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EDITORIAL

The Holy Activism of Abigail the Wise

The story of Abigail's intervention in David's life (1 Samuel 25) offers us a much-needed example of spiritual discernment and practical action in the throes of crisis and provocation.

David's encounter with Abigail occurred during a crisis period of his life as he struggled to survive in the wilderness, evading capture by King Saul, while also being responsible for a community of followers and their families. Abigail's intervention was decisive because she singlehandedly prevented David from committing an atrocity that would have diverted him from the path that God had called him to, and in consequence for the part he would play in salvation history.

The narrator marks the significance of Abigail's intervention by placing this story between the two occasions when David spared Saul's life, first in the caves of En Gedi (ch. 24) and, second, on the hill of Hachilah (ch. 26). As his followers urged David, how much clearer could God's will possibly be? Saul had walked into the very cave where they were hiding. Yet David refused to avenge himself. But after that, the opportunity presented itself again, and Abishai begs David to allow him to carry out the deed that appears completely justifiable. Why does David restrain himself again? As many commentators point out, it is highly likely that David would have had Saul killed that second time if Abigail had not so soundly re-grounded David in the identity and mission entrusted to him by God.

Through the cultural memory of Israel's past, I believe Abigail's wisdom speaks to us today as the people of God even though our circumstances and social world are very different.

Firstly, it reminds us how *not* to respond when our cherished histories and self-identities are rejected and reviled.

The Abigail-David story begins when Abigail's husband Nabal denied David hospitality by questioning his identity and social worth. "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants today who are breaking away from their masters. Shall I take my bread and water and meat…and give it to men who come from I don't know where?" (25:10-11). David is incensed and decided to kill Nabal and all the males in his household. The Hebrew term David used for "males" is quite crude. All but the most literal English translations sanitize it. Peterson suggests that Nabal's crudeness brought out the crudeness in David, and more than just crudeness…violence. Yet, however justified he felt in striking back, David's impulsive and violent reaction would have led to his ruin.

We can relate to this. Have you had moments in your life when you didn't feel respected as a person or when you didn't receive the recognition for the hard work you put in? Did you feel insulted and angry? Did it make you wonder if you really belonged to that place or community? Or did it make you doubt your own self-worth and competency?

Merriam-Webster's 'word of the year' for 2022 was "Gaslighting". Gaslighting is "the act of undermining another person's reality by denying facts, the environment around them, or their feelings."[1] I learnt it from the TV miniseries *Gaslit* (2022) about Martha Mitchel whose testimony on the Watergate coverup was challenged by the Nixon White House who dismissed her memories as unreliably distorted by alcoholism and mental illness.

More frequently now the question is raised whether practicing Christians can be trusted to contribute to public institutions and the public good without poisoning them with (what is perceived to be) their toxic and hateful beliefs. Today we question ourselves whether the terms

1. Robin Stern, "Why Gaslighting Was the Word of the Year," *Psychology Today*, December 1, 2022. https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/power-in-relationships/202212/why-gaslighting-was-the-word-of-the-year The term originates from the Patrick Hamilton novel *Gaslight* (1935) and movie (1938) in which a husband tries to make his wife think she is insane by turning down the gaslights in their apartment to a flicker and then claiming that the flickering is a figment of her imagination.

'Evangelical' and 'Born Again' are worth holding onto because of the negative associations it has acquired in mainstream media. There is a lot of gaslighting going on. While self-examination and self-critique are essential for Christian integrity, the uncritical acceptance of categories and binaries that are forced upon us are not. If the church is to really be like Jesus, we will not fit *anyone's* fixed categories, and we *will* be misunderstood.

But in reaction, we too can be strongly tempted to engage in gaslighting of our own. Christians are not entirely unknown for undermining other people's experienced realities by denying facts, the environment around them, or their feelings. I have witnessed this on many an occasion when well-meaning 'short term missions' teams find fault with local pastors and their congregations of syncretism because they have not made the effort to understand the indigenous culture and social conditions in which they live and have developed their churches. Theology and ethics become missionally transformative when they are driven by solid exegesis, greater awareness of a nation's history and culture as well as pastoral concern.

Secondly, Abigail's wisdom teaches us that our calling is both conservative and progressive. Yes, we seek security and stability for ourselves and our families, but we must also be committed to ensure that others who do not yet enjoy those blessings will have them too, even if we have to volunteer our time and energy, contribute financially through donations and taxes.

Abigail's wisdom breaks in like stadium lights into David's gaslit thrashings about. With a respectful and gentle confidence, Abigail helps David recover his perspective: his identity, his security, and his self-worth. She helps him find their source. "...the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord; and evil shall not be found in you so long as you live. If anyone should rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living under the care of the Lord your God; but the lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling"

(28-29).

Abigail reminds David of the promise of kingship God made to him through Samuel. As we are informed at the beginning of this episode, Samuel had recently died. In a way, Abigail acts prophetically to reassure David that God's promise stands unchanged. Abigail's wisdom contains an affirmation of life, security, and dynastic stability: "a sure house", "bound in the bundle of the living under the care of the Lord your God." Her counsel also spurs David to action and the work of just warfare ahead: "fighting the Lord's battles" when "the lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling." The latter analogy is a resounding reminder of how powerfully God was present when David first stepped into a battlefield against the Philistines.

Abigail was not personally responsible for her husband's foolish actions. She says, "I did not see the young men of my lord, whom you sent" (25). Yet, she nevertheless takes it upon herself to undo the damage and make reparations. Her wise words of 'theological correctness' are only one half of her response. She rushes to put together the food and drink that were so rudely denied David and his followers, even though they had been generous in their help and allowances to Nabal's shepherds. Abigail's words would have sounded so sanctimonious and hollow if they had not also been accompanied by tangible proof of the honour and esteem which she claimed David had in the Lord.

We may not be directly responsible for the sins committed by other parts of the body of Christ or by our ancestors long ago. But where forgiveness needs to be sought and amends made, we ought to do so as unhesitatingly and sincerely as Abigail.

Thirdly, Abigail's wisdom demonstrates that there are times when the necessity to speak is urgent and other times when it is necessary to wait patiently for an opportune moment.

When her servant alerted Abigail to the impending calamity triggered by Nabal's rash actions, Abigail responded with speed and efficiency. She rushed to meet

David and pre-empted his vengeance, for her sake and his. However, when she returned home, she did not rush to confront Nabal. There was no point. He was in no state to hear her, let alone have a conversation. "Nabal's heart was merry within him, for he was very drunk; so she told him nothing at all until the morning light" (36). When she did tell him, he appears to have suffered some type of stroke, and died ten days later. Abigail had saved his life, but his distorted sense of honour was a kind of pride set on self-destruction.

In times of crisis, the church is often under pressure to declare its position and answer the questions put to it. More damage has been caused by offering hasty responses than by delayed responses which were better thought-through. Whenever church councils and synods rushed decisions, they found that they could not be ratified because local bishops and congregations remained unconvinced. At other times, when prolonging a conversation proved futile due to fundamental differences, forcing a compromise caused more confusion and dissention than existed before.

In our culture of instant messaging and reaction memes, Christians need the restrained discretion of Abigail. Perhaps there are times when our secular culture is so caught up in its own forms of self-righteousness and virtue, that a real conversation is not possible. Perhaps there are times when we need to wait patiently for the right moment to speak when the outworking of consequences has inclined chastened hearts to wisdom.

This does not mean that Christians must not think proactively about the critical issues of our time that affect the lives of our neighbours. We certainly must know our own mind, at least in broad principles, before crises hit us, so that we are not caught off guard. Abigail flew into action because she already knew the right thing to do. Her heart and mind were sufficiently well prepared for when her hands, feet, and voice were urgently needed.

But in the here and the now, beware of the Nabals who could, and do, so easily provoke us to react impulsively to our own harm and shame. Let us also not be Nabals to

others, who do need to be recognized for their who they are and what they think and feel. Instead, may the Lord grant us the wisdom of Abigail:

- to be always mindful of who we are in the life and mission of the triune God who preserves and empowers us;
- to desire the reconciliation between people and God, as well as the reconciliation of each other in justice;
- to know when to speak and act swiftly, or patiently wait for the right time. Amen.

This volume of *JCTS* comes in the wake of the worst economic and political crisis in our nation's post-Independence history. Although we can be thankful that the worst shortages and violent confrontations are over, we can be certain that these dangers will engulf us again if radical changes in both heart attitudes and constitutional safeguards are not implemented soon. This is the moment for Christians in every sphere to contribute their uniquely biblical insights to the cause of re-imagining our nationhood and reforming the deformities in our body politic. One malady that flares up from time to time is religious intolerance. While the otherworldly spirituality of some Christians prevent them from participating in civic struggles for the common good, all Christians are affected by religious intolerance.

To this end, we offer biblical, theological, and ethical reflections on a range of topics. Dr. Ivor Poobalan discusses the paradigmatic role of the Abraham and Joseph narratives in the formation of ancient Israelite national identity and political ethos. Dr. Prabo Mihindukulasuriya discusses the relevance of one of Paul's conversion metaphors which,

together with a traditional story motif, provides sources for Christian self-understanding in our often hostile Buddhist context. Dr. Mano Emmanuel takes the ongoing national crisis head on with a fresh examination of the perennial Evangelical debate about whether social action is part of the church's mission. PhD candidate Nathan Somanathan, takes this question right into the heart of the Pentecostal tradition, asking 'What does politics have to do with Pentecost?'

I thank the respondents and peer-reviewers of the articles published in this volume who contributed generously with their time and expertise: Ian Lee, Dr. John Arun Kumar, Dr. Jessamin Birdsall, and Dr. Mark Glanville.

Prabo Mihindukulasuriya
Editor

IDENTITY AND POLITICS: THE PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVES IN THE FORMATION OF EARLY ISRAEL

IVOR POOBALAN

Abstract: *The stories from Abraham to Joseph form the bulk of Genesis (11:27-50:26), and the entire section has been traditionally referred to as the Patriarchal Narratives. The Primeval History (1:1-11:26) therefore only functions as a preamble to what the author wishes to highlight. What then might be the authorial intention of the Patriarchal stories? The remarkably stylised structure throughout Genesis challenges any notion that these stories are merely random recollections of events in the lives of Israel's fathers. This article takes the view that the Patriarchal Narratives are limited to Genesis 11:27-37:1, and deliberately focus primarily on Abraham and Jacob. Using earliest-Israel as the implied first reader of the text, it is possible to see how the Patriarchal Narratives and its two primary characters are deliberately shaped as instructive paradigms, to inspire the collective imagination of the ancient world's youngest nation in the formation of her identity and politics.*

Key words: *patriarchal narratives, Genesis 11:27-37:1, early Israel, identity, politics*

1. Introduction

Genesis has traditionally been divided into two unequal parts: 1:1 – 11:26 and 11:27 – 50:26. Several older commentaries would designate all the chapters that follow Genesis 11:26, the "Patriarchal Narratives", since the remainder of Genesis (11:27 – 50:26) documents the history of a single family of nomads through a period of about 300 years.[1] The focus of this section is on God's involvement

1. See E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1964); Claus Westermann, *Genesis: An Introduction*, tr. J. J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); see also Victor Hamilton, *The*

in the life-experiences of Israel's forefathers: calling them, entering into covenants with them, protecting them and guiding them, from the time their founding-patriarch Abraham entered Canaan from Mesopotamia, to the death of his most illustrious descendant, Joseph, in Egypt. These ancestral stories also show how God was working in the lives of the founders of Israel to reverse the 'curses' in the primeval narratives: God's promises and blessings of prosperity and posterity increasingly work their way as the story advances.

Some scholars, however, suggest that this large section (11:27 – 50:26) ought to be further subdivided because of a shift from the style of writing in 11:27 – 36:1 to the style used in 37:2 – 50:26. The former section details the stories featuring the *actual* patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; presented as a collection of diverse episodes. The latter reads like a short story about Joseph. It traces his life and fortunes from the age of seventeen (37:2) all the way to his death at the age of one hundred and ten (50:22). If we follow this schema Genesis divides into three sections:

Primeval History (1:1 – 11:26)
Patriarchal History (11:27 – 37:1)
The Joseph Story (37:2 – 50:22)[2]

This separation of the *patriarchal narratives* from the *Joseph story* can be further argued on the basis of the overall style of the writing, together with the distinctive content in each.

First, scholars have long noted that chapters 11:27 – 36:1 present multiple stories from the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that are stand-alone narratives, that is to say, they form complete episodes in themselves. These have then been arranged by the author (and perhaps later

Book of Genesis 1 – 17 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 11: "The clear-cut division between chs. 11 and 12 has provided sufficient evidence for dividing Genesis into two main bodies. The first is chs. 1 – 11, designated as primeval history. The second is chs. 12 – 50, designated as patriarchal history."

2. On this see, Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 63-64.

editors) to create a better flow and show how these separate episodes interrelate in the overall understanding of that particular ancestor. The genre of chapters 37:2 – 50:26 is completely different. Rather than a loose collection of episodes strung together like "a row of pearls on a somewhat inconspicuous thread", the third part of Genesis reads like a short story or *novella*.[3] It is the exciting account of its main character Joseph, from his humble beginnings as the eleventh son of Jacob, being rejected from his own home by his jealous brothers, to his exalted position as the 'prime minister' of Egypt and honoured by none other than the mighty Pharaoh.

