THE FUTURE OF THE BIBLICAL PAST:
ENVISIONING BIBLICAL STUDIES ON A GLOBAL KEY

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements vii
Introduction: The Futures of Biblical Pasts xiii

Part 1. Africa
1: Biblical Interpretation and Criticism in Neocolonial Africa: Challenges, Conceptualizations, and Needs in the Twenty-First Century
   Israel Kamuzanzo 1
2: Beyond the “Ordinary Reader” and the “Invisible Intellectual”: Pushing the Boundaries of Contextual Bible Study Discourses
   Sarejini Nadar 13
3: Dealing (with) the Past and Future of Biblical Studies: A New South African Perspective
   Jeremy Punt 29

Part 2. Asia
4: Unleashing the Power Within: The Bible and Dalits
   Monica Iyesna Melachthon 47
5: For A Better Future in Korean Biblical Studies: Dialoguing with Myself in a Different Context
   Yong-Sung Ahn 67
6: Biblical Studies in a Rising Asia: An Asian Perspective on the Future of the Biblical Past
   Philip Chia 81

Part 3. Europe
7: The Future of a Nonexistent Past: Biblical Studies in Bulgaria
   Milena Kirova 97
8: Unity and Diversity in Nordic Biblical Scholarship
   Hanna Stenström 111
India can legitimately be described as one of the earliest recipients of the Bible (Sugirtharajah 2001, 15-22), and yet Indian biblical scholarship has had little impact if any on biblical studies worldwide. I thus welcome this opportunity to participate in *The Future of the Biblical Past*, while aware of the problematic roles that are thrust upon the non-Western individual when she and her work enter the orbit of certain kinds of academic concerns and discursive practices pursued supposedly and predominantly only in the West. However, biblical study and interpretation are not a project of the West alone. Third World individuals should be recognized as crucial partners of mainstream Western voices engaged in biblical criticism, as critical interlocutors of strategies at work in versions of academic multiculturalism or international cooperation as initiated by the Society of Biblical Literature.

Improving the range of texts we attend to and the issues we take seriously, as well as including a range of marginalized voices into academic institutions and public debates, are important social and political tasks. Yet I hope that this project, diverse and multicultural as it is, is not seen simply as a way to reduce the parochialism and enlarge the understandings of mainstream Western subjects, since the stakes of non-Westerners go far beyond a simple "inclusion." We seek to make critical interventions not only into the perspective of mainstream Western culture itself but also into our Third World discourses about our contexts and communities. We have experienced that our interventions have not always been considered "scholarship," of appropriate "method" and "relevant interpretation."

Hence *The Future of the Biblical Past* project is an opportunity for those involved in biblical study and interpretation to be self-reflective about the project of appreciating the "voices from the majority of the globe" that are contributing
to the "breakdown of the North Atlantic dominance of biblical studies." However, I think that we need to be cautious that the views of an elite social group at a particular historical moment do not become the defining components of the worldview of the context represented. It is essential that we reflect on how the actual religious practices, spiritual understandings, and scriptural interpretations of various groups of women, oppressed castes, and groups variously socially and culturally marginalized, might challenge and subvert rather than endorse the views found in such essays. An uncritical appreciation may obscure an understanding of the place of these "cultural positions" within the moral and political fabric of their social contexts and obscure their ideological functions as justifications for practices or institutions that were unjust and exclusionary and that worked to disempower and marginalize a great many of the inhabitants of these cultural contexts.

This could occur particularly with a culture such as India's, which considers itself to be deeply, internally religious and is very hierarchical and stratified. The diversity of culture, language, religion, and caste makes India an almost indefinable entity; one that cannot be encompassed with a single approach or perspective. Well-known studies that have so far showcased biblical studies and biblical methodology or described the reception of the Bible in India have paid some attention to interpretations from the perspective of caste (Sugirtharajah 1998a, 283–89; 2001, 15–22; 2005a, 73–84; Prabhu 1980, 151–70). This essay is an attempt to survey and reflect critically on the following areas: (1) the reception of the Bible by the Dalit Christian community in India; (2) the hermeneutics and methods, as well as the function of the Bible, in the struggle for Dalit emancipation; and (3) the future prospects for biblical scholarship and reflection from the perspective of caste in India.

THE SCRIPTURALISM OF CASTE DISCRIMINATION

The caste, or Varna, system in India is a comprehensive sociocultural system, traditionally stratified and hierarchical, that developed in ancient India. It is characterized by exclusion (rules governing marriage and physical/social contact based on a system of purity and pollution), hierarchy (order, rank, and status according to caste and subcaste status), and interdependence (division of labor; each caste is assigned an occupation). Caste is the most visible, pervasive, and powerful expression of Indian culture and society and the operating principle in all social interactions and relationships. As a religio-cultural ideology of social inequality, it allows and justifies hierarchies and discrimination, yielding a social order peculiar to India, "a land of the most inviolable organization by birth and text" (example of hierarchical society) (Betelive 1981, 32 and 49).

