loyalties, into the concrete lives of the Dalits as partners in their day-to-day struggle for dignity and full humanity.<sup>11</sup> A Dalit reading, therefore, cannot be a mere academic exercise carried out in ivory towers,<sup>12</sup> but a pragmatic reading in the company of the oppressed Dalits, which begins with and leads to a liberating praxis. It is a re-reading that helps one 'perform' the Dalit liberation.<sup>13</sup>

- 
8. A. P. Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," in R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed), *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994, 32-36. Also Raja, "A Dialogue between Dalits and Bible," 42.
  9. Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," 36-39.
  10. Soares-Prabhu, "The Table Fellowship of Jesus: Its Significance for Dalit Christians in India Today," *Jeevadhara* 22 (1992) 140-159.
  11. D. Carr, "Dalit Theology is Biblical and it makes the Gospel Relevant" in A. P. Nirmal (ed), *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Madras: Gurukul, 1992, 83.
  12. Biblical interpretation in India has not emerged from grass-root communities as in Latin America and the Philippines, but is the work of Westernized scholars living in alienation from the Indian situation and the Indian mind. See Soares-Prabhu, "Interpreting the Bible in India Today," *Way Supplement* 72 (1991) 77-78.
  13. A.M.A. Raja, "Towards a Dalit Reading of the Bible," 29-31; "Reading the Bible from a Dalit Location: Some Points for Interpretation," *Indian Theological Studies* 36

Such a life-oriented reading of the Bible does not dispense with scientific exegesis, but rather calls for it in order to complement and enrich it.<sup>14</sup> Therefore it is not legitimate that one carries out first an exegesis of the biblical text, and subsequently applies it to the present day context; rather one has to proceed from the context (praxis) to the text (exegesis) and finally return to the context (praxis).<sup>15</sup> To put it more simply, exegesis is not secondary, but it is the second act for doing contextual theology, the first being the study of the reality of the present time.<sup>16</sup>

### **Dalit Hermeneutics**

Dalit reading has been recognized as one of the many Indian interpretations of the Bible.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately biblicists in India have not developed their own styles and strategies for the Dalit reading of the Scriptures, that is, Dalit hermeneutics proper. Only a few stray attempts have been made so far in this area, making use of, *mutatis mutandis*, the principles that are employed for contextual,

---

(1999) 75-76; M. Gnanavaram, "Hermeneutical Issues in Dalit Theology," *Arasaradi Journal of Theological Reflection* 11 (1998) 122-123. Also Kwan, "Asian Critical Hermeneutics," 356-362. The text also has its 'performative axis'.

14. Soares-Prabhu, "Towards an Indian Interpretation of the Bible," *Bible Bhashyam* 6 (1980) 169-170. L. Alonso Schökel once said: "People ask us for bread and we offer them a handful of theories about each verse of John 6. They ask questions about God and we offer them three theories about the literary form of one Psalm. They thirst for justice and we offer them discussions about the root of the word *sedaqa* ('justice' in Hebrew). I am examining my conscience out loud, and the reply I hear is: the one must be done without neglecting the other." - cited in G. West, "Difference and Dialogue: Reading the Joseph Story with Poor and Marginalized Communities in South Africa," *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (1994) 159, no. 10.
15. Soares-Prabhu, "Editorial [Biblical Reflections in Dalit Christians]," 93; Mesters, *Defenseless Flower*, 117-120; J. S. Croatto, "Biblical Hermeneutics in the Theology of the Oppressed," *Vidyajyoti* 46 (1982) 56-59; Gnanavaram, "Hermeneutical Issues," 119. So much so that another name for the liberation approach to the Bible is 'contextual approach'. See Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible*, I. E.
16. G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, London: SCM, 1988, 11-15; S. Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987, 11.
17. Soares-Prabhu, "Editorial [Indian Interpretations of the Bible]," *Jeevadhara* 25 (1995) 104.

liberationist, subaltern hermeneutics,<sup>18</sup> especially the two important interpretative keys, namely the 'hermeneutical privilege of the poor' and the 'hermeneutic of suspicion'.<sup>19</sup>

### ***1. Hermeneutical Privilege of the Dalits***

With whose perspectives and concerns and in whose company does one read the Bible? This is important because one cannot just pretend to read it objectively or neutrally.<sup>20</sup> What we mean by the hermeneutical privilege of the Dalits is to read the Bible through the eyes of the Dalits and thereby to understand its message as particularly accessible to those at the lowest rung of society.<sup>21</sup>

The Bible is the record of a religious experience of a 'non-people', constantly struggling to be a 'people'. Israel was constantly colonized