Second, and perhaps more objectively, the 'Patriarchs' of the nation of Israel – the ones through whom Israelite religion identified her God – were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Although the sons of Jacob became the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel, and gained a very high recognition within Israelite tradition, it was their ancestors that were accorded the status of 'patriarchs', leading to the common expression: "The God of *our fathers* (patriarchs), Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Genesis 50:24; Exodus 3:15; Matthew 22:31-32; Acts 3:13; 7:32). It is in Genesis 12 – 36 that we find the important collections of stories from the lives of these patriarchs. Although Jacob is prominently mentioned in chapters 37 – 50, this final section is actually the story of Jacob's sons, particularly Joseph:

> Three men – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – are the patriarchs of Israel whom God uses to establish a people dedicated to his service. Jacob's sons, including Joseph, are not considered patriarchs, as seen in the later reference to God as "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." This distinction does not minimize importance of the sons of Jacob, who are the "fathers" of the twelve tribes of Israel. It helps explain why I differentiate the patriarchal narratives

3. See Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, NCBC (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11: "Hermann Gunkel argued convincingly that Gen 37 – 50 needs to be distinguished from the "legend cycles" of the other ancestral narratives in 12 – 36 by its coherent composition."

from the Joseph story.[4]

A third factor that argues for discerning three sections in the structure intended by the author is the book's geographical design. It is not insignificant that the setting for chapters 1 – 11 is Babylonia, for chapters 12 – 36 it is Canaan, and for chapters 37 – 50, Egypt. Hamilton reads the theological import of this arrangement:

> In other words, each part of the Mediterranean world is highlighted in some part of Genesis. The *crucial center section of Genesis* (chs. 12 – 36) is bracketed geographically by two sections of the Near Eastern world with whose history that of Israel would be constantly interlocked.[5]

Hence the patriarchal narratives proper constitute the 'centre' of Genesis; the section that the author wishes to press most firmly into the consciousness of his first readers. It is this focus on the central patriarchal narrative and its function in the instruction and formation of Early Israel that invites our enquiry.

2. The intentionality of 'the Old Testament of the Old Testament'

Walter Moberly coined the phrase, 'the Old Testament of the Old Testament', to refer to the nature and function of the patriarchal narratives. His point is, that in a similar way to how the Old Testament prefigures the events that will follow the coming of Jesus Christ as detailed in the New Testament, so the stories of the patriarchs and their encounters with God and the promises they were given by covenant, prefigure their fulfilment in the rest of the Pentateuch (Exodus from Egypt, the Sinai covenant, and journey to the plains of Moab).[6] Concluding his exploration

4. See, Longman III, *How to Read Genesis*, 127. Italics added.

5. Hamilton, *Genesis 1 – 17*, 10.

6. R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 126: "The thesis I wish to propose is that the relationship of patriarchal religion in Genesis 12 – 50 to Mosaic Yahwism in Exodus onward is analogous to

of how the religion of the Patriarchs relates to Mosaic Yahwism, Moberly observes:

> Indeed, so similar are the dynamics of the two interpretive processes that it seems not inappropriate to borrow Christian terminology for the theological concept of the pentateuchal writers and so to designate the patriarchal traditions of Genesis 12 – 50 as the Old Testament of the Old Testament.[7]

But Moberly's "remarkable parallelism" is difficult to sustain. With regard to the relationship between the Old Testament and the New, the writing of the latter occurred several centuries *after* the writing of the former, with the New Testament writers deliberately shaping their work to demonstrate how the story of Jesus and the Church are continuous and harmonious with the fixed canon of the Jewish scriptures.

On the other hand the Pentateuch, including the Patriarchal Narratives, was written as one complete work attributed to Moses. This suggests that the shaping of material would have occurred in the opposite direction: the selection and arrangement of the materials in the Patriarchal Narratives (and the Joseph story) would have been *intentionally* determined by the needs of the contemporary readership of Israelites living in the author's time.[8] The stories relating to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would, in this case, have to be told in a manner that showed their consonance with later traditions of Mosaic Yahwism, while retaining their essential historicity. This thought

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the relationship of the Old Testament as a whole to the New Testament."

7. Moberly, *Old Testament*, 146.

8. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1 – 15*, WBC (Waco, Texas: Word, 1987), xxii: "Whereas according to Genesis' own chronology the first book of the Pentateuch spans some two thousand years, the next four cover a mere one hundred and twenty. This helps to put Genesis into perspective. It does not stand on its own, but rather contains essential background for understanding those events which constituted the nation of Israel as the Lord's covenant people. *It would therefore not be surprising to find adumbrations of the later national history in the story of the patriarchs*" (italics added).

emerges earlier in Moberly's argument:

> It is not difficult to envisage the pentateuchal writers preserving and molding the patriarchal traditions so that they could function in [a] way to guide and inform Israel's life with Yahweh.[9]

The materials that have been incorporated to form the 'Abraham narrative' (11:27 – 25:18) and the 'Jacob narrative' (25:19 – 37:1) provide valuable insight into the historic experiences of the patriarchs, but they are much more than that. They are carefully organised theological compositions performing a didactic function, inviting us to read between the lines to discern the *instructive lessons* that were originally applied in the life of the community of Israelite tribes journeying in the wilderness.

> [The] expansion of the patriarchal stories into such a surcharged narrative is the product of long work at collecting and even more of superior art in theological composition. One should not think that the many individual traditions about the patriarchal period in circulation came together by themselves into such an artistic and theologically deliberate composition.[10]

3. The structure of the Patriarchal Narratives

If we were to fall back on the *tolēdōt* formula,[11] our section (Genesis 11:27 – 37:1) presents this refrain five times: 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1 and 36:9. The last two repeatedly make reference to Esau, and 25:12-18 briefly accounts for the descendants of Ishmael.

9. Moberly, *Old Testament*, 138.

10. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 159.

11. Arnold, *Genesis*, 4: "Genesis is one of the most intentionally structured books of the Bible . . . The final editor of the book has used a clearly discernible structuring clause, to arrange the book into eleven panels of texts, placed side-by-side in a continuous whole . . . This structuring device is comprised of the term *tôlĕdôt*, "offspring, descendants; (family/clan) history," in the clause "these are the descendants of [personal name]" to introduce each new portion of the text."

The two most important accounts, therefore, are the ones that begin at: 11:27, "these are the generations of Terah"; and 25:19, "these are the generations of Isaac, the son of Abraham". In both instances, as is the pattern of the *toledot*-narratives, the ensuing story concerns the descendant most important to the narrative: *Abraham* in the case of the former and *Jacob* in the case of the latter.[12] It is for this reason that we may broadly divide the Patriarchal Narratives in two: the Abraham cycle (11:27 – 25:11) and the Jacob episodes (25:19 – 37:1).

It is quite plain that although Isaac too is one of the patriarchs of the people of Israel, and although Genesis hints at his significance and stature in the very few stories recorded (see especially Genesis 24 – 26), the author does not say much about the life of this important ancestor. The bulk of the narrative is divided between his father Abraham, and his son, Jacob. What may be the reason?

Although we may only speculate when answering this question, it will be important to see if what is explicitly reported about Isaac the patriarch is consistent with the overall theological schema of the patriarchal narrative. We take this up for consideration later.

4. The design and arrangement of the Abraham-cycle (11:27 – 25:11)

For a long time something about Genesis has bothered scholars greatly, and this is the seemingly inexplicable presence of 'duplications'; incidents or stories apparently told twice over (or in one case allegedly *thrice*). Victor Hamilton lists the examples usually cited:

> Thus there are two Creation accounts (1:1-2:4a; 2:4bff.), two Flood accounts (meshed in chs. 6 – 9), two accounts of God's covenant with Abraham (chs.

12. Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 18: "Contrary to what one might expect, the accounts are not essentially about the titular ancestor but about his descendants. For instance, the accounts of the lines of Terah, of Isaac, and of Jacob are principally about their offspring: Abraham, Jacob, and the twelve sons of Israel, respectively."

> 15 and 17), two accounts of Hagar's banishment (chs. 16 and 21), two accounts of Jacob's name change to Israel (chs. 32 and 35), two accounts of Joseph's sale to merchants bound for Egypt (37:25-27, 28b and 37:28a, 36), three accounts of wife abduction (chs. 12, 20, and 26), and so forth.[13]

The arguments center on a source-critical approach that attempted to go behind the biblical stories to find the 'original' version that had given rise to the one contained in the biblical text. So, whenever any two accounts in Genesis shared a high-level of similarity (like the wife-sister stories of Abraham), they were both assumed to correspond to a single original, which had been developed through two separate traditions of transmission. These, it was supposed, eventually had made their way into the scriptural text independent of each other.

The 'duplications' in the Patriarchal Narratives have led to intense debate and various theories about how the biblical text came to be composed, and more importantly about how confident we could be about the stories themselves: were they actual, historical events, or the fictitious reworking of some existing tradition?

The undue haste, with which scholars sometimes pass judgment on the biblical text, and impose contemporary expectations on it, undermines our effort to read Genesis on its own terms.

Within the Abraham cycle we find one large section (12:1 – 22:19) that is clearly arranged in a carefully structured manner using a palistrophic design (this refers to the placement of statements or stories in a series, followed by a series of matching statements or stories in reverse order: A – B – C – C' – B' – A'). We know that this block of material is meant to be a literary unit by the fact that it begins and ends with journeys that God commissions Abraham to make by using the unique expression in Hebrew, *lēk lᵉka,* "Go, you!" (Genesis 12:1 & 22:2). Such

13. Victor P Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1 – 17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 15.

an expression is not found anywhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures, and therefore stands out as an *inclusio*, or a literary bracket, indicating that everything in between is meant to be read as part of a whole unit.

Looking at this literary unit we find a remarkable arrangement of stories relating to Abraham:[14]

12a – The Call: blessing promised
12b – Abram in a foreign land: wife-sister motif
13-14 – Lot in danger; Sodom
15 – Covenant
16 – Hagar and Ishmael
17 – Covenant
18-19 – Lot in danger; Sodom
20 – Abraham in a foreign land; wife-sister motif
21 – Hagar and Ishmael
22 – The Call: blessing confirmed

It is immediately apparent that there are five matching pairs, including the two stories about Abraham trying to pass off his wife as his sister. It goes without argument that the author has arranged these deliberately. But what may be the intention?

One way to understand this is to consider the Hebrew technique of emphasizing or elaborating a point by means of *repetition*. The most obvious example of this is in the unique use of parallelism in Semitic poetry, that is the characteristic use of repetitive, doubled lines of poetry that convey a single idea, as we find in the Psalms.[15] Although

14. This arrangement was originally proposed by Jonathan Magonet, *Bible Lives* (London: SCM Press, 1992), and reproduced in John Goldingay, "The Place of Ishmael" in Philip Davies and David Clines eds., *The World of Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 146.

15. In 1750, Bishop R. Lowth, professor of poetry at Oxford, gave a series of lectures titled, "Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews," and introduced the idea that Hebrew poetic structure followed a scheme that may be called "the parallelism of members". By this he meant that Hebrew poetic lines were constructed in pairs or sets where the elements of the second line (sometimes the third and fourth) corresponded to the

often the two lines are very similar, they are very rarely exact. This is because the parallel line is meant to add to the idea contained in the first line and so create a more comprehensive thought. One scholar suggests that this technique leads to a kind of "binocular vision":

> Parallelism focuses the message on itself but its vision is binocular. Like human vision it superimposes two slightly different views of the same object and from their convergence produces a sense of depth.[16]

The placement of episodes with matching counterparts within the larger unit could function in the same way as parallel lines in Hebrew poetry.[17] Perhaps it is meant to draw the reader into a technique of reading that will enable 'binocular vision' into the life of the first patriarch. For example, reading a particular narrative that introduces a certain theme, such as Abraham's fearful response in Egypt and the danger posed to Sarah (12:10-20), may first raise some hermeneutical questions in the mind of the reader: how does the author evaluate Abraham in this context? What moral lessons are we to draw from what transpired in Egypt? Then, the matching narrative about Abraham's fearful response among the Philistines and the danger posed to Sarah (20:1-18), certainly works to deepen our understanding of Abraham's character and helps clarify how the author intended to portray Abraham in these circumstances: as a weak and unfaithful patriarch who

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elements of the first, either in a *synonymous* or *antithetical* manner. In all Bishop Lowth identified three types of parallelism: **synonymous** (when the second line repeats the first with little added meaning), **synthetic** (when the second line repeats the first with significant added meaning), and **antithetical** (when the second line contrasts with the first).

16. Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 99.

17. John Goldingay, "The Place of Ishmael" in Philip Davies and David Clines eds., *The World of Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 147: "It is certainly true that ch.17 'improves' on ch.15, but this does not make it a climax. *It need do no more than reflect the fact that these two stories are a pair, and one expects the second of a pair of stories to go beyond the first; this aspect of the nature of Hebrew parallelism can apply to pairs of stories as well as to pairs of cola in a line*" (italics added).

was willing to abandon his wife and risk God's covenant in exchange for his personal safety and advantage.

In the same way we may expect to find that the five 'sets' of narratives are mutually interpretive; the second block of material clarifying and deepening the major assertions and lessons introduced in the first.

On either side of the 'journey stories' (12:1-9; 22:1-19) are genealogical information concerning Terah's family. The first talks about Terah and his sons, and announces the death of both Terah and Haran (11:27-32); the second sums up the genealogy of Terah's remaining son, Nahor (22:20-24).

Thereafter the author presents two more major stories (Genesis 23 – 24), before he announces Abraham's death and burial at the age of one hundred and seventy five (25:1-11). The first story has to do with Abraham's elaborate negotiation with the Hittites to purchase a burial site for the patriarchal families, and uses it first to bury Sarah (Genesis 23). God had promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the entire land of Canaan, but at his death Abraham would only own this very small plot that included a cave in Macpelah. Nevertheless this move was extremely symbolic, because it shows how decisively Abraham acted to *safeguard the memory of the patriarchs* through a permanent and legitimate burial site within the Promised Land.

The second story has to do with the elaborate arrangements that Abraham made with his servant to find a wife for his son, Isaac (Genesis 24): "I want you to swear by the LORD the God of heaven and the God of earth that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites" (24:3). It was paramount for Abraham that Isaac should not marry interracially with the Canaanites, and the lengthy account is told to demonstrate Abraham's successful efforts to *safeguard the legacy of the patriarchs* by not mixing the descendants of Shem with the descendants of Ham, and Canaan (see 9:24-26).

5. The collection of the Jacob-episodes (Genesis 25:19 – 37:1)

Although Abraham is surely the 'father' of the covenant people, it is the personality of Jacob that casts the longest shadow over the book of Genesis. His story begins at 25:19 and doesn't end until the last chapter of Genesis that records his death and burial (50:1-14).