According to current statistics, the "scheduled caste" population comprises over 16 percent of India's total population. Therefore, more than 200 million people in India are considered "Untouchable"—people tainted by their birth into a system that deems them impure, less than human. The Untouchables of India, now called "Dalits," are relegated to the lowest jobs, such as scavenging, cleaning, sweeping, leather tanning, weeding, fishing, and so forth, and live in constant fear of being publicly humiliated, paraded naked, beaten, and raped with impunity by dominant-caste groups seeking to keep them in their place. Wearing shoes or merely walking through an upper-caste neighborhood, drinking water from a pot or well reserved for the upper caste, or visiting an upper-caste temple are life-threatening offenses. Having been relegated to a segregated position characterized by poverty and misery in nearly three millennia, they continue to be the most disadvantaged of the Indian population.

It is almost impossible to ignore the caste question today, since the problems of Dalits figure in every agenda. The social sciences, political practices, artistic expressions, journalistic writings—all pay attention to Dalits. This has not occurred because of any sudden and miraculous changes in perception or consciousness that the upper-caste intelligentsia have come about on their own. The struggles of the Dalit masses in all fields of life—religious, social, cultural, ideological, and political—have forced this realization on the rest of society. The caste struggle has quite some time ago crossed the boundaries of mere opposition or resistance to upper-caste power and dominance or of attempts at upward social mobility. It is a movement that is challenging the very existence of the system in India and is calling for the total annihilation of caste. It is seeking to harness even the living religions of India, including Scripture/s, for the purposes of the struggle.

This is essential because caste derives its legitimacy and strength from the dominant Brahminical Hinduism whose ancient Hindu Scriptures hold that the four castes, called varnas, came out of the primordial man, the Adi Purusha: the Brahmin (priest) from his head; the Kshatriya (ruler) from the shoulders; the

1. I say this aware of my own limitations as a Dalit woman whose life was in many ways a privileged one and that what I present in this essay cannot encompass the thoughts and positions of the diversity that exists within the Dalit community.

2. The term "Dalit" is a descriptive term, for it portrays the conditions under which Dalits find themselves—oppressed, broken, subordinated, crushed, split, and the like. It is a name that they have given themselves to counter names given by others, such as "untouchables," "harrijans," "scheduled classes," and "backward classes."
Vysya (trader) from the torso; and the Sudra (laborer) from the thighs (Rig Veda 10.90). This scriptural rhetoric is based on concepts of purity and pollution and the resolve of the upper castes to surmount through the forces of Hinduism. This "scripturalism" is used to emphasize unity and continuity in Indian culture. The Hindu Scriptures influence deep-seated convictions about the nature of Indian reality and the survival of its customs and mores. They solidify a national identity forged by the Hindu rhetoric of Brahmanical or caste supremacy.

Hence an examination of the Bible and Dalit experience should take place keeping in mind this "scripturality" of the Dalit experience, the pervasiveness of scriptural legitimation of upper caste consciousness by Hindu scriptural mandates. Dalits have had to read and study any Scripture, including the Bible, in such a context. That reading and study have been contested, and for centuries Dalits have been involved in a struggle for access to Hindu Scriptures, which sanctify and justify the hierarchical and discriminatory system of caste and fuel the hegemony of the dominant caste groups through interpretation, religious rituals, symbols, and myths. Dalits have also had limited access and authority to interpret Christian Scriptures.

**Dalit Reception of the Bible: A Brief Overview**

Sugirtharajah speaks of the tolerance with which the Bible was received in pre-colonial India: it was revered as an icon with mystical and magical powers and privileged because of its holiness and transcendentals properties (2001, 16-18). The language of the Bible (Syriac) used by the St. Thomas and other Christians in the Malabar region made it inaccessible to the common populace, who were predominately illiterate. Translations were discouraged; hence, the contents of the Bible were made familiar through various non-textual means, such as sermons, liturgy, the veneration of saints, pilgrimages, and festivals. The Bible presented as a book in harmony with the tenets of other faiths found a place alongside these scriptural traditions (Sugirtharajah 2001, 37-40). Control over interpretation and transmission of the Bible, its contents and message, was very much in the hands of the priests. What Sugirtharajah does not address is the issue of caste in precolonial India. If the first converts to Christianity were the dominant castes (Brahmins), as is popularly maintained, then is it possible that they did not want it translated or circulated? Would Hebrew or Syriac have acquired a status similar to that of Sanskrit as a holy language among these new converts and as a language of Scripture restricted to only those who could read and interpret? Would these early custodians of the Christian Scriptures, given their caste identity, intentionally shelter the Bible from being "polluted" by the so-called "Untouchables"?

