



Research article



A DALIT LIBERATIVE READING OF TORAH WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE BOOK OF EXODUS

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ABSTRACT

The term “Dalit” finds its etymological roots in the Hebrew word “dall” or “dal,” which manifests in various forms within the Old Testament scriptures. Primarily employed as an adjective, it predominantly conveys the notion of “poor” when associated with individuals. Moreover, it often serves as an objective descriptor denoting the condition of specific groups of people. This term conveys connotations of physical frailty, social marginalization, and insignificance within one’s societal context. The Exodus narrative, wherein the Israelites’ liberation from oppressive conditions under the autocratic Pharaoh is a potent symbol for contemporary marginalized and disadvantaged communities. This article elucidates the imperative of Liberative Hermeneutics in reinterpreting the Torah through a Dalit lens, with particular emphasis on the Book of Exodus.

Keywords:

*Dalit, Torah, Israelites,
Liberation, Exodus, Bible*



Introduction

Moltmann's conceptualization of the Dalit as an "Exodus Community" carries significant social and political implications, positing that the Dalit population must summon the courage to embark upon an exodus like that depicted in the Hebrew Bible. This notion draws upon the Exodus narrative, wherein the Israelites' liberation from oppressive conditions under the autocratic Pharaoh is a potent symbol for contemporary marginalized and disadvantaged communities. Liberation theologians have embraced this narrative as a wellspring of inspiration and ethical guidance, discerning parallels between the plight of the Israelites and the struggles faced by oppressed populations today. Consequently, this article elucidates the imperative of Liberative Hermeneutics in reinterpreting the Torah through a Dalit lens, with particular emphasis on the Book of Exodus.

I. The use of the term 'Dalit' in the Bible

The term "Dalit" finds its etymological roots in the Hebrew word "dall" or "dal," which manifests in various forms within the Old Testament scriptures. It appears in perfect form, as in Psalms 116:6, and imperfect form, as in Isaiah 17:4, among other instances. Primarily employed as an adjective, it predominantly conveys the notion of "poor" when associated with individuals (Exodus 23:3, Leviticus 14:21, etc.). Moreover, it often serves as an objective descriptor denoting the condition of specific groups of people. Particularly noteworthy are instances such as 2 Kings 24:14, 25:12, and Jeremiah 52:15, 16, where the NRSV translates it as "poorest" concerning people.¹ This term conveys connotations of physical frailty, social marginalization, and insignificance within one's societal context. James Massey, citing Wolf's interpretation, underscores the reduction in prosperity and social status associated with being "dal" or poor. Massey argues that the English term "poor" fails to capture the multifaceted meaning encapsulated by the Hebrew word "dal."² Notably, the term extends beyond mere economic deprivation, encompassing physical weakness, psychological impairment, and a sense of helplessness.

II. The Sense and Status of Dalits in Biblical Society

Dalits in biblical society are unlike what we, the Indian societies, have exactly a group of people that could be called Dalits in the Indian sense. But it is perhaps the slave, the poor, and the weak that somehow serve the purpose of the rich and powerful in society. The common factor or the sense of exploitation of the poor and the weak by the powerful and influential is considered Dalit or Dalitness.³

The Status of the Dalit is not only based on weak social order but they are weak in their life order. They are considered the lowest level of the physical, social, political, religious,

¹ James Massey, *Towards Dalit Hermeneutics: Re-Reading the Text, the History and the Literature* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), 3-4.

² Massey, *Towards Dalit Hermeneutics: Re-Reading the Text, the History and the Literature*, 5.

³ George Kaniarakath, "A Dalit Reading of the Prophetic Writings," in *Indian Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Augustine Thottakara (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2000), 231.