This prominence is understandable because Genesis is written to the descendants of the thirteen tribes of *Jacob's* sons (since Joseph fathered two tribes: Ephraim and Manasseh). By the time of Moses these tribes made up the vast number of the Hebrew people in Egypt, who called themselves *Israel*, the God-given name of their forebear Jacob.[18]

The section in Genesis that is dedicated to telling the Jacob episodes, however, is the *tolēdōt* of Isaac (25:19 – 37:1). As in the case of Abraham (11:27, "the *tolēdōt* of Terah") and Joseph (37:2, "the *tolēdōt* of Jacob"), the section that presents Jacob as the main character is named after *his* father Isaac.

It is a characteristic of biblical narratives, in comparison to biographical accounts of hero-figures in all the other ancient writings, to present its characters as true-to-life, without hiding their weaknesses and failures. And, in the case of Jacob, the shortcomings of his character are tragically in full display. The author of Genesis does not shy away from showing us the poor judgments and self-centred actions of Abraham and Isaac, but Jacob brings the image of the Hebrew patriarchs down to a new level, and with it the way later Israel was forced to understand its roots:

> The narrative about Jacob portrays Israel in its earthiest and most scandalous appearance in Genesis. The narrative is not edifying in any conventional religious or moral sense. Indeed, if one comes to the narrative with such an agenda,

18. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16 – 50* WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 168: "Thus over half the book is devoted to describing the life of Jacob. This emphasis on his life is fitting, of course, because Jacob, or Israel, was the forefather of the nation and his sons were the ancestors of the twelve tribes."

> the narrative is offensive. But for that very reason, the Jacob narrative is most lifelike. It presents Jacob in his crude mixture of motives. This grandson of the promise is a rascal compared to his faithful grandfather Abraham or his successful father Isaac. The affirmations of faith in this narrative are especially robust. The narrator knows that the purposes of God are tangled in a web of self-interest and self-seeking.[19]

In the Primeval History we read about the beginning of intra-family conflict in the story of Cain and Abel. Thereafter this becomes a running theme throughout the book. But, although we see this problem feature somewhat in the stories of Abraham and Lot (chapter 13), Sarah and Hagar (chapter 16), and Ishmael and Isaac (chapter 21), it is in the stories of Jacob that family conflict reaches a fever-pitch. In fact one scholar, Claus Westermann, identifies this as one of the striking contrasts between the Abraham narratives and the Jacob narratives. He has suggested that whereas the Abraham stories are focused on the "vertical" problem – about how God's promise will move from parent to child and who will be the rightful heir – the Jacob stories are entirely focused on a horizontal view of things.[20] Brueggemann puts it this way:

> Jacob struggles within his own generation. There is conflict with wives and uncle, but especially with his brother. Much more than the Abraham story, this narrative is realistic about power and position *in the family*, about the practices of promise and deception, about wages and departures and reconciliation. The narrative is attentive to all those interactions which betray or enhance humanness and *the well-being of the family*.[21]

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19. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 204.

20. See Claus Westermann, *The Promise to the Fathers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 56-57 and 74-75.

21. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 206 (italics added).

Taking the various episodes of the Jacob narrative into account, the bulk of them may be divided into four different categories:[22]

I. Jacob and Esau (25:19-34; 27:1-28:9; 32:3-21; 33:1-17)
II. Jacob and Laban (29:1-30; 30:25-31:55)
III. The sons of Jacob (29:31-30:24)
IV. Encounters with God (28:10-22; 32:1-2, 22-32)

This still leaves certain episodes unaccounted for, including the lengthy story of Isaac's encounters with Abimelek and the Philistines (Genesis 26), the avenging of Dinah's 'humbling' by Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi (Genesis 34), and Jacob's return to Bethel, God's appearances to him there, and the deaths of Rachel and Isaac (Genesis 35).

When all the episodes in the Jacob cycle are taken into account we find again an underlying structure that is perhaps the one that has been most carefully designed in Genesis.[23] As we saw with the Abraham narratives, here too the episodes are arranged palistrophically (items arranged in a series, followed by matching elements in reverse order creating a mirror image: A – B – C – C' – B' – A'):[24]

25:19-34	First encounters of Jacob and Esau	A
26:1-33	Foreign Relations: Isaac and the Philistines	B
26:34-28:9	Jacob robs Esau's blessing	C
28:10-22	Jacob meets God at Bethel	D
29:1-14	Jacob arrives at Laban's house	E
29:15-30	Laban outwits Jacob with regard to marriage	F
29:31 – 30:24	**Birth of Jacob's sons**	**G**
30:25-31:1	Jacob outwits Laban with regard to flocks	F'

22. See, Brueggemann, *Genesis,* 205.

23. Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 230: "The Jacob narrative, more so than any other portion of Genesis, is an artful chiasm or palistrophically structured unit (i.e. arranged in concentric rings, such as ABCDCBA), using a reversal in the plot line in which Jacob flees to the ancestral homeland in northern Mesopotamia, sojourns there, and eventually returns to the Promised Land."

24. Adapted from Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16 – 50* WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 169.

31:2-55	Jacob leaves Laban's house	E'
32:1-2	Jacob meets God at Mahanaim	D'
32:3 – 33:20	Jacob returns Esau's blessing	C'
34:1-31	Foreign Relations: Dinah and the Hivites	B'
35:1-29	Last encounters of Jacob and Esau	A'

The arrangement above immediately highlights the central place that the birth of Jacob's sons plays in the overall narrative. More specifically, it is the birth of Joseph that marks the major turning point in the story, because as soon we read that Rachel gave birth to Joseph, the next verse says: "After Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Send me on my way so I can go to my own homeland" (30:25).

The analysis also helps us to see that none of the individual narratives need to be considered miscellaneous or unnecessary to the overall story. For example, the narrative about Isaac and Abimelek (Genesis 26) matches the story of Dinah and the Hivites (Genesis 34) because they both show Israel confronted by non-Israelite people within the land of promise and the various challenges that arose.

Finally, the last verse of chapter 35 brings the whole Jacob cycle to a beautiful and harmonious conclusion. The cycle had begun rather ominously with the twins "jostling within" Rebekah, and Jacob coming out "with his hand grasping Esau's heel" (25:19-24). The bitter rivalry had thereafter escalated fueled by raw ambition, ingratitude and parental favouritism, leading to the threat of murder. This makes 35:28-29 a very promising finishing note to the Patriarchal narratives: "Isaac lived a hundred and eighty years. Then he breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, old and full of years. And *his sons Esau and Jacob buried him*".

6. The Patriarchal Narratives in the shaping of early Israel's identity and politics

At first glance the stories concerning Abraham and Jacob appear to be random collections of episodes that

illustrate each patriarch's experiences of living for God, and they certainly achieve that end quite well. Nevertheless when we think about how intentional the author of Genesis has shown himself to be in the primeval narrative – not only in *what* he says, but also in *how* he says it – we must ask if a deeper purpose and design governs the patriarchal narrative as it stands?[25] A helpful way to approach this question is to return to what we understand to be the *purpose* of the book in the first place.

The original readers of Genesis were the people of Israel, who had escaped from Egypt and were on their way to Canaan, the Promised Land. They had been a displaced people in Egypt for 480 years, and slaves to the Egyptians for most of that time. *As a result they had no identity as an independent nation of the ancient world, and no idea about how to conduct their internal affairs as a geo-political entity. Genesis sets out to inform and educate them on these very issues of identity and politics*.

Through the Primeval History the author of Genesis enables the Israelite readers to broaden their identity. First, he had shown that the covenant-God of the Hebrew people was in fact the sovereign creator of the whole universe and the controller of the affairs of nations and empires. He did this by interchangeably using *Elohim* (the culturally recognized Canaanite name for the supreme God) and *Yahweh* (the unique name of the covenant God of Israel) to refer to God. Occasionally and strategically he would combine them (*Yahweh-Elohim*, "LORD God") to coin an entirely new term and make the association unambiguous.

Second, he not only wished to argue that *Yahweh* of Israelite devotion was *Elohim*, the God of the universe, but by using the *tolēdōt* formulae and the carefully-preserved genealogical traditions, he was able to anchor the present generation of Israelites and their ancestors with all the generations of the primeval era, from its very

25. von Rad, *Genesis*, 160: "The arrangement which the Yahwist has given the material is so remarkable that we must consider his molding of the transmitted mass of material as a decisive literary event, which claims our whole theological interest."

beginning with Adam and Eve. By employing two sets of ten generations each (5:1-32 and 11:10-26) he was able to show that their ancestor Abraham was a descendant of Shem, the son of Noah who was most pleasing to God.

Furthermore, the author of Genesis uses the Primeval History also to show how God has set certain standards for human conduct and relationships, and how sin has undermined our ability to fulfill these requirements towards our fellow human beings. The murder of Abel by Cain, the gratuitous killings by Lamech, and the violation of boundaries by the pre-Flood generation show the effects of sin on human relationships and politics, and how these led to God's great grief and evoked his judgment. Following the Flood, Noah's drunkenness and Ham's dishonouring of his father again highlighted humanity's problems *as a society*, which led to the cursing of Canaan and the perpetual conflict between the descendants of Noah.

These lessons about *identity* and *politics* clearly shape the presentation of the Patriarchal Narrative as well, and intentionally so. Two major questions faced the tribes of Israel as they journeyed towards the Promised Land:

1. What status did *national Israel* have in the world of empires like Babylon and Egypt, among well-established nation-states like Moab, Ammon, and Edom, and among Canaanite city-states like Jericho or Ai?

2. How could the twelve tribes of Israel become a healthy community as the *family of Israel*? How could they overcome their internal rivalries and grow into a cohesive and harmonious people, united both by their devotion to Yahweh, and by their descent from the patriarchs?

It is very likely, then, that the stories of Abraham and Jacob are designed to serve these very interests: of *Israel's identity* in relation to the world of nations, and *Israel's politics* within herself as a new nation in the world.

7. The Abraham and Jacob narratives inspire Israel's identity as a nation and politics as a people

It is not immediately apparent that the overall shape of the Abraham-stories significantly differs from that of the Jacob-stories, but on closer inspection we see that they have very distinctive emphases.

When we come to the stories about Abraham, despite challenging intra-family dynamics (with accounts relating to Lot, Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael), another far more prominent characterization of Abraham emerges from these episodes. This is one that the author chooses to present both explicitly and implicitly, and has to do with Abraham's stature alongside powerful kings and kingdoms.

All through the selected episodes from Abraham's life we see him against the broader world of empires and nations.[26] His origins were in the great civilization of Southern *Mesopotamia*, in "Ur of the Chaldeans" (11:31), but very soon we find him in *Egypt*, dealing personally and powerfully with its mighty Pharaoh (12:10-20).

Later, in the surprising account of how Abraham rescued his nephew Lot, he is portrayed as a great suzerain in command of a mini army and able to take on a coalition of *four kings* that had just triumphed over a coalition of *five kings* (14:1-16). The four kings he overcame represented powerful kingdoms: *Elamites*, *Amorites*, *Hurrians* and the *Hittites*.[27] On his way back he is confronted by the *king of Sodom* who attempts to assert his superiority over Abraham: "Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself" (14:21). But Abraham, reassured by Melchizedek the *king of Salem* (14:18), will not compromise, reasserting that his allegiance belongs only to "Yahweh-Elohim, the Most High, Creator of heaven and earth" (14:22).

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26. Abraham Saggu, *Theology of Israel's Founding Fathers* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2013), 153: "The author of Genesis presents the nations as having originated from Adam and Noah, and as *related to Abraham in some way or the other*" (italics added).

27. Victor Hamilton, *Genesis 1 – 17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990) 399-400.

Westermann, although assuming that Genesis 14 is a late post-exilic composition, argues that the narrative intentionally characterises Abraham as a powerful royal figure:

> In the late post-exilic period, when Judah was a small and insignificant province of a great and powerful empire, Jewish writers endeavoured to give figures from their own past a significance that reached out across the boundaries of the great world powers. . . . The author of Genesis 14 gave Abraham, the father of the people, a significance on the stage of world history by making him victor over four kings of powerful eastern empires.[28]

When God enters into a solemn covenant with Abraham, he promises him that his descendants will overcome ten named people groups of *Canaan* (15:18-21),[29] and later shows how Abimelech, the powerful *Philistine king* at Gerar, was totally dependent on Abraham's good offices to escape God's wrath (20:1-18).

Another interesting feature is how Genesis establishes Abraham's relatedness as an ancestor for emerging tribes such as the *Ishmaelites*, who the later-Israelites met roaming the vast desert regions southeast of Canaan (17:17-22; 25:12-18), as well the tribes that descended from Abraham's sons through his wife Keturah, especially the *Midianites* (25:1-11):

The genealogical details of Abraham's sons through Keturah, like the table of nations in chap. 10, define Israel's relationships with some of the neighboring nomadic peoples who inhabited the desert areas on the fringes of Canaan and traded with them. That the descent of these peoples is traced back to Abraham expresses the close affinity Israel felt with these people.[30]

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28. Claus Westermann, Genesis 12 – 36 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 207.

29. See Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1 – 15* WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 333: "This is the longest list of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan found in the OT. Usually six or seven groups are mentioned: here there are ten".

30. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16 – 50* WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 161.

Finally, by means of the final narrative about his nephew Lot, Abraham's status in relation to Moab and Ammon is underscored (19:30-38). The *Moabites* and the *Ammonites*, who were nation states that were in full bloom by the period of the Exodus and opposed Moses and Israel, had, as their eponymous ancestors, the grandnephews of the father of Israel.

All this shows how Abraham, the founder of the nation of Israel, is consistently portrayed in relation to powerful nations and their representatives. This in turn served to inform and build the identity of *Israel as a nation* in relation to the world of the time.[31] They needed to know, as they prepared to enter the Promised Land, that the people of Israel were the proud descendants of Abraham 'the Suzerain':

> The dichotomy between the universalistic picture of primeval narratives and the particularistic picture of the later Mosaic period is bridged in the patriarchal narratives. Gen 12:1-3 is a programmatic text where *God revealed that he had chosen Abraham basically for two reasons, both in relation to the nations*. Firstly, he chose Abraham and blessed him so that he may multiply into a great nation. Secondly, God chose Abraham to be a blessing to other nations.[32]

In the case of Jacob, we find that he is consistently placed within the setting of *family and clan*. Initially we read of Jacob's nuclear family, with Esau, Isaac and Rebekah, and his conflict with his brother and its consequences (25:19-28:22). Thereafter we find him in the context of his clan, in the house of his uncle Laban. There he marries, has children and struggles with Laban's exploitation of his labour. Subsequently he leaves his uncle's house to return to Canaan (29:1 – 31:55), where he reconciles with Esau and

31. It is noteworthy that of the fifteen occurrences of the term *goyim* (nation) in Genesis only four are found in the primeval history; the majority occur within the stories of the patriarchs. See Saggu, *Theology of Israel's Founding Fathers*, 153.