In colonial India, however, the missionary focus shifted to the lower caste groups, and the Bible was translated and printed into vernacular languages. With its availability in English made possible by the work of the British and Foreign Bible Society, more and more people began reading and meditating on the Bible, despite its use to stem any resistance to colonial occupation and oppression (Sugirtharajah 2001, 45-73). The Bible became polyvalent in use: as a colonizing book, a metasymbol of the colonialists, to inculcate European manners, values and symbols; as a medium through which education and literacy became available; and as an icon in a culture with a history of iconizing material objects (Clarke, 2002a, 245-66). Yet it was popular among the newly converted, because it was accessible to all who could read irrespective of caste or gender. It became an instrument of emancipation for the colonized. The gospel was a godsend, because it seemed to weaken the caste system. Given the Dalits' exceptional need for acceptance, the possibility of liberation—from physical slavery, servitude, social stigma, and almost total degradation—promised through salvation in Jesus Christ and participation in the life of the Christian church came as good news. Many Dalits responded accordingly and accepted the Bible as their Book of Faith and Scripture. The offer of a new self-image as a person God in fact loves and has already forgiven, as well as the offer of hope—primarily for eternal life, but also for a life free from cringing fear and terrorized subservience here and now, all of which were denied Dalits by all parties in their existing circumstances—were further reasons to accept Christianity and its Scriptures. Yet, at the very same time, their culture and identity as Dalits were also being eroded.

At a time when missionaries were trying to utilize the Bible as a strategic resource to demarcate familiar colonial binaries (Christian and heathen, saved and damned), many Indian philosophers and thinkers began to familiarize themselves with the Christian Scriptures and to engage them in dialogue with the
Indian Scriptures (Boyd 1973, 141–62; John 1965, 43–51). These early thinkers, Christian and non-Christian, belonged mostly to the privileged and literate caste groups; hence, their interpretations and reflections paid little attention to the needs and aspirations of the Dalits. They used traditional brahmanical philosophical concepts and esoteric theories as interpretive keys to unlock the biblical message for India, one which had little significance for the millions suffering caste tyranny (cf. Sugirtharajah and Hargreaves, 1993).

**DALITS AND BIBLICAL STUDIES: IMPEDIMENTS**

Postcolonial India is still addressing the issue of caste and, although by constitution all Indians are equal, caste continues to function in all spheres of life, including the church and theological education. It is important to view Dalit contributions to biblical studies in the light of this historical background and recognize that such study is inhibited by three major factors.

First, since all fields of intellectual activity were barred to them, about 80 percent of Dalits, even today, remain illiterate. Their cultural and creative activity was denied or considered debased and vulgar. This large scale illiteracy among Dalits leads Maria Arul Raja to remark, “It is an irony to think of a Dalit interpretation of the written text of the Bible, when a vast majority of them are kept as illiterates” (1997, 336). There are just too few biblical scholars/theologians from the Dalit community who are equipped with the formal tools of biblical study and interpretation. Even then, those few have been trained within a Western system with methodological tools that are not always appropriate or helpful in the Indian context. Hence they struggle trying to be sensitive to the needs of the context and be faithful to method (read: Western).

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5. A. P. Nirmal (1990, 142) "Whether it is the traditional Indian Christian theology or the more recent third world theology, they failed to see in the struggle of Indian dalits for liberation a subject matter appropriate for doing theology in India. What is amazing is the fact that Indian theologians ignored the reality of the Indian church. While estimates vary, between 50% and 80% of all the Christians in India today are of scheduled-caste origin. This is the most important commonality cutting across the various diversities of the Indian Church that would have provided an authentic liberation motif for Indian Christian theology. If our theologians failed to see this in the past, there is all the more reason for our waking up to this reality today and for applying ourselves seriously to the task of doing theology."

6. The legacy of these thinkers is their questioning of the biblical text and the setting of the Christian Scriptures within the larger textual tradition of India, the intertextual nature of texts, which set for us a direction for an interpretative process that is Indian and that takes seriously the multiscriptural context of India.

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Second, for a community that had no scriptures of its own, or scriptures that have been erased or incorporated into the dominant tradition, the Bible became an alternate canon, the Christian "Veda," filling a void and supplying the Dalits with a framework for knowledge which they did not have to begin with and which they desired (Thangaraj 1999, 138–39). The Bible is "Scripture," the revealed Word of God; as talisman, an icon with sacred power, it contributes to the notion that the Word of God is found in the letter of Scripture. Yet Scripture in its status as "Word of God" inhibits the Dalit reader from reading the Bible as a historical document open to critical inquiry. This is further exacerbated by similarities in the cultures of the Bible and India. Scripture and culture collude to reinforce hierarchy, particularly in matters pertaining to women. Questioning scripture is considered redundant.