wealth, etc. it is a circle of all lowest levels of life-human based society. Prophet Amos gives an address to how the people of Dalit were treated by the levelly high people. The Dalits are slaves and poor in biblical Israel. The slaves were treated like cattle or commodities whom the master can use as he likes. They could be bought and sold in the markets. But they were protected by the laws in many ways (cf. Exo. 21:20; 21:26-27). A slave is always assured of the necessities of life. the slave, being part of a family, can join in the religious functions (Gen.17: 12-13; Exo. 20: 10, 23: 12, Deut. 12: 12, 18; 16:11) they even shared with the master's inheritance (cf. Pro. 17:2), they were treated as hired laborers and they were to be freed during the jubilee years (Lev. 25:39-43). While in India division of people into casts and classes Israel had a division between poor and rich, and the weak and mighty. The poor were exploited by the rich, and the weak were oppressed by the mighty. Micah indicates the oppression of the people "you who gave the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron" (Mic. 3: 2-4). George Kaniarakath mentions what H. W. Wolff calls the 'cannibalism of prosperity' that spread in Jerusalem to an unheard extent. Amos defines the affliction of the poor and how human beings are oppressed and dishumanified by fellow human beings. (cf. Amos. 2: 6-7; 8: 6 etc.). the poor and the weak people are the most vulnerable in the hand of the rich and the mighty. The vulnerable were oppressed by them economically, politically, religiously, physically, etc.⁴

III. Potential and Possibilities of a Dalit Reading of Scriptures

The challenges faced by Dalits can readily identify a natural connection with the struggles and experiences of marginalized communities as depicted in the Bible, expressed through their faith traditions.⁵ In simpler terms, there are specific areas where the Biblical and Dalit perspectives intersect. Both the Biblical narrative, which emphasizes preferential treatment for the disadvantaged and marginalized, and the Dalit's quest for equality, are considered on the same level of importance.⁶

Dalits face discrimination, are barred from owning land, compelled to endure harsh working conditions, and frequently mistreated by higher caste groups shielded by state protection, a situation often referred to as 'Hidden apartheid.'⁷ Given their dire circumstances, Dalits voice their protests, rebellions, and resistance, persistently advocating for their lost identity, akin to the Israelites' struggle against Egyptian slavery. The crucial aim in Dalit liberative practice is to free them from sociocultural oppression. This approach to

⁴ Kaniarakath, "A Dalit Reading of the Prophetic Writings," 242.

⁵ J. Servio Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* (New York: Orbis, 1981), 48.

⁶ A. Maria Arul Raja, "Assertion of the Periphery," in *Salic Journal of Dharma* 24/ 1 (1995): 25.

⁷ Godwin Shiri, "The Wide Prevalence of traditional Occupations among Christian Dalit as Sign of Continued Oppression," in *Religion and Society* 42 (1995): 22.



scripture interpretation is designed to liberate Dalits from psychological, cultural, and social oppression, empowering them to organize and fight for their freedom.⁸

Biblical texts should engage in ongoing dialogue with the ‘living narratives’ and ‘real-life experiences’ of Dalits. The Dalit interpretation of scriptures is embedded within the broader framework of third-world post-modern and post-colonial readings of the Bible. This approach aids in understanding the Bible’s relevance for the poor, women, Dalits, and other marginalized communities, as well as their ongoing efforts to achieve liberation.⁹ The narratives within the Bible that hold liberation potential are already interpreted and reinterpreted in their original contexts, continuing to be negotiated and renegotiated in our current situation to actualize their liberative potential. This understanding should be integrated into the context of oppressed communities, including Dalits in India, as they seek to experience God’s humanity within their socio-cultural environment.¹⁰

IV. Torah and Dalit Liberation

A. Torah: Name and Structure

In Hebrew, the five books are referred to as the Torah or the Torah of Moses, a term that is more accurately translated as “instruction” rather than “law.” Initially, “Torah” denoted a specific admonition from parents (Prov. 1:8; 4:3f) or the guidance provided by a priest in a specific case (Hag. 2:11ff.). Over time, the term evolved to represent a “law (book)” encompassing the entire ordinance, associated with Moses’ name (Josh 8:31; 23:6; 2 kings 14:6). Each of the five books is titled with its initial word in Hebrew, while the English titles are derived from Greek, reflecting the primary subject of each book.¹¹

The Torah is distinguished by a tightly woven mix of stories and directives. Initially, the storytelling approach dominates, with occasional references to ritual laws (Gen. 9; 17; Exod. 12), but from Exodus 20 onwards, the sections of laws become more prominent. The five books are unified by recurring themes, such as blessings and promises. The overarching narrative spans from the creation and the emergence of nations, through the era of the patriarchs, the exile in Egypt, and the journey to the mountain of God, culminating in the beginning of the settlement period, where Moses dies in East Jordan, near the Promised Land (Deut. 34). The theme of settlement is briefly touched upon in the Pentateuch (Num. 13f. 32-34) and is further explored in subsequent texts (Josh 1ff. Judg. 1). Following the completion of the tabernacle, Leviticus introduces a variety of “Levitical” regulations. The details about the census and the encampment organization in the beginning of Numbers set the stage for

⁸ Jose M. Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 88.

⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering Bible in Non-Biblical World* (New York: Orbis, 1995), 12.

¹⁰ Musa W. Dube, ed., *Introduction in other ways of reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 18-19.

¹¹ Werner H. Schmidt, *Old Testament Introduction* (Mumbai: St. Paul Press, 1997), 49.



the departure from Sinai. Lastly, Deuteronomy serves as Moses' final address, forming a distinct section that includes additional laws.¹²

i. The Exodus Events:

The book of Exodus opens with the Israelites living in a foreign land, unaware of Yahweh's covenants with them, and subjected to the harsh rule of a tyrannical Pharaoh who treats them as if they were gods, controlling every aspect of their lives and enslaving them in Egypt. Upon hearing their pleas, Yahweh dispatches Moses to free them from Egyptian oppression. Through a sequence of ten plagues, Yahweh overcomes Pharaoh and leads the Israelites out of Egypt under Moses' guidance.¹³ God not only rescues the Israelites from Egypt but also guides them through the desert, using His mighty hand to lead them to the Promised Land. To demonstrate His majesty, power, and holiness, God performed miracles such as the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, the provision of water from a rock, the miraculous food of manna and quails, the pillar of cloud and fire, and the appearance of Sinai enveloped in a cloud and ablaze with fire.¹⁴ Exodus vividly depicts the community of God, summoned from degrading and false servitude in a foreign land, embarking on a journey to the Promised Land.

ii. The terminology used in Exodus:

Before proceeding to the Dalit liberative reading in the book of Exodus, a brief account of the Hebrew words used to mention the notion of "liberation, setting free" would be of great help. The idea of "setting free," "redeeming" or "liberating" is expressed by different Hebrew verbs in the Exodus text.

The word *na'al* is used in two cases - in connection with social and legal life and also with regard to God's redeeming acts.¹⁵ It is used to refer to a person's kinsman who is responsible for standing up for him/her and maintaining his/her rights. In Exodus event, its meaning is delivering from distress and release from the obligation of slavery.¹⁶ Another word *phadah* is used in the meaning of "ransom for an assessed price" (Exodus 13:13,15). The word *nazal/ nadzal* used to mean "to snatch away (from danger)", "to rescue (from a wild beast)", "to plunder," "to deliver," etc.¹⁷ Another word *yasha'* is used to convey the meaning "to deliver or save from peril".¹⁸ Mowinckel has defined this word as "wideness,

¹² Werner H. Schmidt, *Old Testament Introduction* (Mumbai: St. Paul Press, 1997), 50-52.

¹³ Richard J. Clifford, "Exodus," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edited by Raymond E. Brown et. al., (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2004), 44.

¹⁴ D. Guthrie, et. al., eds, *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 116.

¹⁵ Examples can be found in Exodus 6:6; 15:13. See also G.J. Botterweck and Ringgren, H., eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing company, 1974), 351.

¹⁶ Modayil Mani Chacko, *Liberation and Service of God: A Theological Evaluation of Exodus 1:1-15:21* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 219-220.

¹⁷ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (England: Oxford University Press, 1953), 664-665. This lexicon is commonly known as the BDB lexicon.

¹⁸ Charles A Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 446.



spaciousness”, meaning to open ‘favorable conditions,’ both in external, political, and in internal, social, moral, and religious, conditions.¹⁹ The *Hiphil* form of this verb *hōshî’* has a distinctive religious connotation, meaning “to save” and the term is exclusively used for divine intervention or the activities of the divinely appointed agents such as Kings and Judges.²⁰ Of all the words mentioned above, two words that are widely used to express the exodus event, according to J. Wijngaards are *hōzî’* and *ha’lah*. The word *hōzî’* expresses liberation from Egyptian slavery, brought by Yahweh at the Red sea. The root word *yaza’* means “going free” of a slave, the redemption of land, the “being at liberty” and the like.²¹ The word *ha’lah* refers to the classical exodus, meaning future exodus culminating in land-giving after the conquest.