18. C. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation*, Maryknoll: Orbis, <sup>2</sup>1995. Also F. Wilfred, "Towards a Subaltern Hermeneutics: Beyond the Contemporary Polarities in the Interpretation of Religious Traditions," *Jeevadhara* 26 (1996) 45-62.
19. Ceresko, *Introduction*, 10. Also E. S. Fernandez, "Hermeneutics and the Bible in Liberation Theology: A Critique from other Companions in the Struggle," *Vidyajyoti* 56 (1992) 390. Gnanavaram, "Hermeneutical Issues," 121-122, points out the relationship and difference between Dalit Hermeneutics and Latin American Hermeneutics.
20. Raja, "Towards a Dalit Reading of the Bible," 31-32. The Historical Critical Method claims to offer an objective, neutral way of reading the text, independent of cultural prejudice or denominational bias. But of late this has been seriously called into question. See Soares-Prabhu, "The Historical Critical Method: Reflections on its Relevance for the Study of the Gospels in India Today" in M. Amaladoss, T.K. John and G. Gispert-Sauch (eds), *Theologizing in India*, Bangalore: TPI, 1981, 314-367. Today among scholars a consensus has almost been reached that readers, no matter how 'objective' they attempt to be, bring to the act of interpretation of a text their own interests and concerns, presuppositions and specific questions - 'known as the 'pre-understanding of the text', or simply the 'pre-text' - which condition and shape their interpretation. See a number of articles by various scholars on reading the Bible from particular social locations in L.E. Keck and Others (eds), *The New Interpreter's Bible* 1, Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, 150-187. As a result, what one gets out of a text (exegesis) depends to a large measure upon what one reads into it (eisegesis). See Croatto, "Biblical Hermeneutics," 60.
21. This is also known as the 'hermeneutic from the underside of history'. See J. Sobrino, "Theology in a Suffering World," *Theology Digest* 41 (1994) 25-30; Croatto, "Biblical Hermeneutics," 57-60; Fernandez, "Hermeneutics and the Bible," 389-390; Gnanavaram, "Hermeneutical Issues," 123-124. It must be made clear that when we speak of reading the Bible from the vantage point of the Dalits, we are not referring specifically to texts that mention the poor and the oppressed but to the entire Bible.

and exploited by Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and finally Rome. As a result, its history was an unending story of struggles for liberation from oppression, exploitation and injustice. But the God of the Bible did not remain neutral in this situation of death; instead he became their partner, taking sides on their behalf in order to liberate them, because he is pre-eminently a God-of-the-poor, a God-with-the-poor and a God-for-the-poor.<sup>22</sup>

This becomes crystal clear in the exodus event which is but the story of those who were exploited by Egyptian society, relegated to the underside of history and reduced to the 'culture of silence' - a story of a small group of slaves, of their suffering and struggle (Ex 3:7-9), and not an account of a king and his battles.<sup>23</sup> This is even more true of the historical praxis of Jesus who identified with the poor and the oppressed of his society and proclaimed to them the Good News of liberation (Lk 4:16-21; 7:22-23; cf Isa 61:1-3; 58:1-12). Thus the Bible itself offers an advantage for being read from the point of view of the poor and the oppressed like the Dalits who are its privileged addressees.<sup>24</sup>

---

22. B. Wielenga, *It is a Long Road to Freedom*, Madurai: Tamil Theological Book Club, 1988, 55-97. A. Durand, "Relating to the Poor as a Constitutive Element of Faith," *Vidyajyoti* 53 (1989) 618-619, compares God's option for the poor to the priority given in families to the handicapped children, and contends that God could be accused of discrimination if he does not give a privileged attention to the poor. Cf S.J.Pope, "Proper and Improper Partiality and the Preferential Option for the Poor," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993) 242-271.

23. J. Alfaro, "God Protects and Liberates the Poor - OT," *Concilium* 187 (1986) 27-28; Ceresko, *Introduction*, 10-13.

24. Ceresko, *Introduction*, 11. Also Y. Taesoo, "Interpretation of the Old Testament from the Perspective of Minjung Theology," *Asia Journal of Theology* 14 (2000) 43-47. In his own inimitable way Soares-Prabhu ("Commitment & Conversion," 14) concludes that we need a commitment to the poor, without which we will not be able to understand the text which has been handed down to us explicitly as 'good news to the poor', nor be able to proclaim it as a liberative message to a people most of whom live on or below the poverty line. Croatto ("Biblical Hermeneutics," 58-59) affirms that the poor and the oppressed have the most rightful 'ownership' of the Bible and are in the most adequate context to re-read it. It is no exaggeration then to say that this way of reading the Bible is not one among many; it is *the* reading of the Bible; all the other readings are to be at its service.

## 2. *Hermeneutic of Suspicion*

Interpretation of the Bible in the past was in a way the exclusive monopoly of experts in biblical criticism, and they tended to reflect mainly their own vested interests and questions without much sensitivity to the problems and struggles of the subaltern groups.<sup>25</sup> In recent times sociological criticism has correctly emphasized the influence of social, economic, cultural and political factors on the formation of the biblical writings which are accordingly considered as 'social products'. Liberation theologians have further clarified that much of the biblical material tends mainly to reflect the concerns, interests and prejudices of the dominant, ruling class,<sup>26</sup> because history and for that matter the Sacred Scriptures have been written mostly by male victors and not by the victims of society. Establishing the full truth, therefore, requires that one does not simply trust the biblical text as it stands, but look for signs which may reveal something quite different.