Third, flawed or biased interpretations of the Bible have hindered Dalits from playing a more active role in church and theological education. While the authority of the Bible has not been used to legitimate the enslavement of Dalits, unlike apartheid, it has not been utilized to address the issue of caste. Even though the good news for Dalits was still presented in terms of a new self-image (a new community granting Dalits greater equality, respect, and caring) and a new hope (defined primarily in terms of enhanced opportunities for individual and family), mobility was/is still a distant dream. Social transformation is confined to social reform, and Indian Christian theology has failed to come to terms with Dalit political aspirations. The church has therefore remained casteist, as though caste were not contrary to the message of the Gospel.

**DALIT INTERPRETATIONS: A SAMPLER**

Over the last three decades, alternate interpretations of the Bible have been rendered by Dalit Christians, who are often at the risk of being considered "untutored exegetes." These interpretations were unmistakably shaped by the status of the interpreters as outsiders. It is still the case that the social, political, economic, and aesthetic marginalization of Dalits— their dislocation both within society and church—conditions their approach to and use of biblical imagery, precepts, and motifs. The Bible holds a central place in Dalit theological discourse, and it is emphatically declared that Dalit theology is biblical (Carr n.d., 71–84; Devasahayam, 1992; Arul Raja 1997, 336–45). Bible study is recognized as an important method for forging Dalit identity and mobilizing Dalit struggle.

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7. Many of these interpreters are not recognized as "scholars" in the field. Most belong to departments of theology and hence pay little attention to biblical methodology.
and resistance. Dalit readings and interpretations of Christian Scriptures use the concepts of “pollution,” “untouchability,” and poverty—all derived from their stigmatized experience as key criteria.8 These alternate readings are part of an effort to unleash the power inherent in the sacred text, a power that has been subdued heretofore by casteist interpretations in an attempt to empower those discriminated by the evil of caste. In what follows I offer a few examples of Dalit interpretations of select biblical texts.

Genesis 4:1–10. Veeramani Devashayam uplifts Abel as the first Dalit martyr, whose heirs are the Dalits (1992, 8–12). Cain the vegetarian assumes privilege and strength by virtue of being the firstborn, a status understood as “God-given,” and expects Abel as the “meat eater” to assume the weaker and secondary role (on grounds of pollution). Devashayam draws parallels between the caste system and Cain’s actions, which begin at the altar (read: religion) and are taken into the field (read: sociopolitical and cultural life of Dalits). Unlike the God of the Hindus, however, the biblical God refutes the dominant values of Cain (dominant caste groups) by listening to the cry of the blood of Abel (Dalits). This God does not destroy the dominant ones but warns them, and the same warning comes to all who entertain caste prejudices and practice discrimination.

Mark 5:24–34. Devashayam lays emphasis on what he calls the subversive faith of the woman (1992, 28–35; see here for other biblical studies). She mingles in the crowd fully aware of her unclean and ritual status; thus, “She dares to pollute others in order to become clean.” The irony of this subversive faith is that she wants to break the laws precisely through channels that were created to remind people of the law and seek its compliance.” It is a faith that “dares to act when it appears feasible by daring obstacles.” By seeking to know who touched him and then commending her in public, Jesus exposes the sin of the oppressor. Devashayam therefore reminds us, “Theology has the prophetic task of pronouncing judgment on the oppressor and the structures in order to call them to repentance.” It needs to expose the sin of the oppressor in order to induce confidence in the oppressed, promote their full humanity, and release them from any fear even after being healed.

Mark 5:21–45. Philip Peacock focuses on the pollution that is passed on by touching (2007, 56–58). Jesus overcomes untouchability by touching—blood and death are considered to be polluting but, by being touched by the woman and by touching the dead girl, Jesus brings healing to both. Rather than becoming polluted, he heals. The christological import of this text lies in its message that

8. Untouchability for the person from the dominant social group is a marginal issue, viewed as something that Dalits have brought upon themselves through their occupations, whereas Dalits view untouchability as a creation of the Brahmins.

the blood and death of Jesus are the means of salvation. That which is polluting (read: Dalit) becomes the means of salvation. The touch of men, Dalit and non-Dalit, on Dalit woman’s bodies is an act of accumulating power, to exert power over, but Jesus relinquished power in order to empower.

Luke 15:11–32. George Zachariah reads the parable of the Prodigal Son from the perspective of the prostituted women and wonders if the text mentions these women only to enhance the sinfulness of the young man and to emphasize the intensity of the forgiveness that the father has granted to his son (2007, 65–72). He notes that the text exhibits excitement over the metanoia of the son but says little about the system that dehumanizes him. Similarly, the prostituted women are those who are, like Dalit women, socially ostracized and prostituted by a colonial system of hierarchical power relations as well as by its morality and religiosity. He asks whether “salvation is a rescue operation of young rich men from ‘sinful’ women.” He further inquires, “Is there a Father [sic] who is concerned with systems that make women prostitutes and is committed to redeeming those systems and its victims?”