B. Israelites’ Experience of Alienation, Segregation, and Oppression as a Dalit

Numerous comparisons are made to liken the condition of Dalits to that of God’s people. The Israelites were characterized by their abundance and proliferation; they flourished and became exceedingly numerous (Exodus 1:7). The fertility of humanity is a divine gift bestowed upon them at creation. God commanded them to be fruitful and multiply, to populate the earth and subdue it (Genesis 1:28). God’s covenant with Abraham includes the blessing of numerous descendants (Genesis 15:5). This blessing was fulfilled as the Israelites grew in number, causing Pharaoh to fear (Exodus 1:9). The Pharaoh’s fear is not out of place because he analysed the political realities without taking into consideration the mutual trust which existed in the past between the Israelites and the Egyptians. So, Pharaoh adopted two steps to curtail the power of the Israelites. Firstly, to make them slaves who have no participation in the power structures of the nation. They may find their sustenance through slave labour. We can consider this condition to the traditional position of the Dalit in Indian society. Secondly, the Pharaoh planned to control the Israelite population by killing newly born sons of the Hebrews. Subjugating the Hebrews under hard slave labour is the plan of Pharaoh to prevent their escape from Egypt. All the ancient societies were built on the hard labor of the slaves. The ruling classes protected them, preventing all possibilities of their escape. So long as they were kept under control, their increase in number particularly that of able-bodied men was not resented. Israel as an Alienated, Segregated and Oppressed community we can see their sorrows in Exodus 3:7, their cry in Exodus 3:7, and the tyranny of their persecutors in Exodus 3:9.²²

In Egypt, the Israelites were subjected to overseers who not only imposed heavy burdens on them but also sought to make their lives as difficult as possible. The Egyptians assigned slave masters to the Israelites, forcing them into harsh labor and treating them cruelly. The Israelites ensured that these overseers worked them tirelessly, making their lives miserable.

¹⁹ Sigmund Mowinckel, *He that Cometh* (England: Oxford University Press, 1956), 69.

²⁰ J.F.A. Sawyer, *Semantics in Biblical Research- Studies in Biblical Theology Vol 24* (London: University Press, 1972), 4.

²¹ Chacko, *Liberation and Service of God: A Theological Evaluation of Exodus 1:1-15:21*, 221.

²² M.M. Thomas, *God the Liberator* (Thiruvalla: CSS Books, 2004), 57.



The Egyptians not only exploited the Israelites for their own gain but also stripped them of their vitality and spirit, undermining their health, shortening their lives, and reducing their numbers. They also discouraged the Israelites from marrying, knowing that their children would be born into slavery. In Egypt, the Israelites constructed storage cities, known as Pithom and Raamses (Exodus 1:11). Here the civilization and culture of Egypt were built upon the hard labor of the Israelite slaves. It was to uphold the prestige and glory of Pharaoh that the people of Israel performed hard labor, certainly not for the development of their own life situation. The Israelites were responsible for the Egyptian progress in the field of agriculture as well. This incident is similar to Indian history. Those who built up the progress of ancient India are the depressed classes (Dalit) who labored in the forests and the fields; and not the Kings, landlords, and philosophers. The present attempt to rewrite the history of nations as the history of the laboring classes is certainly justifiable from a theological point of view.²³

Here we should not be forgotten the Egyptian Pyramids. It is considered to be one of the wonders of the world, as well as ancient temples and other big structures all over the world are all the result of slave labor. Kruschev²⁴, on seeing the Taj Mahal, commented that behind its beauty is the sweat and blood of slaves. In fact, there is no culture or civilization where beauty is conjoined with love. On the one hand, all cultures are created by human labour: on the other hand, all the gains of cultures go to the so-called Pharaohs who is leaving the people in bitterness and misery. As Cain in Genesis 4, Pharaoh in Exodus 1 is the symbol of the lack of humanity of human cultures.²⁵