This awareness prompted the liberation theologians to formulate what is known as the 'hermeneutic of suspicion', also called 'exegetical suspicion'.<sup>27</sup> A stream of questions then is systematically posed with regard to both the interpreter and the biblical text: Did the events recounted in a given text actually take place? Did they take place the way they have been recounted? Why are these episodes remembered and narrated rather than others? What biases are implicit in the point of view and relative importance given to certain individuals and events in contrast to other individuals, persons, and

---

25. Mesters, *Defenseless Flower*, 17-18; Ceresko, *Introduction*, 13; Gnanavaram, "Hermeneutical Issues," 123. However the role of the exegete is to speak up on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. See C. Rowland, "'Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb': A Task for the Exegete of Holy Scripture," *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993) 228-245.

26. Ceresko, *Introduction*, 300-302. S. Briggs, "Can an Enslaved God Liberate? Hermeneutical Reflections on Philippians 2:6-11," *Semeia* 47 (1989) 137-42, identifies three categories of texts that confront readers committed to a liberation perspective: texts under which one can still hear the voice of the oppressed; texts which give voice to the beliefs, values and interests of the dominant social group; and texts whose social effects upon their original audience are unclear.

27. J. L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976, 9.

events?<sup>28</sup> Such questions have been given even a sharper edge by feminists.<sup>29</sup>

## A Proposal

Basing on the above principles we attempt here a Dalit reading of the book of Job which can serve as a proposal or paradigm for Dalit hermeneutics.<sup>30</sup>

### 1. Reading in Front of the Text

Before reading the religious text, one has to read the world of the contemporary reader and in our case, the Dalit context/location which generates Dalit pre-understanding and Dalit perception.<sup>31</sup>

Excluded from the caste system altogether and therefore considered as 'outcasts', the Dalits who make up almost one sixth of the total population of India, are economically exploited and deprived of the necessary material means to live with human dignity, struggling hard every moment to survive at the very bottom of India's economic pyramid. They live a life hardly worthy of human beings and they are the ones most affected by the massive poverty of india.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, because of the humiliating social disabilities imposed on them by the caste people, they are not simply 'have-nots', but 'be-nots' - people with a broken and diminished humanity. It is this social ostracism that characterizes Dalit identity and compounds their

28. Ceresko, *Introduction*, 13.

29. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible*, I. E. 2.

30. This part is a summary of the author's unpublished doctoral thesis *Commitment to the Oppressed: A Dalit Reading of the Book of Job*, Rome: Gregorian University, 1996.

31. A. M. A. Raja, "Reading the Bible from a Dalit Location," 73-75. Also Wilfred, "Towards a Subaltern Hermeneutics," 56-59; D. Bergant, "Reading and Social Location," *Bible Today* 33 (1995) 202-206.

32. G. M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Indian Church Challenged by Poverty and Caste," *Sedos Bulletin* 26 (1994) 174-176. F. Wilfred, "The Dalits and their Struggle for Liberation," *From the Dusty Soil*, Madras: University of Madras, 1995, 106. See F. Franco, "The Structural Nature of Poverty in India" in J. Murickan (ed), *Poverty in India*, Bangalore: Xavier Board of Higher Education, 1988, 37-58.

sad plight. As a result they suffer manifold discrimination.<sup>33</sup> The exclusion of the Dalits from the caste system and their position in the social hierarchy are legitimized and sanctioned by the Hindu religion through the law of *karma*<sup>34</sup> and the ideology of purity-pollution.<sup>35</sup> Consequently the Dalits cannot escape the stigma of their birth.

In their quest and struggle for identity, dignity and full humanity, many Dalit groups have rejected Hinduism and have embraced other religions like Islam, Sikhism and Christianity which promise, in theory at least, a greater sense of liberty, equality and fraternity. However the crude fact is that the stigma of untouchability has followed the Dalit converts even in these religions.<sup>36</sup>

Although the Dalits form a large component - an estimated fifty per cent - of the Indian Church, they continue to remain an 'untouchable group' within the Church. The existence of an oppressed group like the Dalits in the Indian Church and society is not only a shocking scandal, but poses a serious challenge to the very identity of the Church.<sup>37</sup> The continuing discrimination in the Church has triggered off the irruption of the Dalits who even threaten to break away from the present Church, dominated by the upper castes, in order to form a 'Dalit Church' where they will be on their own as citizens and believers.<sup>38</sup>

---

33. Antony Raj, "Disobedience: A Legitimate Act for Dalit Liberation" in A. P. Nirmal (ed), *Towards a Common Dalit Ideology*, Madras: Gurukul, 1989, 44-45.

34. V. Devasahayam, *Outside the Camp*, Madras: Gurukul, 1992, 18-19.

35. V. Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness: A Dalit Perspective" in A. P. Nirmal (ed), *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1989, 4-9.

36. B. Das, "Dalits and Caste System" in J. Massey (ed), *The Indigenous People: Dalits - Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1994, 74-75.

37. Soares-Prabhu, "The Indian Church," 179-182. A Church in which the Dalits cannot feel at home, or a Church that cannot be at home with the Dalits, cannot be a sign and an agent of the kingdom of God which has been promised to the poor and oppressed people like the Dalits. See F. Wilfred, "Option for the Poor and Options of the Poor: Reflections from an Asian Perspective," *Sunset in the East?*, Madras: University of Madras, 1991, 111.

38. F. Wilfred, "Dalit Christians - Quest for Dignity," *From the Dusty Soil*, Madras: University of Madras, 1995, 131-133.