Mark 7:24–31. Surekha Nelavala, in her treatment of the Syrophoenician woman, celebrates the success of the woman seeking healing for her daughter (2006, 64–69). By employing the methods of a trickster, with wisdom and intelligence, the woman challenges Jesus on his exclusionary views. Nelavala’s reading emphasizes the need for the oppressor and the oppressed to work together for liberation and transformation to be complete. Anshi Zachariah reads the same text and challenges the reader to recognize the fact that we see people at the boundaries as objects of charity and never stop to ask, “Why they are where they are?” (2007, 59–61). She sees this text as a call to listen to people at the periphery and to re-articulate our faith and redefine our ministry in the light of their claims of the divine. Jesus’ presence at the boundaries and amidst the boundaries is not to legitimize boundaries but to manifest God’s preferential option for the poor.

Jesus in Mark. Maria Arul Raja reads the Markan Jesus alongside the legend of the martyred Madurai Veeran, who is upheld as a protector god by the Dalit Arundhatthiar community in Tamilnadu (2002, 264). He poses the question: “How are the cruel death and defeat of the murdered heroes to be transformed into the weapon of the weak community?” By analyzing both texts and their impact on the communities that these heroes represent, Arul Raja concludes that by divinizing these murdered heroes, the communities venerating them "seek to deliberately denounce all forms of dehumanization promoted in the name of religious Puritanism (Jewish authorities) and orderly harmony ('casteist' hegemony).” He further claims, "the pronounced and executed punishment meted out to these heroes itself is transformed into the springboard from which the communities evolve new ethical alternatives."
John 4. The Samaritan woman is also particularly significant for Dalit interpreters on two grounds: first, because her ostracized experience as both a Samaritan and a woman resonates with the Dalit experience of rejection and isolation; second, because the narrative locates this encounter between Jesus and the woman at a well. The focus of the conversation is water, which is a primeval issue for rural Indian women and a crucial issue for Dalits (Dietrich 2001, 106). What is significant is that the woman exhibits signs of having transcended gender norms, transgressed cultural taboos, and subverted cultural expectations—all norms which need to be emulated by Dalits as well. "Living water" here is understood as the capacity for physical emancipation from the drudgery and pain of caste labor, violence, discrimination, and suffering. It is understood as the empowerment that comes with being equipped with the mechanisms and the mindset to resist and overcome caste and other forms of oppression (Melanchthon 2007, 50).

Exodus. Sathianathan Clarke examines the Exodus narrative as a paradigm of liberation and reflects on its significance for Dalits, who no longer see or experience any “mighty acts of God” delivering God’s chosen oppressed ones from the clutches of their oppressors (2002b, 285–86). Instead, they experience “an apparent reversal of direction of the mighty acts of God.” In fact, there are “no miraculous signs clearly disrupting the hierarchical and unequal social order in India.” Clarke therefore calls for rethinking the nature of God and God’s involvement with the poor and the oppressed in the way in which Dalits work for their own liberation. God must be found, he says, “in the process of funding and sustaining the non-violent and repetitive acts of ‘chipping away’ at the conventional order.”

**DALIT INTERPRETATIONS: METHODOLOGICAL INDICATORS**

The Bible holds a central place in Dalit theologizing because it is seen as a source of power and comfort and because it provides Christian identity and continuity with the Christian tradition (Devashayam 1992, 4). The potential of biblical texts for liberation, renegotiated and renegotiated in the light of Dalit experience, makes possible the discovery of God within the Dalit social and cultural milieu and their liberation from oppressive forces.

What identifies the method employed by Dalit biblical interpretation? This question has been repeated often, and Dalit interpreters have been challenged to name the unique characteristics of Dalit biblical methodology. Actually, Dalit biblical interrogation employs a variety of methods. It has definitely found helpful the insights gained from traditional historical-critical methods as well as from literary methods. However, the heart of Dalit biblical methodology is found in the post modern reader-oriented methods.9

There is also growing awareness among Dalit theologians that, in addition to the biblical text, there are in the lives of Dalits other texts that need to be studied and interpreted (Arul Raja 2006, 103–11; Clarke 1998, 35–53; Dietrich 2001, 244–49). These include folktales, songs, dances, art, and other cultural productions of the Dalits—namely, literary works and other writings by Dalit authors; Dalit experiences of revolt, protest, and revival; and Dalit living stories that are told and retold. These are often juxtaposed and brought into conversation with the biblical text and woven together with the use of imagination and the wealth of experience (intertextual, crosstextual, contrapuntal, reading in juxtaposition). It is to be noted that these other texts are not restricted to the written but are, in a majority of cases, oral, and are by their very nature fluid and flexible and do not always originate in the written word. They provide new and fresh insights into the meaning of the biblical text, and hence the biblical text is seen as one among other texts that has to be read.