32. Saggu, *Theology of Israel's Founding Fathers*, 183 (italics added).

settles down near Shechem and eventually moves to Bethel with his family (32:1 – 35:15).

We could say that the stories of Jacob offered the Israelites much insight about the pitfalls and challenges to their wellbeing as the *family of Israel*. Through these accounts about the problems caused by favouritism, deceit, jealousy, exploitation and lust, and the corresponding stories about how Jacob the "grabber" was transformed to Israel "the one who contends with God", the Israelites would have learnt how they would have to overcome their internal squabbles by their dependence on Yahweh and submission to his discipline:

> Much more than the Abraham story, this narrative is realistic about power and position in the family, about the practices of promise and deception, about wages and departures and reconciliation. The narrative is attentive to all those interactions which betray or enhance humanness and the well-being of the family.[33]

We propose then, that the excessive focus on Jacob's familial conflicts is due to the agenda of the writer to use the patriarchal stories as a means to shaping later-Israel's politics. Just as Abraham's interactions with great kings and eponymous ancestors of future tribes informs Israel's identity and calls her to take her place as an equal among the nations, so Jacob's perpetual struggles with family members calls Israel to resolve her internal conflicts and achieve true harmony as a people of one family.

The collections of Abraham-stories and Jacob-stories function on multiple levels. On the one hand they present episodes that together reveal the life-story of each patriarch. On the other hand each patriarch's narrative helps to underscore a different but complementary model for Israel's identity and politics. The example of Abraham, buttressed Israel's self-understanding as a nation, as a political equal among the nations of the time, and the example of Jacob, motivated a deep commitment

33. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 206.

to consolidate Israel's internal cohesion, to live out her existence as a people bound together by blood-descent as well as a shared devotion to Yahweh, the God of their fathers.

8. How the brief account of Isaac and the extended story of Joseph serve to advance the themes of politics and identity

When we now return to the question of the limited but prominent presentation of Isaac narratives – chapters 24 and 26 – it is difficult not to notice the continuation of the two themes we have identified: *Israel as family* and *Israel as nation*.

In chapter 24 the author relates the story of how Isaac was found a wife from his father's clan living in Aram Naharaim, which ensured that Isaac's descendants were not inter-mingled with the Canaanites (24:3-4), thus preserving their racial purity and internal cohesion. Thrice within the chapter we hear the refrain that Rebekah was "the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Nahor whom Milcah bore to him" (vv. 15, 24 and 47). It was important to the writer to repeatedly confirm that although Isaac was born in Canaan, among the descendants of the 'cursed' line of Ham (Genesis 9:24-25) he married a woman who was directly related to the chosen family of Terah, a descendant of the approved line of Shem (9:26).

Later we encounter Isaac, the feared suzerain in chapter 26. After the introduction that shows him initially falling back on Abraham's cowardly wife-sister ploy, and calling Rebekah his sister when asked by the Philistines, we discover a little-appreciated presentation of Isaac. He is portrayed as a highly successful, prosperous and powerful head of a very large household. His crops yield a hundredfold (v.12), and the volume of flocks and herds that he had became the envy of the Philistines (v14) and the telling comment by Abimelek: "Move away from us; you have become too powerful for us" (v16).

All this leads to the concluding episode (26:26-33) that speaks of how Abimelek came to Isaac, bringing with him his political adviser and his military commander, in order to persuade Isaac to establish a covenant with them *for the protection of the Philistines*: "There ought to be a sworn agreement between us – between us and you. Let us make a treaty with you that you will do us no harm, just as we did not harm you but always treated you well and sent you away peacefully" (26:28-29).

So the two lengthy accounts that focus on Isaac (24 and 26) also major on the two themes of the *family of Israel* and the *nation of Israel* respectively.

This reconstruction helps us to appreciate the shaping of the later Joseph story, which brings together the two themes to a successful and happy conclusion. According to this short story or *novella*, through the highly disciplined and honourable life of Abraham's great grandson Joseph, the people called "Israel" gain honour within the greatest empire of the time. He rises from the humble beginnings as a slave and prisoner in Egypt to become the prime-minister of Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh himself: "Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt" (Genesis 41:44).

At the same time, Joseph's exemplary life also became God's means to build an unprecedented harmony and peace among all the descendants of the covenant people. This is powerfully brought out through the elaborate story about the reconciliation of brothers through acknowledgment, repentance, and forgiveness, which takes up several chapters of Genesis (beginning in chapter 42 and climaxing in chapter 45).

It is no wonder then that these two themes are reiterated in the very last chapter of Genesis. First, we read about how Egyptian state honours are accorded at the funeral of Jacob, the eponymous ancestor of Israel (50:1-14). Thereafter, we read again about how repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation bring the sons of Israel together. Their bickering and rivalry become a thing of

the past, and the story ends with Joseph's prophetic words about the united family of Israel that will grow to become a nation of numerous descendants that will leave Egypt four centuries later to fulfil her destiny (50:15-26).

9. Conclusion

Our introduction to the second section in Genesis, the Patriarchal Narratives (11:27 – 37:1), has given us an overall appreciation of the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and why they are selected and ordered in a particular way. One key we have used to make sense of these narratives has been to imagine how the Book of Genesis would have been understood by its first readers. How it was meant to function in the life of Israel; enabling her to reimagine her identity and politics following her status as mere slaves in Egypt and on her way to settle in the Promised Land as the youngest nation of the ancient world.

INTERPRETING PAUL'S CONVERSION ANALOGIES (GAL. 3:22-26; 3:29-4:3) THROUGH A TRADITIONAL SRI LANKAN STORY MOTIF

PRABO MIHINDUKULASURIYA

Abstract: *Conversion from Buddhism to Christianity is commonly derided in Sinhalese society as "amma thāththa amathaka-kirīma," or "denying (lit. forgetting) mother and father." It is a shameful accusation in a culture where filial piety and family loyalty are sources of identity and honour. From a convert's perspective it can be argued that professing faith in Christ is not a "denial of mother and father" but the discovery of God as one's true father and the church as one's true 'mother'. This paper appropriates Paul's analogies of conversion to Christ in Gal. 3:22-26 and 3:29-4:3 as a transition from juvenile minority under the authority of "a tutor/disciplinarian," "guardians and trustees" to fully entitled maturity in the fatherhood of God. This can serve as a helpful model to explain how Buddhist-background believers can view and relate to the Buddhist tradition from within their new identity as belonging in Christ. The 'pupil to prince' motif in classical Buddhist Jātaka stories will also be explored, which will serve as a parable for the Christian conversion experience in a predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist society.*

Keywords: *Buddhist-background believers, Galatians 3:22-26; 3:29-4:3, ta stoicheia tou kosmou.*

1. The accusation

The ideologues of Sinhala-Buddhist primacy in Sri Lanka characterize a person's decision to convert from Buddhism to Christianity as essentially an act of betrayal and rebellion. A common metaphor ascribed to conversion is the Sinhala phrase '*amma thāththa amathaka-kirīma*,' that is, wilfully forgetting one's mother and father. In a culture where filial devotion and family loyalty are paramount

sources of personal identity and honour, the sheer insolence and ingratitude of abandoning or betraying one's own parents is a shameful accusation indeed.

When conversion to Christianity is framed in such abhorrent terms, why would a Buddhist seeker ever desire to do so? How would Buddhist-background converts understand their former religious experience? How can they make sense of this transition of identity and belonging biblically and theologically? This paper ventures to formulate a hermeneutical and homiletic answer to these questions.

2. Paradigm texts

When we look to the NT for a culturally relatable situation, we find in Paul's letter to the Galatians two helpful metaphors that frame the believers' conversion experiences as transitions from subordination under some form of temporary authority to freedom and relationship with God in Christ.

2.1. Gal. 3:22-26: metaphor of a student and his disciplinarian

The first metaphor is not directly applicable to our context of Buddhist-background believers because Paul addresses the Jewish Christians of Galatia who were re-appropriating *tōrah* practices as expressions of Christian piety and apparently inviting their Gentile brethren to do the same. However, it is helpful to see, through the eyes of Gentile Buddhist-background Christians, that even within the continuity of covenantal development and progressive revelation in the salvation history of ethnic Israel itself, the coming of Christ and the new covenantal relationship mediated by him constitutes a transformational discontinuity with former modes of Jewish identity, belonging and practice.

Paul develops his argument as follows:

> But the Scripture has shut up (*synekleisen*) everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept in custody (*ephrouroumetha*) under the law, being shut up (*synkleiomenoi*) to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor (*paidagōgos*) [to lead us] to Christ (*eis Christon*), so that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor (*paidagōgon*). For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. (3:22-26, NASB throughout)

The tenor of the metaphor is: "we were kept in custody (*ephrouroumetha*) under the law, being shut up (*synkleiomenoi*) to the faith which was later to be revealed" (v.23). The vehicle of the metaphor is: "the Law has become our tutor (*paidagōgos*) [to lead us] to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith" (v.24). Three things can be deduced from this.

First, notice the two different senses in which *sugkleiō*, 'to shut together or enclose together,' is applied. First, in v.22, Paul asserts that "Scripture has imprisoned (*synekleisen*) everyone under sin," probably in the same sense as "For God has imprisoned (*synekleisen*) all in disobedience…" (Rom. 11:32). But then, in v. 23, Paul speaks of the Law as the means by which God's covenant people were "imprisoned (*ephrouroumetha*) and guarded (*synkleiomenoi*) … until faith would be revealed." This is an elaboration of what Paul had just said: "Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, … until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made" (v.21). Therefore, what Paul posits is this: God locked down all humankind under disobedience and sin as a consequence of the fall. But to bring about humanity's redemption, God set apart one of its nations with whom he made a covenant to that end. To safeguard his covenant people from the very disobedience from which God desired to rescue humanity he locked them up in his Law until the time when his promise of redemption would be made available in Christ and appropriated by

faith. Therefore, the second *sugkleiō* is different from the first. To be "imprisoned (*ephrouroumetha*) and guarded (*synkleiomenoi*) under the law" was not an incarceration intended to prevent them from, or deprive them of, faith in Christ which was already available to them at that time. God's people had to wait. They had to experience the interim provision of the *tōrah* until full freedom could be experienced in Christ.

Second, like *sugkleiō*, the term *ephrouroumetha* (from *phroureō*, to guard) in v. 23 was an "enforced restraint,"[1] not a punitive imprisonment. If the latter sense were intended, Paul could easily have used the metaphor of a jailer (*desmophulax*, e.g. the Philippian jailer, Acts 16:23) or soldier (*stratiōtēs*, e.g. the sentry who was guarding Paul in Rome, Acts 28:16), because one of those titles would have fitted more naturally with the functions 'to shut up' or 'to keep in custody.' Instead, I infer that his choice of *paidagōgos* was intentional because it embodies a combination of the *tōrah*'s roles which Paul wanted to describe. On the one hand, by itself, the *tōrah* had served a God-assigned purpose. On the other, that God-assigned purpose had now been served. It is absurd that his once *tōrah*-observing Jewish converts (and their misled Gentile imitators) should wilfully regress from the mature freedom they now enjoyed in Christ to a life of self-imposed routines and restrictions which did not contribute anything to their spiritual growth and witness to society.

Third, Paul's choice of "*paidagōgos*" for his personification of the role of *tōrah* is significant. To be sure, a *paidagōgos* was not a teacher or tutor (as erroneously rendered in the main text of the NASB, or how we now mean it by the term 'pedagogy'). A *paidagōgos* (lit. "child-conductor," as correctly given in the NASB margin) was, in Hellenistic culture, a trusted household slave assigned with the high responsibility of supervising the daily routine and moral conduct of the master's young son. In middle- and upper-class South Asian families this role used to be,

1. Ronald Y. K. Fung, *NICNT Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 168, fn. 2

or perhaps still is in some cases, performed by an āyah or nanny.

As revealed Scripture, the *tōrah*'s role as Israel's *paidagōgos* was unique among God's dealings with the nations (Deut. 4:5-8).[2] As Paul states elsewhere, "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, *the giving of the law*, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs…" (Rom. 9:4, my emphasis). And yet, the difference between the fullness of their present understanding and belonging as "sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (v. 26) and their past spirituality regulated by the routines and restrictions of *tōrah*-observance is what sets a child's relationship with a servant-guardian different from a son's relationship with his father. After experiencing Christ and his kingdom, you could never see *tōrah* in the same way ever again.

For Buddhist-background believers the main takeaway here is an *a fortiori* lesson. If Christ made such an ontological and epistemological difference in the identity, belonging and practice of his Jewish followers, to whom their God-revealed *tōrah* ought now to appear as the servant-guardian from a past childhood now behind them, how much more then ought the Buddha *dhamma* and *sampradā*, which are not God-revealed scripture, appear so to them.

Again, I infer, that Paul does not use the same metaphor of the *paidagōgos* for his Pagan-background Gentile converts for a reason. For them, he has a different analogy because their salvation history was different. But there are some similarities too.

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2. Some Asian theologians have used this text to argue that the ancient scriptures of other religious traditions functioned as the precepters for those nations until they too received the gospel of Christ. They further assert that the Hindu *Vedas* and Buddhist *Thripitaka*, for example, may be considered valid scriptures on par with the canonical status of the Hebrew Scriptures in the salvation history of the ancient Israelites. As attractive as that option may seem to us who genuinely appreciate and admire the intellectual, devotional, ethical and literary sophistication of our ethnic ancestors, an attentive reading of Paul's argument does not validate such a proposition.

2.2. Gal. 3:29-4:3: metaphor of an heir and his guardians and managers

Paul continues his argument about the absurdity of trying to reverse one's status after transitioning from subservient minority to independent maturity. From 3:29 onwards, he appears to address the gentile Christians, who had no heritage of *torah*-observance as in the previous example, but were no less "Abraham's descendants" in the faith. He uses a new metaphor to suit the particular situation of the gentiles and their spiritual-ethical heritages.