## 2. Reading the Text

Having analyzed briefly the social location of the Dalits, one has to read now the world of the text from their standpoint. Therefore we propose to construct a new reading of the book of Job from their vantage point - 'the hermeneutical privilege of the Dalits'.<sup>39</sup> This will be done in two phases: we go through the entire book focusing on i. the characterization of Job, and then ii. of God, the two main characters in the Joban drama.

### i. The Characterization of Job

Job is introduced as "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (1:1; see 1:8; 2:3). In other words, he was a well-integrated, socio-centric personality who promoted life and harmony in his community (1:1-5). Consequently his practice of justice became legendary (Ezek 14:14, 20; Sir 49:9).

All of a sudden Job's world began to crumble, and a series of calamities rained down upon him in a single day. He was stripped of all his possessions category by category (1:14-17), and was reduced to utter and abject poverty. He was also deprived of all his ten children (1:18-19) who were the promise of prosperity in old age and assurance of retirement security.<sup>40</sup> Later on, stricken with a deadly and humiliating disease, he endured unbearable physical suffering (2:7-8). As an outcast he was ostracized from the community which had hitherto held him in the highest esteem, was isolated from the warmth of human fellowship, and was forcefully pushed from the centre of society to its periphery (2:8).<sup>41</sup> Crushed under the weight of affliction of his body and the agony of his soul, he broke the silence of seven days and seven nights (2:13; 3:1), and gave a heartrending expression to his bitter feelings by means of a lament (ch 3) which is the language, often the only language, of the oppressed and the afflicted.<sup>42</sup> Here one can see Job's deep sense of solidarity with the lowly (3:13-19).

---

39. For instance, D. J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20*, Dallas: Word, 1989, xlvii - lvi, demonstrates how a feminist reading, a vegetarian reading, a materialist reading and a Christian reading of the book of Job might look like. Also C. A. Newsom, "Cultural Politics and the Reading of Job," *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993) 119-138.

40. E. M. Good, *In Turns of Tempest*, Stanford: Stanford University, 1990, 192.

41. F. I. Andersen, *Job*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1976, 92, 95.

42. C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, Atlanta: John Knox, 1981, 264.

The three friends of Job who had come to condole with him and to console him (2:11) were soon shocked by his lament bordering on despair and blasphemy. In their passionate attempt to explain the cause of suffering, they expounded with conviction and vigour, and reiterated in one form or another the iron law of retribution (4:7-9; 5:14-27; 8:11-23; 11:6; 18:12-13; 20:23). This boils down to saying that some sin of his, however secret or inadvertent it might be, must have brought all the misery down upon his head. Hence in their eyes he could only be classified as a hypocrite and a secret sinner (cf 32:1). This is the main burden of their argument which runs through three rounds of speeches and counter-speeches (chs 4-14, 15-21, 22-27).<sup>43</sup>

What is this secret sin? There is no indication whatsoever in the prose narrative which presents Job as a paragon among mortals. In the poetic dialogue too there is no clear reference to this, till one reaches the third round of speeches. Strangely enough, Eliphaz attacks his integrity and accuses him of serious and heinous crimes which include economic abuse of the poor, refusal to help the afflicted and lack of compassion for the bereaved (22:6-9) - "the most specific, most harsh, and most unjust words spoken against Job in the whole book."<sup>44</sup> His allegations presume that "Job was a man of means and guilty of exploiting his position of power and influence by withholding the essentials of life from the vulnerable people within society who rightfully turned to him for assistance."<sup>45</sup> In short, Eliphaz branded him as a very anti-social person.

If these allegations could be established, it would then mean that Job was no more 'blameless and upright' (1:1). Whereas he was conscientiously righteous (6:30; 9:15, 20-22; 10:6-7; 13:23-24; 27:4-6) and would go to any extent to do what was right and fitting. Therefore he openly questions and vehemently protests against the validity of the doctrine of retribution; he brings together all his arguments in his final plea (chs 29-31) and defends himself against the charges.

---

43. D.J. A. Clines, "The Arguments of Job's Three Friends" in D.J. A. Clines, D.M. Gunn and A. J. Hauser (eds), *Art and Meaning*, Sheffield: JSOT, 1982, 199-214.

44. Clines, "The Arguments of Job's Three Friends," 211.

45. D. Bergant, *Job, Ecclesiastes*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982, 120.

Job's culture placed great emphasis on honour in keeping with one's position in society and on public acknowledgement of that honour without which life in the community would become almost impossible.<sup>46</sup> Therefore he takes a nostalgic glance back over his halcyon days when he enjoyed God's intimate friendship and loving protection (29:2-6), and also received honour and deference from his people as an honest judge and leading citizen (29:7-11, 21-25). He goes on to affirm in unambiguous terms that the respect he commanded had nothing to do with his wealth or power, but with the fact that he championed the cause of helpless people such as the poor, the fatherless, widows and the handicapped who did not have a secure place in society and hence were easily victimized and exploited (cf Sir 4:1-10). In addition, he clarifies that without reservation he used his position and possessions, influence and affluence, to restore justice to them and to improve their lot (29:12-17; cf 30:24-25).