V. God's Presence in the Alienated, Segregated and Oppressed Community

God heard the cries of the oppressed, looked down and was touched with compassion for those at the bottom of society, and came down to struggle with them to take them out of unjust structures into a new space and time of freedom.²⁶ Here in the Exodus, Yahweh took sides with the ancient Hebrew slaves in the material concreteness of political power and economic dynamics. By siding with the works and the enslaved. God disrupted the free profit-making of the oppressor and broke the system of slavery.²⁷

By separating biblical texts from the grip of oppressive caste and hierarchical structures and focusing on points of liberation hermeneutics, numerous biblical scholars and theologians have embarked on a profound dialogue between the Bible and Dalits.²⁸ Historically, Dalits have been systematically excluded from accessing Scripture and its interpretation, a practice perpetuated by the caste elite. This exclusion was a means to maintain the existing social

²³ Thomas, *God the Liberator*, 57-59.

²⁴ First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union

²⁵ Thomas, *God the Liberator*, 60.

²⁶ Dwight N. Hopkins and Wati Longchar, eds., *Contextual Theology* (Kolkata: ESPACE, 2013), 53.

²⁷ Longchar, eds., *Contextual Theology*, 127.

²⁸ K. Jesurathnam, *Towards a Dalit Liberative Hermeneutics: Re-reading the Psalms of Lament* (Bangalore: UTC, 2002), 34.



order by legitimizing and justifying the caste system's hierarchy and discrimination. Despite this, Dalits have found a resonance with the Bible, identifying with its teachings. The urgent need is to explore the commonalities between Dalits and the Bible, and to liberate the Bible from the dominance of the so-called upper castes and their interpretations. Israel as the liberated community from racial alienation, segregation, and oppression, their life was from enslaved and unorganized, without any identity, autonomy, and land to a people as a nation with God as God with identity, land, and self-determination: from people as objects of contempt subserviently depending on imperialist dictatorship to a self-dependent tribal confederation with the covenant as the horizontal and vertical bond of union: from military-based powers imposed from above chasing away the victims of human history to communitarian evolution of an ethos with countercultural sensibilities against royal consciousness.²⁹

a. Traditional Interpretation of the Exodus Event:

The majority of the Old Testament scholarship is of the opinion that the Exodus event comes to us from differing traditions, principally J and P, and there are some inconsistencies within the tradition of J. J.P. Hyatt is of the opinion that Israelites believed that their crossing of the sea was made possible by the mighty act of Yahweh, and only little is said of the human effort.³⁰ With regards to the division of the Sea of Reeds, U. Cassuto proposes to consider the natural process. He says, at high tide, the waters of the Reed Sea penetrate the sand and water begins to ooze up out of the sand and the sand turns to mud. At low tide, the reverse happens, i.e., the water covering the sand diminishes and the marshy land becomes dry.³¹ In a way, Cassuto seeks to rationalize the Biblical story, as having nothing being done by the divine and that all that happened is only because of the natural conditions.

It was Brevard S Childs who gives a clear picture of how the Exodus event had been interpreted throughout the history of the Christian church. He mentions Josephus' account of the event, who opines that Moses chose his route by means of a clever calculation. He also draws a parallel to exodus tradition to Alexander the Great who was also offered a passage through the sea.³²

Childs also talks of how the event is interpreted in the narratives of the New Testament. First of all, there are references to the redemption from Egypt in the NT which use the event in a sense of unbroken solidarity with Judaism (cf. Acts 13: 16ff). Also, NT places the event of Exodus into a new context which radically alters its meaning and function for early Christianity (cf. Matt. 2:15 refers to Hosea 11:1 and cites the Exodus as having been

²⁹ A. Maria Arul Raja, *Biblical Perspective Neither to be Enslaved nor to Enslave: Dalit Vision and Biblical Mission, On Being a new Community and Ecclesia of Justice and Peace* (Bangalore: SATHRI, 2010), 72.

³⁰ J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus: New Century Bible Commentary* (England: Purnell & Sons Ltd., 1971), 156.

³¹ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, translated by Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1951), 167-168.

³² Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1974), 230.