> 3:29And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs (*klēronomoi*) according to promise. 4:1Now I say, as long as the heir (*klēronomos*) is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave (*doulou*) although he is owner of everything, 2but he is under guardians and managers (*hypo epitropous…kai oikonomous*) until the date set (*prothesmias*) by the father. 3So also we, while we were children (*nēpioi*), were held in bondage (*dedoulōmenoi*) under the elemental things of the world (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*)… 7Therefore you are no longer a slave (*doulos*), but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

Paul here derives an analogy from a legal arrangement pertaining to the testamentary appointment of trustees and guardians under whose care a minor heir would remain until he attained the predetermined age of majority when he would inherit all that his father had bequeathed him.[3] Prior to their conversion to Christ, gentile believers were comparable to an infant (*nēpios*) under the authority of *epitropoi* and *oikonomoi*. Both these titles designate duly appointed functionaries who exercised authority to manage and administer domestic or civic affairs. Even though he

3. The remarkable verbal and circumstantial similarities of Paul's analogy and an actual Roman papyrus testament from Hermopolis, Egypt dating to the mid-second century AD are discussed in John K. Goodrich, "'As long as the heir is a child': The Rhetoric of Inheritance in Galatians 4:1-2 and P.Ryl. 2.153," *Novum Testamentum 55* (2013): 61-76.

was the rightful heir, the child was a minor and remained in slave-like submission until he reached maturity. When he reached the predetermined age of majority, he would then receive the full rights and freedoms to enjoy and exercise independent authority over all that he had inherited. That much is clear enough.

The main difference between the two metaphors is that the *paidagōgos* had a part in leading the child *eis Christon*, translatable as "to", "towards" or "until" faith in Christ. This is strongly reminiscent of Paul's affirmation to Timothy that "from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). The *epitropoi* and *oikonomoi* are attributed no such Christ-ward role. They merely safeguard the child until maturity.

Another difference is that while life under the *tōrah* is given connotations of imprisonment, existence under "the elemental things of the world" is compared to slavery. The child under their guardianship does "not differ at all from a slave (*doulou*)" (4:1); under them the gentiles were "held in bondage (*dedoulōmenoi*)" (v. 3); and afterwards, "are no longer a slave (*doulos*)" (v. 7). The slavery language continues in vv. 8-9. Interestingly, again, Paul does not use personifications that could easily have matched the slavery analogy, such as "masters" (*kourioi*) or "task-masters" (*ergodiōktai*).[4] The administrative designations *epitropoi* and *oikonomoi* are positive. That indeed is the point. Although their role is positive in that they serve the heir's best interest, the existential status of the heir as a dependent minor is no different than that of a slave.

But who or what were "the elemental things of the world" (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*) portrayed as fulfilling the role

4. Scott's proposal that Paul alludes to Israel's pre-exodus enslavement under Egyptian masters has been convincingly refuted by Goodrick. James M. Scott, *Adoption as Sons of God: An Exegetical Investigation into the Background of ΥΙΟΘΕΣΙΑ in the Pauline Corpus* (WUNT 2/48; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1992); John K. Goodrich, "Guardians, not Taskmasters: The Cultural Resonances of Paul's Metaphor in Galatians 4.1-2," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 32 (2010): 251-284.

of "guardians and managers"?

What precisely Paul meant by "*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*" continues to be debated. Andrew Bandstra (1964), followed by Carl Kurapati (1967), sorted the divergent interpretations handed down from the early Church Fathers onwards into three main categories: principial, cosmological and personalized-cosmological.[5] The uncertainty about which referent best fits the context is reflected in our English Bible translations:

> a. *Principial*: the fundamental principles of any system of knowledge (cf. Heb. 5:12).
>
> E.g.: "the rudiments of the world" (NRSV margin), "the basic spiritual principles of this world" (NLT), "the elementary principles of the world" (ESV, Mounce), "simple instructions" (MSG), etc.
>
> b. *Cosmological*: the basic elements of the physical universe, (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10, 12); and by extension, component objects forming the functional cosmos.
>
> E.g.: "the elemental things of the world" (NASB), "the elements of the world" (KJV, NKJV, YLT), or "the basic forces of the world" (NET), etc.
>
> c. *Personalized-cosmological*: personalized spiritual beings or forces such as presiding angels, tutelary deities and astral spirits).
>
> E.g.: "the elemental spirits of the world" (NRSV text), "the elemental spiritual forces of the world" (NIV), "the ruling spirits of

5. A. J. Bandstra, *Law and the Elements of the World: an Exegetical Study in Aspects of Paul's Teaching* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1964); C. J. Kurapati, *Spiritual Bondage and Christian Freedom According to Paul* (dissertation; Princeton Thelogical Seminary, 1976); as cited in David R. Bundrick, "Ta Stoicheia tou Kosmou (Gal. 4:3)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, no. 3 (September 1991): 353-364.

> the universe" (GNT), "the powers of this world" (CEV) etc.

Imagine the confusion then among Sinhala Bible-readers when our two versions give two very different interpretations: "*lōkayē gurukam*"[6] (teachings of the world), and "*vishvayē devidēvathāvanta*"[7] (the gods and deities of the universe).

Recent writings on the topic tend to support the principial view, mostly on the basis of Paul's juxtaposition of the *stoicheia* with human philosophy and tradition in Col. 2:8: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*), rather than according to Christ."

However, many interpreters also take care not to exclude the cosmological and personalized views entirely. I would certainly agree that any variation of 'the basic teachings of the world' familiar to Paul's first century Pagan-background converts would invariably have included fundamental worldview concepts about the existence and functions of supernatural beings, and the appropriate observances due to them. The exclusive worship of Christ and the simplicity of the Lord's Day liturgy must have felt rather meagre, casual and lacking in comparison to the seemingly all-pervading calendrical symmetry and socio-political cohesion emanating from the cosmic and civic rituals of both Jewish and Pagan cults. To those still impressed and enamoured by such a worldview and lifestyle, imagine how topsy-turvy Paul's admonitions would sound:

[8]However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves (*edouleusate*) to those which by nature are no gods. [9]But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things (*stoicheia*), to which you desire to be enslaved (*douleuein*) all over again? [10]You

6. Sinhala Revised Old Version (1995).
7. The New Revised Sinhala Version (3rd edition 2006).

observe days and months and seasons and years. [11]I fear for you, that perhaps I have laboured over you in vain. (Gal. 4:8-11)

The challenge for the culturally-embedded interpreter is to help her Buddhist-background disciple community to understand Paul's radical re-framing of his Gentile Galatian converts' identity, belonging and practice, as a counter-narrative to the accusatory and exclusionary rhetoric of Sinhala-Buddhist ideology. To do so, it is necessary to identify whether Sri Lankan Buddhism (as a philosophical, ritualistic and ideological complex) is a kind of *stoicheia tou kosmou*. It is also necessary to locate an idiomatic narrative medium to make Paul's conversion metaphors to his original Galatian audience more recognizable to contemporary Buddhist-background believers in Sri Lanka.

3. Traditional religion as *stoicheia*

When considering whether Buddhism qualifies among the *stoicheia tou kosmou*, it is useful to survey the reception of this text among the church's earliest non-Jewish interpreters. Although they disagree on the precise aspect, there is overwhelming consensus among the early Church Fathers for placing some aspect of their ambient Pagan Greco-Roman life-world within its scope. Clement of Alexandria stated, "For Paul too, in the Epistles, plainly does not disparage philosophy; but deems it unworthy of the man who has attained to the elevation of the Gnostic [as he called the Christian], any more to go back to the Hellenic 'philosophy,' figuratively calling it 'the rudiments of this world,' as being most rudimentary, and a preparatory training for the truth."[8] Not only that, but Clement was quick to point out that Greek philosophers had long been pilfering their ideas mainly from Egyptians, Babylonians and "the philosophy of the Indians too."[9] Clement specifically noted, "Some, too, of the Indians obey the

8. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 6.8
9. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 6.4

precepts of Buddha; whom, on account of his extraordinary sanctity, they have raised to divine honours."[10]

The principial, cosmological and cosmological-personal epistemes of the *stoicheia* all have their corresponding manifestations in Buddhism. First, the *Abhidamma Pitaka,* which systematizes the *sūtta* (occasioned sermons and teachings) of the Buddha into meticulously enumerated scholastic taxonomies, is the epitome of *stoicheia* as principial formulation. In fact, one of its seven books is actually entitled '*Dhatukatha,*' Discourse on the Elements. Second, Buddhist cosmology maps a complex multiverse of states of being with their corresponding abodes, all caused by interdependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and regulated by the impersonal phenomena of *karma* and *samsāra*. Third, the Buddhist cosmos is inhabited by rank upon rank of sentient beings from *Buddhas*, *bōdhisattvās*, *brahmās*, *dēvas*, to *manushyas*, animals, spirits and demons. Although soteriologically atheistic, popular Buddhism is as polytheistic as Hinduism, counting thirty-three million deities. Most significantly, the founding narrative of the Sinhala people (chronicled in the Pali *Mahavamsa*) has the Buddha entrusting the progenitors of the Sinhala people to the deity Upulvan, later identified with Vishnu, charging him with the responsibility of protecting the pristine form of Buddhism in the *dhammadvīpa*. Virtually every Buddhist temple has shrines to multiple tutelary deities, believed to dispense favours in their respective domains of influence. In the last few decades, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists have elevated Rāvana, the anti-hero of the *Rāmāyana*, to the status of the national guardian deity. Astoundingly, Rāvana predates Buddhism, and embodies the desire for an autochthonous Sinhala identity free of any Indian influence, either Dravidian or Aryan.

In the world of everyday realities, Sinhala-Buddhism operates its stoicheic holds on many levels. It binds would-be seekers from the more educated strata of society with

10. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 1.14.

its much vaunted claim of being the intellectual and rational philosophy far superior to the 'blind faith' on which theistic Christian supernaturalism is based. Who in their right mind would ever give up the former for the latter, except for base motives? It also holds back seekers of more nativistic proclivities with the obligation to practice, preserve and pass down cultural heritages tied to occult, astrological or deity rituals. How terrible would be the karmic repercussions of abandoning such dutifully transmitted esoteric knowledges? Most powerful of all, as we highlighted at the beginning, is the role of Buddhism as a form of family and community cohesion. The irony that *apē-kama* (our-ness) is the collective assertion of *mamathvaya* (my-ness), the very impediment that the Buddha prescribed against in the pursuit of *nirvana*, is entirely lost on the Sinhala-Buddhist conscience. When inherited identities and social bonds become obstacles to self-exploration and self-discovery the *stoicheia* become imprisonment and slavery. In fact, it is the bestowal and recognition of true self-hood in Christ that must be interpreted now in an indigenous narrative idiom.

4. Traditional story motif as hermeneutic mirror

Jātaka stories (the morality tales of the Buddha's previous births) are a popular and powerful homiletic and iconographic canon in the Buddhist tradition. As Gunapala Dharmasiri rightly states, "It is the Jātaka book, rather than the other highly doctrinal texts, that has affected and shaped the lives of the Buddhist villagers for centuries."[11] One might add, and not the rural devotees only, but the urban ones as well.

A recurring motif in many of the stories involves a king who sends his young heir away to a renowned teacher for his education. The *Tila-mutti Jātaka* (no. 252) explains that "… kings of former times, though there might be a famous teacher living in their own city, often used to send

11. Gunapala Dharmasiri, *Fundamentals of Buddhist Ethics* (Antioch, CA: Golden Leaves, 1989), 88.

their sons to foreign countries afar off to complete there education, that by this means they might learn to quell their pride and high-mindedness, and endure heat or cold, and be made acquainted with the ways of the world." The young prince would pay the teacher the fee sent by the king for his food and lodging in the teacher's household and begin his training which would continue for several years until the young student had attained mastery of the princely arts and sciences. If the aspiring student was unable to pay a fee, he was required to work for the teacher. In the above story, the teacher states, "The resident pupils attend on their teacher by day and at night they learn of him but they who bring a fee are treated like the eldest sons in his house, and thus they learn."

In his chapter on the education of princes in ancient India, M. C. Joshi observes that "it was the duty of the student to treat his teacher and his wife as his own father and mother."[12] When a prince became a student under a teacher he became part of his family and the relationship was that of father and son.

When a poorer student came into the teacher's household, he performed the duties of a servant in return for his education. In the *Amba Jātaka* (no. 474), a student lists all the menial tasks he performed to win his teacher's favour: "brought wood, pounded the rice, did the cooking, brought all that was needed for washing the face, washed the feet [of the master]." The student was a domestic servant to the teacher for the duration of his education.

After the period of training was complete, the king would send for the young prince. He would bid farewell to the teacher who had been his father-figure during his residence in his household, and return to the palace of his real father, the king. Now, accomplished in the arts and sciences required for his royal status and responsibilities, the prince is entrusted with authority over his subjects, lands and revenues by the king.

In the *Ayoghara Jātaka* (nos. 510), a newborn prince

12. M. C. Joshi, *Princes and Polity in Ancient India* (Meerut: Kusumanjali Prakashan, 1986), 19.

is locked up in an iron house where "the king gave him in charge to nurses, and placed a great guard about the place." When the boy reaches sixteen years of age, the king calls for him to be brought out, dressed in royal finery and paraded around the city on a caparisoned elephant. Prince Ayoghara wonders, "All this while my father has kept me close in prison, never let me see this city so richly adorned. What fault can there be in me?" Then the courtiers reveal, that a she-goblin had devoured both the princes born before him, "therefore your father made you live in an iron house [which has] saved your life… ."

These stories illustrate well the point about transition of identity. The young prince is placed in the household of the teacher for a predetermined period of training. During that time, he relates to the teacher as his father. Once the period is over, the student returns home. In the Vedic culture, in which the Jātaka stories are set, the student who has completed his studies goes through a *snāna* (ritual bath) and a 'graduation' ceremony called *samāvartana*, which literally means "the returning home of the student."[13] When the prince returns to the palace, he is received by his true father, the king. There is no confusion about who is teacher and who is father. Once he has been bestowed his royal status, he does not return to the teacher's household, submitting himself again to the teacher, and relating to the teacher as his father. He is grateful to his teacher, but his relationship and duties are focussed upon his true father, the king.