Job describes his social conscience and commitment to justice as 'putting on righteousness and justice like a garment' (29:14). He was, in fact, a veritable incarnation of righteousness and justice, the two principles that determined and underlined the quality of life he imparted to his community.<sup>47</sup>

Righteousness and justice, however, cannot be promoted in a vacuum, but only in an existential situation of oppression. Therefore it was necessary, as Job claims, not only to rescue the weak from ruthless oppressors (29:12), but also to break their aggressive power to injure anyone else in his society (29:17). Thus defence of the oppressed requires liberation from their oppressors.<sup>48</sup>

Conscious of the full force of injustice he suffered and of his own exercise of justice (30:16-31), Job is now driven to confront the false accusations of his friends by passionately seeking a complete clearance through a series of exculpatory oaths (ch 31) by which he vows to accept terrible curses upon himself if he has committed any of the sins he enumerates. Interestingly, all the sins mentioned here are primarily sins against his fellow human beings, and yet they are

---

46. M.N. Ralph, "The Book of Job," *Discovering Prophecy & Wisdom*, New York, 1993, 165.

47. N. C. Habel, *The Book of Job*, London: SCM, 1985, 410.

48. G. Gutiérrez, *On Job*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987, 40-43.

also sins against God.<sup>49</sup> Righteous actions and attitudes promote the well-being of society, while sinful and criminal deeds lead to social harm.<sup>50</sup>

Job's abiding concern for the welfare of others was based on the common origin, inherent dignity and fundamental equality of all human beings, the ultimate basis for human rights and social justice: "Did not he who made me in the womb make them? And did not one fashion us in the womb?" (31:15; cf 33:6; 34:19). Since he recognized slaves, among others, as God's creation and as equal before the law, he has "taken a giant leap forward in advancing the value of humanity."<sup>51</sup> It is thanks to this sublime realization and recognition that Job treated justly all human beings, especially the marginalized (31:13-15).

Prompted by his fundamental rectitude, he proudly challenges the Almighty if he could prove him wrong (31:35-37; 27:2-6). In so far as legal language is incorporated, his lament becomes a protest which lays the matter out before God so that he will do something about it.<sup>52</sup>

Thus righteousness for Job is not simply a matter of individual uprightness, but primarily a question of one's behaviour to the poor who are explicitly loved by the Lord.<sup>53</sup> As B. Vawter notes, Eliphaz and Job are entirely at one in making the service of one's fellow a measure of the service of God.<sup>54</sup> No wonder then that Townsend boldly states: "The list of his [Job's] concern for those in need reminds me of Jesus calling for concern for those in need in Matt. 25:31-46."<sup>55</sup>

---

49. D. J. A. Clines, "Job" in D. A. Carson and Others (eds), *New Bible Commentary*, Downers Grove: Inter-varsity, <sup>4</sup>1994, 478.

50. L. G. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, Sheffield: JSOT, 1991, 189.

51. J. E. Hartley, "From Lament to Oath: A Study of Progression in the Speeches of Job" in W. A. M. Beuken (ed), *The Book of Job*, Leuven: Peeters, 1994, 95.

52. R. E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981, 17; J. Susaimanickam, "Protest: The Language of Prophecy" in T. Kadankavil (ed), *Little Traditions and National Culture*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2000, 21-40.

53. Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 39.

54. B. Vawter, *Job & Jonah*, New York: Paulist, 1983, 62.

55. T.P. Townsend, "The Poor in Wisdom Literature," *Bible Bhashyam* 14 (1988) 15.

## ii. *The Characterization of God*

God dominates the entire book because from the beginning it deals with the critical question: What kind of God is it that allows the innocent to suffer?<sup>56</sup> The book then presents a double exploration of his character: the dialogue (3:1-37:24) depicts God as humans see him, and the 'theologue' (38:1-42:6) depicts God as he sees himself.<sup>57</sup>

The God of Job is not just any deity, but Yahweh, a personal, living and liberating God who is intimately linked to the exodus (Ex 3:7-17), and as such he is not on the side of the forces of enslavement, but on the side of those who cry out because of oppression and destitution; he is 'an outgoing being with those who are threatened by non-being' (Ex 20:2; 33:12-19).<sup>58</sup> A mighty God, he 'does not stamp out evil at its first appearance, but chooses to wrestle with it in weakness rather than in strength, through costly permissions rather than through flat refusals'.<sup>59</sup> He is really pained to see Job suffer and suffers with him (cf 2:3).

Job only questions the validity of the model of God as proposed by his friends, namely the impartial celestial administrator who reacts according to a rigid code of retribution.<sup>60</sup> In his vacillation between his mounting frustration and confidence, he clings to God, the *goel* of the helpless and the hope of the hopeless (19:25-29).

Elihu underscores that despite God's impartiality to human beings based on their common origin, he is partial to the lowly whose cry he hears in the event of social oppression (34:16-30).

---

56. D. Cox, *Man's Anger & God's Silence*, Middlegreen: St. Paul, 1990, 11.

57. D. Cox, "A Rational Inquiry into God: Chapters 4-27 of the Book of Job," *Gregorianum* 67 (1986) 621-658. In fact, not two but several portraits of God clash. See J. Susaimanickam, "An Indian Prolem of Evil: The Caste System - A Dalit Reading of the Book of Job" in A. Thottakara (ed), *Indian Interpretation of the Bible*, Bangalore : Dharmaram Publications, 2000, 187-196.