‘fulfilled’ in the life of Jesus). Again, NT shifts the emphasis away from the first exodus to the ‘second’ (cf. Luke 3:4ff).³³

The next characteristic usage of Exodus event in NT was its emphasis on the freedom won from Egyptian oppression. For instance, Paul’s speech in Acts 13 begins with a positive note on the Exodus event but then concludes that Israel did not achieve real freedom. So also, in I Cor. 10:1ff. Israel’s failure to achieve salvation was given as a warning to Christian to take heed lest they also perish. Because the first covenant proved obsolete, a new and better covenant was initiated. Finally, there is also a reference in Rev. 15:3 to the Christian saints singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.³⁴

b. The Paradigmatic Nature of the Exodus Traditions:

It is important to acknowledge that the historical accuracy of the Exodus event or the establishment of Exodus as a historical event remains a topic of debate, as previously discussed. This is attributed to two main factors: the varying accounts of what constituted the Exodus, as highlighted in the different versions of Exodus; and the lack of clarity regarding the sea rescue event, as none of the sources provide a definitive account of what occurred. This issue can be addressed by highlighting the story’s paradigmatic nature. It is theorized that the group of slaves who fled Egypt under Moses did not represent the entirety of what we now know as Israel. They likely contributed only a small portion of the population that eventually became Israel. However, they played a crucial role in shaping two essential elements of the nation “Israel”: the ‘story’ of these people. The narrative of the oppressed and marginalized people who escaped slavery was repeatedly told and retold, celebrating the omnipotence of their God.³⁵ The next element is the ‘covenant’ which these liberated people entered into with their God. Anthony R. Ceresko opines thus, “the desperate and antagonistic groups seeking refuge from a dominating and oppressive network of socially stratified city-states found in this story a root metaphor for their diverse yet analogous experiences of liberation.”³⁶

VI. Biblical Support for Dalit Liberative reading

The book of Exodus and the exodus event appears to be paramount in their biblical basis for a Dalit Liberative approach. As Bruce Birch notes, “The Exodus story is perhaps the major biblical corrective to a spiritualized notion of God’s salvation.” Birch defines divine salvation as God liberating the oppressed from the oppressor, the weak from the “tyrant.” Thus Yahweh’s “salvations issues forth in freedom within the sociopolitical order.”³⁷ The overall storyline of the “Exodus experience” can be found in Exod. 1-15. The narrative begins by

³³ Childs, *Exodus*, 232-233.

³⁴ Childs, *Exodus*, 233-234.

³⁵ Exodus 15: 1-2, 4-5, 9-10, 11b-13.

³⁶ Anthony R. Ceresko, *The Old Testament: A Liberative Perspective* (Bangalore: St. Paul’s, 1992), 104.

³⁷ Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 128.



describing the awful living “conditions” in which the Hebrews are oppressed and their struggles to exist. With the birth of the baby boy Moses, he becomes the future “agent of God’s deliverance.” The narrative continues with the “call of Moses” while he is tending his father-in-law’s sheep in Midian, his “struggles with pharaoh,” and finally with the “climatic events at the crossing” at the Red Sea. Birch continues by saying that these “theological affirmations about the character of God, the nature of God’s saving work, and the understanding of the community as the recipient of God’s salvation that occupies central concerns in these narratives.”³⁸

The real “story of Israel’s birth” as a nation (and our spiritual birth) comes “not in a moment of nationalistic triumph,” according to Birch, but in the “context of slavery and oppression.” We find the Hebrew children are used by the pharaoh as slaves on these “massive” public work projects and they build store cities for him at Pithom and Rameses (1:11). While Israel is not powerful enough to defeat pharaoh, yet Yahweh is able.³⁹ The text says that the Hebrews cried out to God (2:23b; 3:7, 9:6:5). This verb “implies not only misery but complaint (sometimes in a legal context.”⁴⁰ This cry for help is an “acknowledgment that things are not right and the Hebrew slaves are not resigned to things as they are.” Their “outcry is the first sign of openness to the new and hopeful expectation that oppression is not the last word.” While some view their cry as a prayer unto God, Birch does not view this as such.⁴¹ Birch does argue that the theme of God’s freedom in Exodus, the deliverance from bondage, is an example of God’s grace.⁴²