This narrative motif serves as a 'hermeneutical mirror' making Paul's metaphors of 'managers' and 'guardians' more culturally recognizable.[14] Buddhist-

13. Radha Kumud Mookerji, *Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhist* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), 209-210.

14. I am grateful to Dr. John Arun Kumar for pointing out what is plainly the main limitation of this comparison. In the Pauline analogy, the child growing up under *epitropoi* and *oikonomoi* would never have known his/her father who is presumably deceased. In contrast, the prince in the Jātaka stories would already know his father before being sent away for further education under the teacher. Clearly, there is no perfect match between all the points of comparison. The reason why the Jātaka motif is useful is, firstly, because in it the young student is obligated to relate

background believers will immediately grasp the lesson. When they came to faith in Christ, they did not abandon their 'father and mother,' they discovered their *true* Father and mother.

This does not mean that Buddhist-background believers ought to spurn their Buddhist heritage or repudiate those who nurtured them in it during their spiritual 'minority,' but that a categorical distinction must be made between the best efforts of human understanding and God's incomparable grace. As the writer of Hebrews teaches, "Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live?" (Heb. 12:9-10). Paul himself drew a similar categorical distinction when he entreated, "For if you were to have countless tutors [*paidagōgous*] in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel" (1 Cor. 4:5). It is not that Paul wanted his Corinthian converts to disregard their "tutors," but that he wanted them to be more mindful of their duty to him as their spiritual father.

5. God as 'father' and church as 'mother'

In Christ, we discover God as our true Father. As Paul goes on to affirm, "Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God" (Gal. 4:6-7). Elsewhere, Paul makes the same point in terms of moving from life 'in the flesh' (sinful desires) to life 'in the Spirit': "For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself testifies with our

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to the teacher with filial devotion *as though he were his father*, even though he is not; and, secondly, because when the prince returns to the palace, that filial devotion is rightly transferred to the king without equivocation, while gratitude to the teacher is still maintained. Indeed, the prince would presumably be grateful to the king for having afforded him the privilege of an ennobling tutelage under the teacher.

spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ… " (Rom. 8:15-17).

In Christ, the community of believers, the church, is our true mother. As Jesus himself declared, "My mother and my brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21). Espousal of the fatherhood of God with the motherhood of the church has a venerable history.[15] Among the Church Fathers, Cyprian of Carthage (c. AD 200-260) famously declared, "He cannot have God as a father who does not have the Church as a mother;"[16] because "from her womb we are born, by her milk we are nourished, by her spirit we are animated."[17] Augustine (AD 354-430), too, exhorted, "Let us love our Lord God, let us love His Church: Him as Father, Her as Mother."[18] The Magisterial Reformers fully affirmed the church as *mater fidelium*, mother of believers. Luther (1483-1546) catechized that the Church is "a unique community in the world. It is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God."[19] And Calvin (1509-1564) affirmed that "the church, into whose bosom God is pleased to gather His sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and reach the goal of faith […] so that for those to whom [God] is Father the church may also be Mother."[20]

6. Conclusion

Buddhist-background Christians may answer their accusers with gentle confidence, that their conversion to Christ was not a betrayal of 'father and mother,' but the

15. See Alexander J. D. Irving, 'The Motherhood of the Church in Henri de Lubac and John Calvin,' *International Journal for the Study of the Church* 18 no.2 (2018): 1-19.

16. Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church*, 6.

17. Cyprian, *On the Unity*, 5.

18. Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms*, 89.41

19. Martin Luther, 'The Large Catechism' in *The Book of Concord*, 416.

20. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.1.1.

discovery and embrace of true Father (God) and mother (his church). They can make sense of this transition of identity and belonging biblically and theologically. The Jātaka story motif of the transition from student (under the guardian-teacher) to prince (in relation to the king-father) offer a homiletic device, a hermeneutical mirror, which makes Paul's analogies of 'managers' and 'guardians' in Gal. 4, more recognizable to Buddhist-background believers.

However, nothing of this removes the 'offence' of the gospel in placing sacrificial loyalty to Christ above all family ties as the decisive mark of genuine discipleship. The call of Jesus remains as hard a challenge as ever to our filial loyalties: "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Mat. 10:37a).

SOCIAL SERVICE OR SOCIAL JUSTICE? THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS IN SRI LANKA

MANO EMMANUEL

Abstract: *This article explores the biblical basis and motivation for engagement in social justice, defined as socio political involvement, including non violent protest. Looking at the themes of God's character, the cross, and the kingdom of God, it argues that love for God and neighbour and total allegiance to Christ in times of national crisis must be demonstrated, in various ways that include social justice,, not just social service, defined as acts of mercy such as the provision of dry rations or cooked meals to those worst affected . The context of the article is the economic and political crises in Sri Lanka in 2022.*

Key words: *Justice, kingdom of God, Sri Lankan church, social service, social justice.*

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka began experiencing an economic and political crisis that became acute between March – August 2022 that has left the nation reeling. Long queues for petrol and cooking gas were matched by long queues outside the passport office as Sri Lankans sought relief in employment and study overseas. Inflation continues to rise steeply, and by some accounts, more than half the population cannot afford three meals a day. Perceived corruption and mismanagement in the government sparked anger amongst a society usually marked by what some call "resilience" but is more likely a passive resignation to circumstances that most Sri Lankans feel powerless to change. In an unprecedented peoples' movement, silent vigils turned to strident protests, and eventually led to a long and defiant campout dedicated to encouraging and demonstrating an

unusually united front, demanding action to reverse the political and economic crisis. This spontaneous non-violent movement, drawing people from all ages, ethnicities and backgrounds captured the imagination of the nation and other parts of the world.

Since the beginning of this crisis Sri Lankan Evangelical Christians have been divided over what the appropriate response of the church. There has been a widespread consensus that social service to suffering neighbours in the form of practical care is unambiguously a Christian duty. John Stott defines social service as "works of mercy" which seek to relieve the material needs of individuals and families.[1] From distributing bottled water and snacks to people standing in queues, to providing dry rations to families, opening community kitchens, and supplementing the income of the poorest, churches rose to the challenge with generosity and compassion.[2] These actions are seen as acts of charity and mercy, the obvious duty of Christians. Where the Evangelical church is divided is on whether it should be involved in "social justice" or "socio-political activity" such as public demonstrations of protest against injustice and mismanagement.[3] Social justice in this article, refers to action taken to address societal evils – for example protesting, writing to the media, defending those arrested for taking part in protests and so on. Some parts of the church have been visible in the public square as Christian clergy stood with leaders of other religions at protest sites, nuns formed human shields to protect protestors from the military, and denominational heads issued public statements denouncing violence against

1. John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1990), 11.

2. https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2022/7/31/photos-soup-kitchens-in-crisis-hit-sri-lanka-feeding-the-poor; https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/2022/articles/kirks-partners-ask-for-prayers-for-political-and-economic-crisis-in-sri-lanka

3. While "politics" can be narrowly defined as "the science of government," in this article, we use the broader definition which is politics as the responsibility of the citizen in the art of community life. See Stott, *Issues*, 11.

protesters and calling for relief for suffering citizens. Many Christians used social media to raise awareness and call for change. Many stood alongside and marched with their fellow citizens, some camped out for days. But others invoked Romans 13:1-*5* and insisted that Christians must submit to the government as God's chosen servant under all circumstances except when it clearly entails disobedience to God. Some appealed to the New Testament emphasis on preaching, prayer and compassion and argued that Jesus and Paul were "not political", did not address social ills, such as slavery, and certainly did not publicly demonstrate. Others point to Jesus' apparent other-worldly notion of his kingdom described as "not of this world" (Jn 18:36 NIV, ESV, KJV). Such Christians restricted their involvement to prayer and relief work. This ambivalence to participation in public protest has led some Christians to ask, 'What *is* the church's calling and mission?' In this paper, we reflect on the biblical theological basis for social justice, that is, active involvement in socio-political action to promote justice in contexts like Sri Lanka. This will be done by re-visiting the texts cited above setting them in the context of God's mission to the world, the calling of the church, the nature of the Kingdom of God and the continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments.

2. Reading the Bible as a church in a suffering nation

Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians in Sri Lanka who feel powerless because of their minority status have tended to read the Bible in ways that distance themselves from direct participation in public political activism. When Christians are confronted with serious and prolonged crises of injustice and corruption which leads to the suffering of thousands of their fellow citizens, they are forced to make ethical choices that their readings of the Bible have not prepared them for. We will address some of those questions here.

2.1. God's character: Does God care about earthly justice?

No one can dispute that the God of the Bible is a God of justice (Dt 32:4). He loves justice and hates injustice (Is 61:8, Ps 37:28, 145:17). He actively "does" justice (Ps 89:14, 103:6, 140:12, Dt 10:18-19) and commands his people to do justice (Dt 16:20, Ps 82:13, Is 1:17, Mic 6:8). He thunders his disapproval when his people diligently keep their religious rituals but disregard justice (Am 5:21-24). When justice is described in the OT, it is often associated with a particularly vulnerable group in society – the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the poor.[4] Also, justice has two aspects to it. There is protection and provision for the vulnerable and then there is active opposition to the wicked. Biblical justice is covenant justice, flowing from a right relationship with God and obedience to the *torah*.[5] Therefore, justice is relational, not just an abstract set of principles. As Chris Marshall puts it, "Justice is the way God intended the world to work, depending on and displaying his own character."[6] Therefore, "human beings have a part to play in that. Justice means doing all that is necessary to create and sustain healthy, constant, and life-giving relationships between persons."[7]

An objection could be raised that these injunctions were meant to be practiced within the covenant people of Israel, not in the world at large. Therefore, the proper application of biblical justice ought to be within the Christian community, rather than to work towards (or expect) such values in the unbelieving world. After all, Jesus did not encourage campaigns of social emancipation and political liberation against Roman oppression. Why then should the church encourage or participate in acts that are construed as political? Is the church called to ensure

4. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Contours of Justice: An Ancient Call to Shalom," in *God and The Victim*, ed. Lisa Barnes Lampman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 111.

5. Chris Marshall, *The Little Book of Biblical Justice* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), 15.

6. Marshall, *Little Book,* 23.

7. Marshall, *Little Book,* 36.

that structures of justice exist for everyone, or should it be confined to the pursuit of justice for the Christian community's freedom to evangelize and worship freely?

The Old Testament shows that God is not just concerned that there is justice within Israel. Abraham, faced with God's planned judgment on Sodom is confident that God will judge rightly when he acts against that nation (Ge 18:26). The psalmist rejoices that God "works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed" (Ps 103:6). The oracles against the nations in Amos chapters. 1-2 show that God is concerned with the way people treat each other whether or not they belong to the covenant people. Christopher Wright reminds us that whatever the New Testament adds to our understanding of the mission of God's people, it cannot cancel out what was prescribed in the Old Testament.[8] For example, Micah 6: 8 declares what God considers good and it is not just for Israel, but for all human beings:

"He has He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

As Wright argues, "... there is no hint at all that the ubiquitous message of the Old Testament about social and economic justice, about personal and political integrity, about practical compassion for the needy are in any sense provisional or dispensable."[9] In fact Jesus warns the Pharisees that keeping the law in minute detail did not excuse them from the "weightier matters" of justice, mercy and faithfulness (Mt 3:23-24).[10]

2.2. The church's character: Doesn't Romans 13 command Christians to submit to their government always?

When Paul teaches Christians that governments are instituted by God, he also explains the purpose for which

8. Christopher J H Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's grand narrative,* (IVP: Nottingham, UK, 2006), 304.
9. Wright, *Mission,* 305.
10. Wright, *Mission,* 306.

God intended them to use that authority: "But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:4). Surely, this too indicates that God's intention is that all people are enabled to live in an environment of justice and peace suitable for human flourishing. God's justice, God's concern for the vulnerable, arises out of his love for every one of his human creatures.[11] God's justice is then an aspect of his love, for how can he not be moved (both to anger and compassion) when those he loves are exploited or ill-treated?

Just as all love has its source in the God who is love, all justice is rooted in the fact that God is just. And just as God defines love, he also defines justice. And if we are called to imitate God in his qualities, we must imitate him in his justice and imitate him in being motivated by love, both love for God and for our neighbour. In a stratified, divided country, the church engages in social justice to demonstrate the great value of all human beings, created as they are in God's image. While the church in Sri Lanka is already known for its love demonstrated in social service, it is now being challenged to show that love in more costly and risky social justice .

What if the state stops acting as God's servant to punish evildoers and commend the good? Esau Macauley in his book *Reading while Black* points out that although Paul does not instruct Christians to engage in non violent resistance in Rom 13, he shows us in his epistle that God's people can and will be agents of change and even instruments of God's judgment on evil governments. Paul refers to God's sovereignty in judgment in Rom 9:17 by using Pharaoh as an example. In his sovereign judgment of an oppressive ruler, God used a human agent – Moses. Macauley says

> I maintain, then, that we read Romans 13:1-2 as a statement about the sovereignty of God and the limits of human discernment. We are allowed to

11. Walterstorff, "Contours," 113.

> discern and even condemn evil like the prophets did. We are allowed to resist like the Hebrew midwives, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Nonetheless, we cannot claim divine sanction for the proper timing and method of solving the problems we discern. Again, this does not place limits on our ability as Christians to call evil by its name, but it does obligate us to be willing to suffer the consequences of living in a fallen world.[12]

To what extent is it wise for a national church, which is a minority community facing its own sporadic persecution, to risk being seen as a source of dissent and protest against the government? In the first four centuries AD, the church in the Roman Empire was a small community facing sporadic persecution and lacking any political influence. Their response to injustice, violence, and oppression towards them was "submission, supplication and sacrifice."[13] Through this behavior, the church's mission was more likely to proceed unhindered and the gospel find fertile ground. Meanwhile, the church did social work by visiting prisoners, rescuing abandoned babies, and caring for the poor. They first ministering to needy believers but then moved out to help outsiders. In times of plague, they cared for the sick and dying, unconcerned for their own health and safety.[14]

> The churches grew in many places, taking varied forms. They proliferated because the faith that these fishers and hunters embodied was attractive to people who were dissatisfied with their old cultural and religious habits, who felt pushed to explore new possibilities, and who then encountered Christians

12. Esau Macauley, *Reading While Black,* (Wheaton, Illinois, IVP Academic, 2020), 34.

13. Scott A. Wenig, "The Lessons of History of Faith and Politics," in *Christians and Political Engagement*, eds. Dieumeme E. Noelliste and M. Daniel Carrol (Denver, CO: Denver Seminary's Vernon Grounds Institute of Public Ethics, 2009), 14.

14. Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 128. See pp. 133-134 for a list of distinctive habits of the early church.

> who embodied a new manner of life that pulled them toward what the Christians called "rebirth" into a new life. Surprisingly, this happened in a patient manner.[15]

Alan Kreider calls this process "the patient ferment." The church grew because it attracted people by its distinctive lifestyle. "We do not speak of great things, we live them," said Cyprian.[16] Justin Martyr spoke of the virtue of patience, and though we do not have details, Christians in the ordinary course of public life displayed a "strange patience" that intrigued their contemporaries and prompted conversions.[17] Patience was generally a virtue expected only of the powerless such as the slaves and women, for whom it was less of a virtue than a necessity.[18] But church leaders such as Justin, Cyprian and Tertullian urged that Christians live with patience, and in their consistent behaviour wear out the hostility of their opponents.[19]

The early church was a counter-cultural community. It was politically powerless, but it was "in some very real sense, a political reality" in that it was a visible and public community participating in the common life, and whose public actions had an impact on society as well as clearly pointing people to God.[20] The early church shaped the larger community by simply being the church. Ron Sider lists certain values that characterized the early church: choosing to deal with conflict through dialogue rather than force, economic sharing, being an inclusive community that cut across social boundaries, giving every member a voice, and choosing forgiveness over retaliation.[21] Although the church was counter-cultural, it

15. Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 23.
16. Kreider, *Patient Ferment,* 26.
17. Kreider, *Patient Ferment,* 29.
18. Kreider, *Patient Ferment,* 59-60.
19. Kreider, *Patient Ferment,* 34.
20. Ronald J. Sider, "The Anabaptist Perspective" in *Church, State and Public Justice: Five Views*, ed. P.C. Kemeny (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 171.
21. Sider, "Anabaptist", 175.

was not anti- cultural. The church in its weakness was still a leaven that worked through society causing "profound changes in the social order"[22] The church drew grudging admiration and curiosity not just in their living but also in their dying. When they faced a horrific death for the entertainment of the masses, even then their behaviour was shockingly counter-cultural. They displayed courage instead of cringing; peace instead of fear; praise of God not curses against men. The slave and mistress stood together supporting one another, the shared kiss of peace between those of different social stations about to die together could not be ignored. They were proof of a transformed community, transformed in their inner life as well as their external relationships.

God calls for the faithful presence of his people throughout history.[23] This is what Jeremiah advises when Judah was in exile in pagan Babylon (Jer 29:17). God's people were to "seek the *shalom* of the city." This meant settling down, raising families, and recognizing that their welfare was tied into the welfare of the city. This patient consistency was expected of them not because they would, by this righteousness, save that city in any sense of the word. Babylon would ultimately be destroyed (51:60-64).[24] But patient, consistent witness to the true God remained the calling of the remnant. It remains the calling of God's people in every age.

In the book of Revelation, the state is revealed as a blasphemous beast in service to the dragon, setting itself up as a god (Rev 13). With vivid apocalyptic imagery the book describes the trials and tribulations of God's faithful people in a world in opposition to God. Although the book depicts warfare and judgment, it is noticeable that this warfare is carried out by God, not his people. The church would overcome through its patient endurance

22. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B Eerdmans publishing Co., 1983), 3.

23. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2011), 219.

24. DeYoung and Gilbert, *What*, 201, *219*

and faithful witness. Luke Wilson points out that the term translated "patient endurance" occurs numerous times in the letter (Rev 1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12).[25] When the state attempts to usurp God's place, it is a call for wisdom to discern when to refuse to comply. Then the church must be willing to witness through obedience to God, however costly (Acts 4:18-20). The word "witness" which originally meant someone who gave evidence would become synonymous with martyrdom as Christians witnessed to their faith to the point of death. Wenig calls this readiness to die an attitude of "defiant sacrifice."[26]

The witness of the church in the Roman Empire was effective in its impact on society, in terms of making the gospel attractive and compelling, and sometimes gaining sympathy from powerful officials. But its emphasis was on protecting the distinctiveness of the church, rather than on transforming pagan society, on demonstrating that its allegiance was given to Jesus as Lord, not Caesar. Transformation it did bring, but in individual lives through the power of the gospel so that by the 4th century, around 10% of the population (at a conservative estimate) was Christian.[27]

2.3. A Christian's character: As a minority community, what possible difference can Christians make?

Since Christians are a minority community in Sri Lanka with little political power to make structural changes, can the Sri Lankan church interpret the OT command to "do justice" (Mic 6:8) as acts of personal holiness and righteousness? Could 'doing justice' be lived out as the early church in counter cultural ways: praying for our leaders, and paying the price for refusing to conform to the corruption so prevalent in society? This would include paying fair wages and being considerate of employees even

25. Luke Wilson, "Church State Relations: Lessons from China", *Themelios* 47:2, 2002, 366-381, 369.

26. Wenig, "The Lessons," 15.

27. Wenig, "The Lessons," 17.

in times of financial stress, integrity in business dealings, refusing to take or give a bribe, being generous to the needy, not taking advantage of the vulnerable, returning good for evil, displaying integrity and humility in church leadership and making sure no one in the church is in need. We must ask if the church in Sri Lanka can claim to be that distinctive community, attracting outsiders by their courageous, joyful service to one another and the needy. Certainly, the church is recognized as being generous. Unfortunately, however, Christians too have succumbed to the temptations of paying a little extra to the Petrol Station employee to get a full tank of petrol instead of the allocated quota, to syphon out the petrol they got and enter the queue again, or to buy fuel on the black market. They are sometimes as divided on ethnic and class lines as the culture around them. They are as prone to try to leave the country through less than ethical ways. The content of personal purity seems to get smaller and smaller as pressure to conform gets stronger. Perhaps these actions do not seem like acts of injustice, because it is easy to overlook those who are adversely affected by these acts of petty corruption. These seemingly harmless acts deprive our neighbours of what is due to them. It is easy to succumb to desperation (literally, without hope) which places the impulse to survive over the impulse to act justly.

But in the context of a democratic society, does personal holiness or "righteousness" sufficiently fulfil the call to 'do justice'? To answer that, we must understand what "righteousness" means in the Bible. The words for "justice" occur over 1,000 times in the Bible.[28] The words primarily used for justice in Hebrew are *mishpat* and *sedeqah,* and in Greek *diskaiosune and krisis*. One of the reasons why we do not see the word "justice" appearing so frequently in our English Bible translations is because this set of words are translated into other words. *Sedeqah* is usually translated "righteousness,"[29] and although this is a fair translation, it obscures the Hebrew meaning because we usually

28. Marshall, *Little Book,* 11.
29. Marshall, *Little Book,* 10-12.

associate "righteousness" as personal purity and piety. But if we recognize the root word from which it is translated, we see that righteousness is "doing, being, declaring or bringing about what is right."[30] As Von Rad explains, "Every relationship brings with it certain claims upon conduct and the satisfaction of those claims which issue from the relationship and in which alone the relationship can persist" is *sedeqah.*[31] God's righteousness is displayed in his maintaining his commitment to the covenant relationship he has with his people.

Mishpat means to judge, but not in the modern sense of passing a sentence. Rather, it incorporates the idea of ensuring that what is due to a person is given to them.[32] Justice and righteousness are frequently used synonymously in the Bible:

> But let *justice* roll on like a river,
> *righteousness* like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:24)
>
> *Righteousness* and *justice* are the foundation of your throne;
> love and faithfulness go before you (Ps 89:14)
>
> Endow the king with your *justice*,
> O God, the royal son with your *righteousness*.
> May he judge your people in *righteousness*,
> your afflicted ones with *justice*. (Ps 72:1-2)

So, righteousness in the Bible incorporates the idea of doing justice. And doing justice in the Bible conveys the idea of putting right what has gone wrong or restoring things to a condition of "rightness" or "righteousness."[33] Justice is to do with rights, in the sense of what someone may legitimately claim. Justice is allowing someone access to what is legitimately theirs, either legally, socially, or

30. Marshall, *Little Book,* 11.

31. Cited in Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 154.

32. Birch, *Let Justice,* 155.

33. Marshall, *Little Book* 12.

morally.[34]

While we may feel uncomfortable with the language of rights, Wolterstorff points out that rather than beginning with the concept of modern human rights, we consider that in the course of everyday life, we recognize the legitimacy of certain claims. For example, a student who hands in a paper that is in accordance with the given instructions has a "right" or legitimate claim on a good grade. To withhold that grade and expect the student to plead for it as an act of charity would be unacceptable. Justice is giving the student what is legitimately their right. To deny the existence of such rights would be ultimately to deny the obligation we have to one another in community.[35] So the call to righteousness must not be misunderstood to mean an inward-looking piety, but a sense of obligation to society. Justice and righteousness call us to discover what is owed to those around us and contribute towards making sure that is made available to them.

3. The kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world

Jesus came preaching that the Kingdom of God had been inaugurated in his ministry (Mk 1:15,Mt 12:28). His miracles were a demonstration of its inbreaking. But did he not say that his kingdom was "not of this world" (Jn 18:36)? If so, is political engagement consistent with being citizens of God's kingdom? DeYoung and Gilbert warn against an improper use of the vocabulary of "the kingdom." They emphasize that the mission of the church is its proclamation of the King, rather than any attempt to "build" the kingdom in our society.[36] They point out that the NT consistently teaches that the kingdom is something that we may proclaim, receive, inherit or enter, but not build, expand or establish. Since the kingdom cannot be separated from the King, no amount of political engagement or "redeeming of structures" can enlarge the

34. Wolterstorff, "Contours," 114.
35. Wolterstorff, "Contours," 115.
36. DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is*, 208.

kingdom.[37] Their caution is useful to keep the Church from being triumphalistic and to keep individual Christians from attempting to be the lone savior of the nation. However, let us consider the nature of Jesus' kingdom. Jesus' words were that his kingdom was *οὐκ ἐκ τούτου κόσμου,* which translated literally is "not from this world." Jesus' kingdom comes from elsewhere, just as Jesus is from elsewhere (Jn 8:23). But as New Testament scholar N T Wright declares, the kingdom is "for the world."[38] Andrew Kirk points out that "world" in John's Gospel usually has a particular significance. The "world" is a place where values are different from those that underlie God's kingdom. For example, power is used to coerce (Jn 19:10-11), and it reinforces ethnocentricity (Jn 8:33). Jesus addressing Pilate, the representative of that worldly kingdom is thus not saying his kingdom is separate from this world but that it is built on a different foundation, a different view of freedom, power, and identity.[39]

The call for personal conversion is one of the hallmarks of Evangelicalism. Unfortunately, this has had an individualizing impact even in our collectivistic community. Our " personal relationship with Jesus" can easily become a private spiritual experience whose quality is measured by time spent in church activities, Bible studies, and prayer, thus establishing a solid division between our spiritual and secular lives. Jesus' claim that his kingdom "is not of this world" is then interpreted to mean that the Christians prime concern is heavenly. As citizens of God's kingdom, we may wish we could keep ourselves separate from the "world." But in a democracy, every citizen is connected to the actions of the State whether they like it or not. Not only through our voting, but through the fact that our taxes support government expenditure. There is "no privileged zone of innocence" into which we can

37. DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is,* 134.

38. Tom Wright, *God in Public: How the Bible speaks truth to power today* (London: SPCK, 2016), 51. ,

39. Andrew Kirk, *A New World Coming* (Basingstoke, UK: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1983), 53.

retreat.[40] For those who urge the church to engage in "spiritual activities", the New Testament offers an integrated spirituality that recognizes that the power of the risen King is "unleashed in works of justice and mercy and healing and beauty and hope already in the world."[41] This is what the whole Old Testament looked forward to, a "world affirming, world reclaiming"[42] kingdom, where God's original intention for human flourishing would be fulfilled in part, in anticipation of the New Heavens and New Earth. Richard Mouw recounts an experience of hearing a believer bemoan the fact that discussing social issues detracted from "the things of the Lord."Mouw asks, what are the Lord's "things?"

> Doesn't Jesus agonize over attacks on the dignity of those persons for whom he spilt his blood? Doesn't he grieve over men and women who have been imprisoned because they witnessed for justice and righteousness? Isn't the Son of God angered by the oppression of widows and orphans and by the schemes of those who plot the destruction of all that the creator has called "good"? If so, then many "social issues" are the "things of the Lord."[43]

So, while we do not build the kingdom, we can "work for the kingdom" (e.g. Col 4:11) or "bring God's kingdom to bear" (e.g. Rom 12:17-21, Mt 5:21-48) on society.[44] We are God's co-workers in his mission (e.g. 2 Cor 6:1). Our work on earth will be used to achieve his purposes (e.g. Gen 1:28, Mt 25:31-46). And these purposes include doing justice so that God's will is done on earth as in heaven (Mt 6:10).

It may appear that Jesus' command to "render to Caesar what is Caesar's" (Mt 22:15-22) confirms the idea that all "worldly" activities are under the remit of Caesar

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40. J. Philip Wogaman, "The Social Justice Perspective" in P C Kennedy (ed.), *Church, State and Public Justice* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2007),215.

41. Wright, *God,* 9.

42. Wright, *God,* 52.

43. Richard J Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 123.

44. Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 143.

while "worship," in the narrow sense, is all that must be rendered to God. But if that was all, his listeners would not have marveled at Jesus' reply. Jesus refuses to subscribe to either of the two main responses to Caesar–the violence of the zealot revolutionaries and the pragmatic acquiescence of the Herodian collaborators. Instead, Jesus expected his disciples to grapple with and decide on what might be owed to Caesar that is consistent with total allegiance to God. Caesar's image might adorn his coins, and they can be given back to him; but the claim inscribed on his coin that designated Caesar as 'Son of God' must be rejected. On the other hand, every human bears God's image. Therefore, to render to God what is his means that we are accountable to him for how we treat those who bear his image. Jesus was not political in the narrow sense of political governance, but he challenged the authority of the Jewish leaders who were also political leaders.[45] He was crucified for sedition and rebellion, not as a religious teacher (Jn 19:19).