Whatever the method, Dalit interpretation pays attention to the context and experience of the interpreter (autobiographical, experiential). The context, therefore, becomes the means through which the text becomes available and is read. The historical nature of the text (the background of the text) is also important. Crucial also is the generation of faith and action for resistance and transformation. It is a very subjective approach to the biblical text. Arul Raja points out, “The Dalit reading of the Bible [sic], like any other contextual reading, does not indulge in the rhetoric of claiming value-neutrality, a historical point of view, scientific objectivism, presuppositionless exegesis, a-political [sic] detachment and universal meaning” (1996, 31). This subjectivity is justified on the grounds that, “The real objectivity starts with the declaration of the subjectivity. If one’s subjectivity is in tune with the subjectivities of majority [sic], then only it becomes objective one [sic]” (Appavo 1993, 4).

**THE CONTEXT AS MEDIUM FOR READING AND INTERPRETING THE TEXT**

The many convergences in the matrices of the biblical and the Dalit worlds are an important methodological consideration, as in the case, for example, of the

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9. Arul Raja writes, "The bible [sic] is ... oriented towards 'performing' a transformation.... Any method that claims to facilitate a genuine dialogue between the 'performative' Dalit consciousness and the 'performative' biblical text, has to be necessarily performative.... Such a method of the Dalit reading of the bible [sic] is oriented towards concrete historical commitment transforming the present reality into a new liberative one" (1996, 30–31).
biblical dictum of a preferential option toward the poor and the Dalit struggle for equality (Jesuruthnam 2002, 2–3). Therefore, both the exegetical starting point for Dalit biblical interpretation and the material force that grips the Dalit are grounded in a materialistic epistemology that is characterized, among other things, by its location of truth not in a world beyond history but indeed within the crucible of historical struggles. The social, cultural, economic, and political world of Dalits and their denied humanity constitutes the valid hermeneutical starting point for reading Scripture for liberation. This emphasis on context requires attention to what is particular, concrete, and experiential. Paying serious attention to the context is one way of exhibiting responsibility to the faith community on behalf of whom the text is being interpreted.

The Historical Nature of the Text

While Dalit interpreters claim in theory to take the context of the text seriously, published Bible studies by Dalit authors reveal that this is not always the case. One gets the impression that historical-critical issues and the sociohistorical foundations of the text are not as important unless they touch on Dalit experience; such is also the case with the inherent and varied ideologies and agendas of the text. Yet some trained Dalit readers emphasize that it is imperative that the Bible is received as a text, a result of human effort (Arul Raja 1996, 30). In other words, there is awareness that the Bible should not be seen as divinely inspired but rather as becoming the “Word” when read in community and in the light of the community’s experience. Such an approach, according to Peacock, has various effects: (1) it enables a questioning of the text and facilitates a dialogical approach that gives room for multiple meanings; (2) it eliminates the necessity of and dependency on a priestly class (read: Brahmin) to be the “expert” interpreters of the text; (3) it frees the text from the mysticism attributed to it, which has often been used to oppress the marginalized, to legitimize their oppression, and to stress the notion that the text cannot be argued with; and (4) it brings about the realization that the biblical text, as all other texts, is ideological and that it either justifies a particular status quo or challenges it. Dalit readers of the Bible see the Bible as a book of liberation. Yet they realize that not all biblical texts are liberative; indeed several texts actually legitimize hierarchies and the status quo (Peacock 2005, 3–4).

The Text as Praxis Generating

The effectiveness and relevance of a reading is measured by the extent to which it has touched upon the life of the individual and the community. There is, therefore, a special sensitivity to the practical implications of the reading for the reader. New interpretations are futile unless they motivate and provoke the community into action. The move from their particular experience to the Bible, from the Bible to action, and then back again to the Bible is emphasized, requiring a process of mutual validation between experience and text. Only then can one envision the liberation of Dalits, the renewal of the church, and the transformation of society.

DALIT HERMENEUTICAL MARKERS

What seems more important than a fixation on method is the hermeneutical lens through which the text is read and interpreted. Perspective and approach are crucial to Dalit readings. Dalit readings, therefore, criticize that which is merely theoretical; they validate the experiential, the lived, and the ambiguous. There is a consciousness regarding modes of knowing that may be considered ambiguous, disruptive, and even chaotic, but which are closer to actualities than those offered by verbal authorities. The overarching perspective adopted by Dalit interpreters of the Bible is one of resistance and liberation. It is a perspective that is influenced by Dalit consciousness, a mindset informed by the Dalit experience not only of suffering and rejection but also of overcoming the same. The term “Dalit” is a result of this new consciousness and determination (Manchala n.d., 4). The name bears witness to their awakening and their awareness of subjugation and of their oppressors. It affirms their determination to annihilate slavery, both internal and external, and their visions for an egalitarian, casteless society. It asserts that their new identity is shaped by shared visions and formed as a counter to imposed oppressive identities (Manchala n.d., 4). This desire to surmount repression makes their experience a legitimate and creative theological resource. It is within such experience that the affirmation of God’s liberating power also takes place.