58. Wielenga, *It is a Long Road to Freedom*, 55-97.

59. D. Kidner, *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature*, Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1985, 59.

60. R. A. F. MacKenzie, "The Purpose of the Yahweh Speeches in the Book of Job," *Biblica* 40 (1959) 440; N. C. Habel, "In Defence of God the Sage" in L. G. Perdue and W. C. Gilpin (eds), *The Voice from the Whirlwind*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1992, 26-28.

The God of the whirlwind first conducts a 'cosmic tour' and points out to Job several features of the cosmos - the spheres of the earth, sea, heavens and underworld (38:4-38). It is not enough that God merely creates the universe; he has to continue to create it; he has to continue to display his power and liberate it from the destructive forces; or else it would be in danger of sinking back into chaos (3:8; 7:12). In other words, the world has to become the world again and again - what is known as the continued creation (Ps 74). He is, therefore, immanent and compassionate in the sense that he is active in his creation.<sup>61</sup> This explains the care, the providential nurturing that God expends upon his creation (cf Ps 146:5-9).

Then a gallery of wild animals is paraded before Job (38:39-39:30). Most of the animals are very insignificant, and except perhaps for the horse the rest are wild beasts which, by that reason, are beyond the control of human beings and are hostile and dangerous to them. Some of them might seem ugly, repugnant, ridiculous and useless; yet all of them are among God's pets. He cares for them by providing them with all the necessities of life (cf 10:8-12; 33:4; Ps 50:10-11).

What is particularly interesting in this section is that God is alluded to by parental images as father and/or mother: he is a kind father (cf 38:28; 10:12) and a loving mother who provides for her young ones (cf 38:39-41). Notably, womb imagery plays an important role in the whole book (see 3:1-3, 10-11; 10:8-13, 18-19; 31:15, 18; 38:8-9, 29). If 31:15 presents the womb as the place of human equality, the animal discourse depicts it as a symbol of cosmic equality, of deep-rooted concern for the well-being and flourishing of all human and non-human life, especially of the neglected, the oppressed, the weak sections of the universe.<sup>62</sup> God thereby demonstrates the breadth and depth of his tender care and loving concern for the entire creation.

---

61. G. Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, 327.

62. P. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978, 36-38; Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation*, 33. Incidentally, womb imagery is important for Dalit theology. Cf K. Ilaiah, "Hindu Gods and Us; Our Goddesses and Hindus," *Why I am not a Hindu*, Calcutta: Samya, 1996, 71-101.

The elaborate and elegant description of Behemoth, the fiercest of the land animals (40:15-24), and of Leviathan, the most dreadful of the sea monsters (41:1-34), comprises the bulk of the second discourse. Scholarly opinion today favours naturalistic-symbolic interpretation, that is, the animals are real, but they represent beasts from the realm of myth.<sup>63</sup> Definitely the stress here is on the power and majesty of God who, against the background of the combat motif in the book (26:5-14; 9:5-14; 38:8-11), emerges as victor, creator-liberator, who subjugates the evil and chaotic forces and takes full control over them.<sup>64</sup> Since the proud, the powerful (40:11-13; 41:34), the wicked (cf 38:12-15, 22-23; 40:12), etc. align themselves with these destructive, oppressive elements, he keeps them also under his direct control and constant watch (cf 4:10-11), and thereby actively takes care of his creation.

God thus makes it abundantly clear that he is vitally concerned with justice, cosmic as well as social, which can be established only through a constant struggle with the evil forces - supernatural, natural and human.<sup>65</sup> His triumph over them can give a sense of hope and security especially to the poor and the oppressed, because his power and might "are not crushing human beings but encouraging and enabling them to stand up against the powers that threaten to crush them."<sup>66</sup> God's nature or character is thus defined, even conditioned, by his relation to the victims of society.

We can therefore rightly conclude that the oppressed and the exploited, who live at the bottom of society, occupy the centre stage in the drama of Job, and a radical commitment to their project, which is God's own project, is integral to the very architecture of the book of Job.<sup>67</sup>

---

63. J. E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988, 521-522.

64. J. Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1985, 38-49, 62-87.

65. J. C. L. Gibson, "On Evil in the Book of Job" in L. Eslinger and G. Taylor (eds), *Ascribe to the Lord*, Sheffield: JSOT, 1988, 413.

66. Wielenga, *It is a Long Road to Freedom*, 91-92.

67. Townsend, "The Poor in Wisdom Literature," 13.

However some questions keep on coming up in our minds: Why are Job and God so much concerned about the oppressed? Who are the oppressed? Why are they oppressed? What types of exploitation do they undergo? What is the attitude of the ancient Israelites to this category of people? Who are the wicked? Why are they blamed for the wretched conditions of the oppressed? Why do they oppress them? etc. Only a study of the socio-historical context of the book can throw light on these questions.