The Exodus is viewed as a paradigm for deliverance and liberation. Birch argues that if we only understand the “events” in the book of Exodus only in their “original context,” then we miss out of what is really important. Every generation is to reclaim the story as their own.⁴³ The Exodus is not meant to “stay tied to its historical moorings in the past.” The narrative is meant to be used as a lens through which each succeeding generation sees their particular experiences. Every generation going forward is able to add their own “meaning” to this story.⁴⁴ Birch argues that this is the “reminder” for us as the church in seeing “God’s redemption and deliverance” for today.⁴⁵ For today liberation theology sees Jesus as “the liberator who paves the way for the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth.” By proclaiming “this message of hope” today in the modern world, liberation theology is able to reemphasize “the centrality of the exodus from Egypt.”⁴⁶ Walter Brueggemann argues that the Exodus “story” is one of “*theological* triumph, whereby the God of Israel defeats all the

³⁸ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 114.

³⁹ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 115.

⁴⁰ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 115-16.

⁴¹ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 116.

⁴² Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 116-17.

⁴³ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 129.

⁴⁴ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 130.

⁴⁵ Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 131.

⁴⁶ Dan Cohn-Sherbok, “Judaism And The Theology Of Liberation,” in *Modern Theology* 3:1 (1986): 6.



powers of death that continue to stalk the earth with threatening authority.” This so-called divine triumph also “has socio-economic and political dimensions.” Brueggemann states that the Exodus should not be looked upon as merely as a “religious event.”⁴⁷

1. Dalit Liberative reading of Exodus narrative

Liberation theology gained significance due to the exodus narrative, which served as a solid text for theologians in developing nations. “Let My People Go” became a powerful standpoint for the liberation theologians to script this theology. Unlike Liberation Theology, Dalit theologians focused on the exodus narrative to pen Dalit Theology. When articulating Liberative Hermeneutics the Exodus narrative gave focus and meaning to the struggles of age-old caste-based oppressed people on Indian soil. Many theologians have given their attention to the Exodus narrative from different angles. Let’s examine how theologians and interpreters have applied liberative hermeneutics to the Exodus Narrative.

a. P. Nirmal

Nirmal, a trailblazer in Dalit Theology, examines the Deuteronomic creed in Deuteronomy 26:5–12, which narrates how God responded to the Israelites’ pleas by delivering them from hardship, oppression, and the brutal slavery of the Egyptians. He draws parallels between this narrative and the suffering of Dalits, positing that if Dalits voice their cries, God will free them from caste oppression, just as He did for the Israelites. He advocates for this faith within the Dalit community. Nirmal’s second point is that if Dalits acknowledge their transformation from being “no people” to becoming “God’s people,” God, who heard the cries of the descendants of a wandering Aramean, will similarly liberate them from their oppression.⁴⁸ Nirmal’s statement highlights that God is the God of the oppressed and will reinstate the humanity of Dalits, whose human status has been taken away by their oppressors, similar to how God did for the Israelites. Both Israelites and Dalits were dehumanized by their oppressors. For the Israelites, they were initially considered ‘free people’ in Egypt, an alien land, starting from the time of Joseph (Gen. 47:11, 27), and were later dehumanized through slavery (Exod. 1:8-11). For Dalits, they were native to their own land, dehumanized by Aryan invasion and the subsequent practices of untouchability.⁴⁹ Nirmal may have drawn inspiration from this comparison to assert that God is the God of the oppressed, who will transform the “no people” into “God’s own people” due to their shared strong faith.

b. Peniel Rajkumar

Rajkumar contests Nirmal’s perspective, suggesting that Nirmal is significantly influenced by Gutiérrez and Cone, who employed the Exodus experience in liberation theology and Black

⁴⁷ Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol I, edited by Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 690.

⁴⁸ A. P Nirmal, “Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,” in *Indigenous People: Dalits-Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, edited by James Massey (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006), 220.

⁴⁹ Vincent Manoharan John Pakianathan, “Towards A Practical Dalit Theology: A Study on The Status And Relevance Of Dalit Theology Among Grass Roots Dalit Christians In Their Struggle Against Caste Oppression” (D. Th dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2012), 82.