A. P. Nirmal, a pioneering Dalit theologian, while comparing the Dalit struggle for liberation with that of the slaves in Egypt, identifies five important features of the struggle within the Deuteronomic creed (Deut 26:5–12). These are: the affirmation of one’s roots; collective struggle; the experience of suffering, as well as the experience of liberation; and the vision of liberation and restoration (Nirmal n.d., 65–69). These features present in the historic struggle of the Dalits are also the ingredients of Dalit consciousness. Such consciousness is a prerequisite for reading and interpreting the text for Dalit liberation. Dalit readings of Scripture are not unbiased; they are readings that are committed to the cause of justice and holistic life for all people and for the entire earth. Hence, the ultimate goal of Dalit readings is to instill in the community the impetus to strive for polit-
ical and social liberation and to provide the community with possible blueprints for action towards liberation, a new identity, and fullness of life (Manchala n.d., 4).

Dalit biblical hermeneutics are closely bound up with their direct involvement in the process of production and hard physical labor. By their physical exertion they contribute to the maintenance of life, and not just of themselves but of the entire society. Without their services the entire social structure would collapse. Dalits have, therefore, been likened to the “thumb” on a hand. This life needs to be protected when it is threatened, and hence they are “skeptical and suspicious of religious sources that do not vibrate with their daily lives, instead seem to contain ideological legitimization of their subjugated condition and bondage” (Wilfred 2005, 150). The lack of fulfillment of their basic material needs for a dignified life makes the Dalit reader very sensitive to the present moment (Wilfred 2005, 150). They challenge the theological and social determination of the dominant castes to keep Dalits in subservient roles by finding ways to revise or reject both scriptural and social dictums that have imposed on them a life of drudgery. Through openly performed rituals,10 through song, dance, and act,11 they read, enact, or revise oppressive traditions and thereby equip themselves and the community with strength and hope to address and cope with the predicament of exclusion, discrimination, and exploitation.

Indian tradition affirms that “no hermeneutic by itself will yield truth in its fullness without purification of the mind, transformation of the heart and discipline of the body” (Samartha 1991, 307). Faith is both a starting point and the end result of Dalit interrogation of Scripture. Faith is considered an effective hermeneutic because it helps the interpreter to be cautious in his/her use of tools used to sift the text of the Bible for meaning, irrespective of the method employed. The study of the Bible for the Dalit is a matter of faith, and biblical research is not merely an intellectual exercise but ultimately a means to respond to God and God’s demands. This provides both the motivation and goal in all aspects of biblical research. The faith of the Dalit cannot be equated with the intellect alone. Rather, it is characterized and defined by its “earthliness” (Wilfred 1996). It indicates urgency, immediacy, and directness; it is bound up with the material and physical realities and needs of life (Wilfred 1996, 58).

**Future Possibilities in Dalit Biblical Interpretation**

The future of Dalit biblical interpretation lies certainly in addressing the impediments listed above. Further, the possibilities for Dalit interpretation would be immense if biblical studies in India were more open to the following resources and strategies: the voices of Dalit women; informal and creative learning and interpretative strategies and methodologies; reading the many oral resources (stories, rituals, songs, poetry) alongside the biblical text; and reading and interpreting in community.

Despite the radical and liberative rhetoric of inclusion, Dalit theologians (read male) have not given due respect to the voices of Dalit women. Gender is very much an ignored lens within Dalit theologizing and biblical interpretation. For more serious efforts need to be made to encourage and include the reflections arising from among Dalit women and their experience of being thrice marginalized (gender, class, and caste) from all movements of social change, including the women’s and the Dalit movements, and alienated from all sources of society. Patriarchy and caste collude to keep women in a servile position to men both within and outside their caste grouping. Thus, Devahasyam writes, “The concern for humanity in the Indian context should start from concern for Dalit women, where humanity is most discredited. It is only a Dalit women’s perspective that would be adequate to serve the liberative struggles” (1997, 33).

Dalit women live lives of pathos, protest, and indefeasable will to survive. Their voices, if given attention, will restore the mark of this exiled “other” on

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10. Charsely (citing Glickman 1954) identifies these performances as “rituals of rebellion” (Charsely 2004, 287n41).