### **3. Reading Behind the Text**

Here we take up the questions raised above and attempt to find an answer by going back to the real social world, i.e., the circumstances, the material causes, the economic and political realities, the psychological profile of the author(s) etc. that the text itself might point to.<sup>68</sup> As A. R. Ceresko would put it, "we use the text not as a mirror which reflects the image of the one who gazes at it," but as "a window through which we can gaze and gain access to the historical situation which gave birth to the text."<sup>69</sup> To this end, we employ the second interpretative key, namely, the 'hermeneutic of suspicion'. Why is it that an upper-class figure is chosen as the hero of the book of Job rather than someone from the lower rungs of society? Why is the story told in this way, with these personages placed as the central and determining actors? How come that there is also a strong sympathy for the oppressed groups? In other words, one has to critique the text, the ideology inscribed in the text, the world of the text, and try to reconstruct with a fair amount of confidence the interests that lie behind the text,<sup>70</sup> namely the world of the author(s)

---

68. D. J. A. Clines, "Why is There a Book of Job, and What does it Do to You if You Read it?," *Interested Parties*, Sheffield: Academic, 1995, 123-136. Also A. M. A. Raja, "Some Reflections on a Dalit Reading of the Bible," *Indian Theological Studies* 33 (1996) 251. It will not be out of place here to mention that dalit theologians today emphasize the role of Dalit history in the construction of Dalit theology. See J. Massey, "History and Dalit Theology" in V. Devasahayam, *Frontiers in Dalit Theology*, Madras: Gurukul, 1992, 161-182.

69. A.R. Ceresko, "The Identity of the Indian Church: A Biblical Perspective" in K. Kunnumpuram, E. D' Lima & J. Parappally (eds), *The Church in India in Search of a New Identity*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1997, 50-51.

70. D. J. A. Clines very graphically explains this way of reading the Bible by the metaphor of 'Reading from Left to Right'. See Clines, "The Ten Commandments, Reading from Left to Right," *Interested Parties*, 26-45.

and the audience for whom they were writing with the application of the scientific tools of sociology, anthropology and the like. One can learn much about the historical setting - the social, economic, political, cultural, religious factors - which determined the shape and character of the message the author(s) intended to communicate to their audience.<sup>71</sup>

The early post-exilic period which coincides with the early Persian era (538-400 BC) is the most likely date for the composition of the book of Job.<sup>72</sup> We therefore go on to examine the historical and political background, religious and cultural factors, social and economic realities which must have been at play in the post-exilic Judah. We focus, among other things, on the conflicts between the people of the land and the Babylonian exiles, between the priestly class and the lay aristocracy, on the controversies over the land and the rebuilding of the temple, and on the socio-economic reforms of Nehemiah and Ezra.

Since Job is a literary creation, it is difficult to reconstruct a possible historical setting from the world of a fictional text. However OT stories are the creation of worlds alternative to our own present reality, and therefore we are justified in our endeavour.<sup>73</sup>

A contextual analysis of the different Hebrew verbs connected with oppression - *daka'* (to be oppressed), *hamas* (to do violence), *shadad* (to ruin), *'ashaq* (to oppress), *'anah* (to be afflicted), *ratsats* (to crush) and *lahats* (to harass) - spread throughout the book of Job explains the fact of oppression and further shows that the wretched

---

71. Ceresko, "The Identity of the Indian Church," 51. Also Y. Taesoo, "Interpretation of the Old Testament," 42-43.

72. A. R. Ceresko, "Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job* : Some Questions of Method," *Indian Theological Studies* 29 (1992) 229-233.

73. D. J. A. Clines, "Story and Poem: The Old Testament as Literature and as Scripture," *Interpretation* 34 (1980) 126-127. One should not lose sight of the fact that there is a world of difference between Job and the Dalits. Although Job, the former aristocrat, was reduced to nothing and was ridiculed even by the despicable (30:1-15), he did not suffer from social discrimination as the Dalits who are deprived of all their rights and privileges, are condemned for life to carry with them the stigma of untouchability and are treated as dehumanized persons, as nonentities.

of the earth suffer mostly from injustice, violence and economic losses, reminiscent of the grim situation depicted in Neh 5:1-5.

Examining the Hebrew nouns employed for the objects of oppression - '*ani/anaw* (poor), *ebeyon* (needy), *dal* (destitute), *almanah* (widow), *yatom* (orphan), *ger* (stranger) and '*ebed* (slave) - one can conclude that they roughly correspond to the poorest people of the land who were left behind in the land of Judah (2 Kgs 24:14; 25:12), that is, the small farmers, landless lower classes of the countryside, the illiterate, the little, the humble and the lowly. They are poor because they are oppressed, and they are oppressed because they are poor.<sup>74</sup> This takes us to the consideration of the agents of oppression, namely *rasha'* (wicked), and *hanef* (godless).

Thus in the Joban community we find three groups which were at odds with one another in the wake of the social crisis of the early post-exilic period: the pious rich, the wicked wealthy, and the oppressed. We can rightly infer that the anti-social rich were not bothered about their religious obligations in the social sphere and that they prospered by cleverly exploiting their social standing (20:19; Neh 5:5). The wicked, as presented in the book, resemble this group. The pious rich, on the other hand, must have come to the bitter realization that their religious way of life, expressed in a high degree of social involvement on behalf of the impoverished lower class, did not produce direct results; worse still, they must have been also threatened by the loss of social positions and by isolation. As a result, not a few of them must have begun to doubt the justice of God and to despair over the meaning of their life. Job, as portrayed in the book, resembles the members of this group.<sup>75</sup>

Ground by poverty and oppression, and led to a feeling of alienation and hopelessness, the exploited must have become strongly eschatological in their orientation to life, and awaited their redemption by means of a great social upheaval brought about by

---

74. Soares-Prabhu, "Class in the Bible: The Biblical Poor a Social Class?," *Vidyajyoti* 49 (1985) 322-346.

75. R. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament* 2, London: SCM, 1994, 437-522; A. R. Ceresko, *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999, 68-71, 78-79.