Theology, respectively, to inspire liberation in their contexts. However, this approach is not aligned with the Dalit experience, as Dalits do not perceive God as a victor; for them, only Brahmanical gods wield divine power as a weapon to kill, an action not attributed to Dalit gods. This paradigm perpetuates a permanent division between Dalits and non-Dalits as oppressed and oppressors, offering no pathway for integrated living.⁵⁰ Secondly, he cites Warrior's perspective, noting that once liberated, the Israelites, who were oppressed, became oppressors of the Canaanites, the indigenous people.⁵¹ For Rajkumar, it is not the Exodus experience but the Canaanites' experience that provides a more fitting narrative and reference, as Dalits are depicted as having been displaced by the Aryans who invaded their ancestral lands.⁵² Rajkumar also notes that if God liberates the people by hearing the cries of the wandering Arameans, God will similarly liberate the Dalits from caste oppression by hearing their cries for liberation. The Dalits affirm that God transformed them from "no people" to "God's people," similar to the Israelites' Exodus experience. Rajkumar believes that while this idea strengthens the faith of the Dalits, it does have some referential issues. The Israelites were chosen, descendants of Abraham the wanderer, and already believed they were chosen by God, who responded to their cries for redemption. However, in the case of Dalits, they were neither chosen nor selected, and God does not have a covenant obligation to respond to their cries.⁵³ Yet this argument of Dalits as God's people can be justified in Nirmal's viewpoint, that God takes the sides of the oppressed. Since God is the God of the oppressed, God would respond to the cries of the Dalits for redemption.

c. **Leonardo Boff**

Boff, while significantly contributing to Liberation Theology, suggests that his perspective on God as the Liberator aligns well with Dalit experiences. He cites Exodus 3:7-9 to affirm that God is a living God who hears the cries of the people, observes their oppression, and decides to liberate them. He outlines four characteristics of God to show that God is the God of the Oppressed: "He lives, listens, witnesses, and decides to liberate people who are in bondage."⁵⁴ The statement by Boffs aligns perfectly with the experiences of Dalits and their theological belief. Dalit theology emphasizes that God is an active force who hears the cries of Dalits, observes their suffering, and will ultimately set them free.

d. **M. Azariah**

Azariah applies the story of the Exodus to the situation of Dalits today. He emphasizes that the Exodus wasn't just about freeing the Israelites, but also about giving them the power to live freely. God, acting as a protector of the oppressed, didn't just save the enslaved minority from the Egyptians, but also prepared them for a new life. Azariah argues that God, through

⁵⁰ Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms, and Possibilities* (England: Ashgate, 2010), 61-63.

⁵¹ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms, and Possibilities*, 62-63.

⁵² Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms, and Possibilities*, 63.

⁵³ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms, and Possibilities*, 63.

⁵⁴ Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (New York: ORBIS, 2007), 44.



Moses and his companion, liberated the Israelites from Egypt. However, they then faced challenges and cleansing struggles for forty years in the wilderness. This period prepared them to enter the promised land of Canaan, empowered and ready for a life of freedom.⁵⁵ Azariah sees God's act of liberation as a two-fold process: emancipation and empowerment. Emancipation freed the Israelites, a minority enslaved by the Egyptians. But God's work went beyond just releasing them. For forty years in the wilderness, God empowered them through challenges and struggles, preparing them to thrive in freedom.⁵⁶

Evaluation and conclusion

The application of Dalit-Liberative hermeneutics, rooted in the practical experiences of marginalized individuals, particularly Dalits, within theological and biblical discourse, offers a methodical and action-oriented approach. Through the lens of the exodus narrative, which vividly portrays the struggles and perseverance of the oppressed, a narrative emerges that actively shapes a faith experience focused on liberation. Just as the Israelites' faith was tested and refined amidst adversity, Dalits find resonance in the biblical narrative as a guide toward their own liberation, offering strength and inspiration for their ongoing struggle for dignity and identity. Envisioning a future eschatological community marked by hope and celebration, Dalit communities find in the Exodus narrative a blueprint for reclaiming their rightful place in God's creation. Embracing a more experiential and imaginative approach to biblical interpretation alongside traditional methods becomes imperative, particularly in unlocking the transformative potential of narratives like Exodus.

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⁵⁵ M. Azariah, "Doing Theology in India Today," In *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, edited by A.P. Nirmal and V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul, 1990) 85-92.

⁵⁶ Azariah, "Doing Theology in India Today," 85-92.



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