11. Through his study of the Madiga community in Andhra Pradesh, Charsely (2004) shows how they undermine the claimed superiority of the dominant Brahman by calling on cosmogonic traditions that emphasize the female Shakti and by making secondary and junior the great male gods of contemporary Hinduism. The practical importance of this community—traditionally assigned to work with leather and hence considered polluted—to others is emphasized, and an embraceable caste identity at odds with shrewd economic perceptions “of the Untouchable” is constructed. The problematic aspects of their identity as untouchable, polluted, and excluded are also accounted for within contextualized positive elements. For example, “The ability to move and skin dead cattle is given a forcefully positive evaluation. The eating of beef is not represented as a mistake” (285).

12. In his discussion of those Dalits who converted to Christianity in exchange for rice and who are therefore called “rice Christians,” Wilfred writes, “The seeds of a subaltern hermeneutics were present in the acts of the subaltern peoples in their quest for a religious affiliation which would respond to their needs for rice, wheat, security and other material necessities. Today this hermeneutic is unfolding itself with greater incisiveness and force. The growing critique by the subalterns of the religious traditions for denying equality of treatment, freedom and dignity is a further elaboration of their hermeneutics of religion through “rice”—a symbol of all that a human being requires to live and to live with dignity. This critical earthiness forces the religious traditions to find their true bearings in a politically, socially and culturally situated praxis” (1996, 59).
the many institutions—familial, psychic, ethical, ecclesial—that ground their personal and political lives. Their voices will renew the understanding of patriarchy and the various oppressive systems that sustain it. The questions raised by women are frightening and yet full of promise, and thus the inclusion of the Dalit woman’s perspective in Dalit biblical hermeneutics and interpretation would fill a serious historical gap by documenting the relationship of Dalit women with God and would bring fresh insights to the reading of Scripture.

Wilfred emphasizes in his writing the “primacy of the oral” in Dalit culture, made evident in their mode of communication, interaction, and transmission. Because it is oral, performance takes center stage in their religious experience and expression. Through performance, one can more easily communicate emotion, mood, feeling, and the like—all of which may not be as effectively communicated through the written word (1996, 60). The oral tradition is by nature collective, hence knowledge, including knowledge of Scripture, is acquired through participation in the collective, in the community of faith. The oral traditions of the Dalits, their rituals, and symbols, and the manner in which the Bible is presented—all of which are interpretations of life and faith—are still very much untapped sources. Placing these oral and performative reflections alongside the biblical text could result in new and exciting interpretations. Just allowing the community to perform the biblical text in context would provide for some fresh insights. The hermeneutics employed to interpret these oral reflections may need to be different from those used to decipher and interpret the written text (Wilfred 1996, 61).

Sophisticated and complex methods of biblical interpretation are a challenge in a community that is illiterate and functions orally. The Bible is known to these masses not as a written text but as one that is heard and seen. Orality provides for the use of imaginative, informal learning and reading strategies. However, since there is an obvious bias in favor of academic learning, many Dalits from poor rural and urban areas of India continue to feel incapable of doing biblical interpretation, given their lack of access to the written text. Thus an emphasis on informal methods of Bible study that enable illiterate Dalits to participate in the articulation of theology and biblical interpretation would prove beneficial. Storytelling, role play, and other traditional forms of telling and retelling need to be identified and kept alive in a world that stresses textual modes of knowledge. Such methods enable the community to release itself and the text from traditional interpretative processes. Dalits are known to act out their rebellion and their conflict with the environment or the status quo through many traditional art forms. Learning to act out the biblical text and reflect on it from one’s inner being and instinctual center would elicit a response that is powerful and congruent with knowledge derived from faith and experience.

Conclusion

Every Dalit reading of the Bible forcefully claims an approach that is vested in the experience of pain and prejudice, of being discriminated against, marginalized, and excluded. It employs a hermeneutical strategy from below that is in many ways similar to, and yet different from, those used in struggles against sexism, racism, and classism. Dalits bring to the table a multitude of gifts: their oral culture; their creative art forms; their religious rituals and expressions; the rich symbolism inherent in their culture; their holistic approach to life; their experiences, both liberative and burdensome; their strong will and resilience to survive amidst pain; and their faith in a God who will liberate. These gifts need to be explored and utilized for the purpose of identifying new and effective methods of reading the biblical text that would aid them in their struggle for liberation.

A critical solidarity between conscientized Dalit intellectuals and the unlettered, untutored Dalit members would provide for engaged and meaningful conversation and reflection on the biblical text. This along with the resilience, the energy, and the Dalit desire for change, liberation, and transformation could contribute to an interpretation of the text that would result in new meanings and stimulate new ideas for conversion of self and community (Melanchthon 2005, 64).

We have washed away
Your dirt from our eyes.
We have removed the locks
You clamped over our mouths.
Now it is your duty
To hear what we speak.
Scratch it on your brains.
Liberation is ours, at first.\textsuperscript{13}