God who would completely do away with the unjust economic and social structures and take the side of the poor (Isa 56:6-57:27).<sup>76</sup>

At this critical juncture the author of the book of Job, playing the role of a pastor, wanted to offer consolation and guidance to his divided, but dejected community. To serve this purpose he must have borrowed the folk-tale of 'Job the patient' and introduced the dialogue section.<sup>77</sup>

#### **4. Reading Back and Forth**

The insights garnered from a look at the world behind the text may help us understand better and deal with the conflicts and challenges we face in our world - the world in front of and confronted by the biblical text.<sup>78</sup> To put it differently, we allow the reader/context and the text to interact and dialogue with each other more sharply because only in such interactions - 'fusion of horizon' - meaning can emerge.<sup>79</sup> Out of this conversation we may draw a few pertinent conclusions which will help us perform the dalit liberation.

i. Suffering is not always a sign of guilt or of God's displeasure. In a world of contingency and ambiguity, God can maintain order and justice, only by his vigilant care and compassionate humaneness, exhibited in his partiality to the disadvantaged. There are also social evils like poverty and ruthless exploitation which are caused by human beings. Here God is silent so that humans may take responsibility for them and voice their protest against them; he suffers and struggles with the victims of injustice. Indeed he is a 'Dalit God', because brokenness and hence Dalitness belongs to his very being.<sup>80</sup>

---

76. Albertz, *History of Israelite Religion* 2, 503-507. Interestingly, Raja ("Some Reflections on a Dalit Reading of the Bible," 253) observes that the Dalits have an attraction towards apocalyptic tradition. The more they are wounded the more they are enamoured of an alternative world order, perhaps as part of their dreaming dreams and seeing visions. See Clines, "Why is There a Book of Job?," 134-136.

77. For a critical survey of opinions regarding the central theme of the book, see K. J. Dell, *The Book of Job as a Sceptical Literature*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991, 29-56. Also Clines, "Why is There a Book of Job?," 136-144.

78. Ceresko, "The Identity of the Indian Church," 51.

79. Soares-Prabhu, "Editorial [Indian Interpretations of the Bible]," 103.

80. Susaimanickam, "An Indian Problem of Evil," 196-198.

ii. A paragon of piety, Job did not hesitate to attack the traditional systems of belief. Of course, his protest was prompted by his firm belief in a moral God who governs the universe with passion and compassion. Such protests, which characterize Dalit literature, can be a source of social power from below to break the unjust structures and to bring about a radical change in our society.

iii. All human beings are of common origin created with dignity and equality (31:15). This explains Job's dogged commitment to the deprived, and God's solicitude for the despised. The urgent need of the hour is to empower the Dalits by expressing one's solidarity with them and to work in their company for their integral liberation. It calls for a new life style, a new kind of spirituality, born of conflicts and struggles.

iv. The Hollywood type restoration of Job presents a contrast-society where all could again live together and celebrate their life together. Although social mobility is not generally possible within the rigid, closed caste system, it is making headway through economic betterment, political participation, cultural change and the like. Through personal transformation a casteless society could become a historic reality.<sup>81</sup>

v. Post-exilic Judah moved in the direction of exclusivism which gradually developed into hostility towards other religious, ethnic groups, finally resulting in some sort of a caste conflict within the Jewish community itself. Only against this backdrop can one appreciate the openness of the book of Job towards the gentiles. Today communalism and religious fundamentalism are on the rise in India and all over the globe. Therefore the task of the Church is not to become an elite Church, but to build up open communities, transcending barriers of caste and creed, race and sex.

vi. The friends of Job refused to see what was happening to him under their very noses, and attempted to pigeon-hole and thereby falsify God. Whereas Job started from the stark reality of his suffering, and painted a picture of the existential God of human experience. In the process, he learnt to speak correctly about God and became a real

---

81. Susaimanickam, "An Indian Problem of Evil," 198-200.

theologian (42:7). Interestingly, Job was also sensitive to the needs of the suffering masses and theologized in solidarity with them (ch 3), and that made his theologizing real and authentic. Thus the book of Job offers a method, a model for contextual theologizing and for Dalit hermeneutics/theology in particular.

vii. Though the book of Job has been traditionally classified as wisdom literature, it is more akin to prophetic tradition in its vocabulary, literary form and content. Its main thrust is not in maintaining the status quo, but in the restoration of a brotherhood ethic, in bringing about a structural change, even subversion with an 'apocalyptic impatience'! Only such a prophetic outlook and agenda can help break the all-pervasive caste system, and usher in a just social order on the Indian soil where all human beings - small and great, poor and rich, outcasts and caste people alike - can live together in harmony as brothers and sisters with more dignity and equality.