Biblically, the dichotomy between sacred and secular does not exist.[46] It does not fit a Jewish or Christian worldview in which God alone is sovereign over all of life as creator and sustainer and Lord of the universe, not just the church. To a Jew, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and render to God what is his" would mean in everything God is to be served. Therefore, what is rendered to Caesar is only what is compatible with the worship of God.

God is sovereign over all the world and is concerned with all of it. All of creation is cared for by him, including the animals, the fields of grass and the "unrighteous" (Ps 104; Mt 5;45). His method of judging and providing is usually through human agents, either knowingly or unknowingly. The state is his servant as is the church, but only the church recognizes this role and gladly embraces it. The church is the salt of the earth and the light of the world

45. The temple Jesus cleansed was not just a religious center but also the center of civil authority and economic activity. The Sanhedrin was central to domestic government and reported to the Roman Governor. See Marshall, *Little Book*, 52.

46. Marshall, *Little Book,* 52.

(Mt 5:13-16). This connotes distinctiveness but also impact. Salt penetrates and preserves from decay; light discloses as well as contrasts with the darkness. And while we recognize that outward change is not conversion, yet the Church rejoices at what is beneficial to our community. John Wesley writes this about good manners in 18th century Britain:

> But it is likewise true, that the Magistrate is "the minister of God;" and that he is designed of God to be "a terror to evil-doers," by executing human laws upon them. If this does not change the heart; yet, to prevent outward sin is one valuable point gained. There is so much the less dishonour done to God; less scandal brought on our holy religion; less curse and reproach upon our nation; less temptation laid in the way of others; yea, and less wrath heaped up by the sinners themselves against the day of wrath.[47]

Admittedly, Wesley was speaking of a "Christian" nation, rather than a nation such as Sri Lanka. But he was implying that the improvement of the environment was beneficial to all people, even before they converted, and that this mattered to the church.

The Kingdom of God has certain characteristics, such as are outlined in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7). When Jesus teaches about kingdom behaviour he talks about actions towards the community, not only one's inner purity. The kingdom is characterized by justice. Jesus describes the citizen of the kingdom as follows: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt 5:6). He follows that with "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake (Mt 5:10). The word translated "righteousness is *dikaiosynē,* which we saw is the Greek word for justice.

Paul reminds his readers that "the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness (*dikaiosynē*), peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17).

47. John Wesley sermon "Before the Society for Reformation of Manners," *Works Vol. I* . Available online http://www.wordsofwesley.com/libtext.cfm?srm=52

The kingdom will one day be all in all when "the kingdoms of this world [become] the kingdoms of the Lord" (Rev 11:15). Until that day, justice and peace will be transient, and incomplete. We pray for the kingdom to come and God's "will to be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:7). So, should we not work in line with that prayer, as we do with other prayers?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was converted by reading the Sermon on the Mount. He interpreted it as a call to oppose Hitler and his anti-Jewish policies. At a time when most churches supported Hitler, Bonhoeffer was quick to speak out to warn the church that Hitler was claiming an allegiance that was due only to Christ.[48] While the Confessing Churches went some way to speak out, they tended to concentrate on protecting themselves, whereas Bonhoeffer actively opposed the regime by smuggling out Jews into Switzerland to prevent their arrest and detention.[49]

The motif of kingdom clarifies our involvement in social justice . Kirk goes as far as to say:

> The theme of the kingdom brings together a number of crucial concerns: the possibility of a personal relationship to Jesus with man's responsibility to manage wisely the whole of nature; the expectation that real change is possible here and now, a realistic assessment of the strength of opposition to God's intervention, the creation of new human relationships and the eventual liberation by God of the whole of nature from corruption.[50]

We move next to consider our view of the opposition to the kingdom and how the cross impacts our view of political engagement.

48. Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 126.
49. Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 127.
50. Kirk, *A New World*, 26.

4. The cross as victory over evil in all its forms

The NT offers us different imagery to depict what was accomplished on the cross. The most familiar metaphors are sacrifice, justification, redemption and reconciliation. They function to show us different facets of the same event. But another facet of the cross might be overlooked in our atonement theories–that of victory over Satan and his powers. On the cross Jesus defeated the principalities and powers (Col 2:15). The ministry given to his disciples was nothing less than that of "setting up God's rule where previously there had been Satan's rule."[51] The disciples recognized that there was both spiritual and human opposition to God's kingdom. When we see injustice and corruption, there is a mixture of human and satanic powers at work and the church has the authority and calling to stand against those powers. As Gregory Boyd explains,

> [...S]ince Christ has in principle defeated the fallen "gods" (principalities and powers) who have for ages inspired injustice, cruelty and apathy toward the weak, the poor, the oppressed and the needy (Ps 82), the church can hardly carry out its role in manifesting, on earth and in heaven, Christ's victory over these gods without taking up as a central part of its mission just these causes. We can, in truth, no more bifurcate social concerns and individual salvation than we can bifurcate the cosmic and anthropocentric dimensions of Christ's work on the cross.[52]

Boyd describes this as a "warfare worldview."[53] While Biblical writers never denied the reality and depth of human sinfulness, they also took seriously the reality of evil powers in the spiritual realm. Boyd argues that to lose sight of the reality of the battle against evil unleased by Satan's

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51. Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War* (Secunderabad, India: OM Books, 2007), 191. See also Tom Wright, *How God Became King* (London: SPCK, 2012), 206-209.

52. Boyd, *God at War,* 254

53. Boyd, *God at War,* 13.

forces is to turn our attention from active engagement in the world to intellectual argumentation that ultimately leads to resignation.

> Whereas the New Testament exhibits a church that is not intellectually baffled by evil but is spiritually empowered in vanquishing it, the Western tradition has more frequently exhibited a church that is perpetually baffled by evil but significantly ineffective in and largely apathetic about combating it. [54]

The Sri Lankan church by and large recognizes the spiritual forces of evil. Some recognize this but primarily see it in terms of individual demon possession and personal spiritual warfare; some see it in aspects of culture but not often in terms of structural evil causing injustice and oppression.

So social justice and political involvement are part of our witness to the fact that the church recognizes the dark spiritual forces behind evil and declares that the victor is Jesus. It believes that the strong man has been bound and his power is limited (Mt 12:29). Jesus had compassion on those who were victims of Satan's schemes, and was outraged (Jn 11:33, 38) at the consequences of sin in the world. Boyd states that "if we were to follow the example of our Saviour instead, our basic stance toward evil in the world would be characterized by revolt, holy rage, social activism and aggressive warfare—not pious resignation."[55] By this he means that Christians will not be apathetic towards evil, neither will they resign themselves piously and say God's will is being worked out mysteriously. Instead, they will recognize the existence and potency of the evil one and the war he has waged on God's creation. They will avail themselves of the authority given by the One who has bound the strong man,, deploy the spiritual weapons of prayer and love and engage in such activities as will diminish the kingdom of evil.

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54. Boyd, *God at War,* 22.
55. Boyd, *God at War,* 191.

5. Consummation and new creation

Stott cites the popularity of J.N. Darby's premillennial theology as one reason for the "great reversal" in social activism in the 20th century. Premillennialists hold that the world will get progressively worse until the coming of Christ to set up his millennial reign and that the church will be raptured during the great tribulation that comes on the unrepentant. This view is popular among many Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Sri Lanka and could be one of the reasons for their apathy towards social activism. If the hope of the church is to be removed from the suffering world through the rapture and then be taken to heaven, there is less motivation to work for change in this world. There is a popular saying that some people are so heavenly minded they are no earthly use. But in church history those who have truly grasped the urgency of the Christ's imminent return have been motivated to work for change in this world, not disregard it as unnecessary. For example, Lord Shaftesbury, the politician and philanthropist who worked for social change in the 19th century said hardly an hour passed when he was not conscious of the thought of the Lord's return.[56]

Theologians like N.T. Wright and Richard Middleton are among those who have stressed the continuity between God's creation and the new creation and thus the significance of the actions of the church today.[57] For example, Rev 19: 8 states that the righteous acts of God's people will be the fine linen that clothes the Bride of Christ at the wedding support of the Lamb.

> What you *do* in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your

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56. Richard Bewes, *Great Quotations of the Twentieth Century* (Rossshire, UK: Christian Focus, 1999), 59.

57. E.g., Tom Wright, *How God Became King (*London: SPCK, 2010); *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007); Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

> neighbour as yourself—*will last into God's future. . ..* They are part of what we may call *building for God's kingdom.*[58]

In similar vein, Mouw reflects on the vision of Isaiah 60 where the prophet envisions the nations and kings coming to the Holy City bringing with them the accoutrements of pagan culture (Is 60:3, 7-9 cf Rev 21:26). In some way, culture is not destroyed but transformed, purified from the taint of sin and made suitable for the Holy City..[59] If human culture will someday be transformed, Mouw argues, although we may not bring about that transformation singlehandedly ourselves, though we must await God's intervention we can and must wait actively. Such active waiting in preparation for God's consummated kingdom will involve calling human institutions and culture to obedience to their creator, in alignment with and in preparation for his consummated kingdom.[60]

The importance of this sure and certain hope is noted by International Justice Mission's Gary Haugen. The battle for justice is not fought on the battlefield of truth, power or even righteousness, he says. "In the end, the battle against oppression stands or falls on the battlefield of hope. No one knowns that better than the oppressor." [61] No matter our courage, compassion, or knowledge. If we have lost hope, we stay inactive. "God's coming justice is the culmination of, not a substitute for, human striving for greater justice here and now."[62] In the context of grandiose claims by leaders who put forward an alternative vision of a Sri Lanka based on ethno-nationalistic ideals, the vision of the new creation where there will be no more sin, death, tears or curse, ought to fire the church's imagination and action for change.

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58. Wight, *Surprised by Hope,* 93. See Also, Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2003*),* 270.

59. Mouw, *Kings* 128.

60. Mouw *Kings*, 24-30, 129.

61. Gary A. Haugen, *Good News about Injustice* (Secunderabad, India: OM Books, 2001), 67.

62. Marshall, *Little Book,* 29.

6. Reasons for Evangelical and Pentecostal apathy to social justice

Stott summarizes the main reasons given by American historian Timothy Smith with regard to the dwindling interest in social justice following World War I. This was a "Great Reversal" of the activism that had been sparked by the Reformation and had gathered momentum in the Evangelical Revivals in Britain and the United States:[63]

1. The fight against liberalism that made the church put all her energy behind protecting the fundamentals of the gospel.
2. A reaction to the "social gospel" which equated the Kingdom of God with Christianized society.
3. Pessimism after the devastating evil of World War 1, which seemed to suggest that reform was not possible
4. The popularization of J.N. Darby's premillennial theology which taught that the world would get progressively worse until the coming of Christ to set up his millennial reign. If the world was going to get worse, there was no impetus to work for change.
5. The spread of Christianity among the middle class who then diluted the radical nature of its demands to surrender to the status quo.

In the Sri Lankan context, we might say that there are similar concerns. There is a fear that attention to social justice will result in the loss of Evangelical zeal for the gospel and evangelism. There is also the fear that liberal and liberation theologies will dilute the gospel by their equitation of social and political liberation with salvation through Christ alone. For at least middle class Christians, there is too much to lose by being identified with the 'radicals' in our society who constantly agitate for change. The popularity of premillennial and dispensationalist

63. Stott, *Issues,* 6-9.

eschatology especially among Pentecostals is also is a factor. Added to that is the very real fear of reprisals, of losing whatever religious liberties we still have. There is also a cultural view of leadership that lends itself to the misunderstanding that submission to the State means absolute loyalty such as was expected by sovereign monarch long ago. The privileges and responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy are not fully understood or embraced by a culture whose history glorifies autocratic, violent, ethno-nationalistic warrior kings.

7. Proceeding with caution

In this article, we have argued that there is a need for the church to be prepared to engage in social justice . But as we do, there are some important principles to remember.

7.1. The need for wisdom to discern the level of engagement

Luke Wilson, writing from his own situation in China distinguishes between the church's role in an oppressive regime as opposed to an open one.[64] In different circumstances, and different government structures, the church needs wisdom to discern its strategy. The strategy of the church in the Roman Empire or in certain closed countries today will be different to the church's role in the UK or the USA where strong safeguards are in place for the protection of human rights and civil liberties.

Also, the church must recognize the pitfalls involved in taking part in socio-political action. Wilson points out that the more deeply the organized church gets involved in social justice , the less clear and unified its voice will be. This will be inevitable as Christians differ in their views on complex issues like capital punishment, war etc.[65] Speaking for the church in China says Wilson suggests that the church may speak truth to power when it is given space to

64. Luke Wilson, "Church State Relations: Lessons from China," *Themelios* 47, no. 2 (2002): 366-381. https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/church-state-relations-lessons-from-china/

65. Wilson, "Church," 371.

do so and if it can speak with the consensus of the church. Where it is not recognized by the State, this is like casting pearls before swine.[66] There is some wisdom in Wilson's warning about the confusion caused by contradictory voices from the church and the possibility of being ignored. But the church cannot always wait for space to be given to it. Governments often give space to church voices only when they approve of what will be said. The Old Testament prophets spoke truth to power. In the gospels, Jesus spoke truth to Caesar's representative though Pilate cynically questioned the existence of truth, as people do today (Jn 18:). N T Wright points out that those who now have the Spirit of Truth follow Jesus in witnessing to the truth "thereby calling the world and its rulers to account."[67] Truth is speaking "words which bring God's fresh order into the world."[68] Christians speak and live truth which renews and restores the world.[69]

While in every stage of history, we are called to patient endurance, the "waiting in eager expectation" (Rom 8:2) is not passivity but engagement. Sider, a Mennonite who accepts that his denomination's pacifist stance would disqualify a Mennonite from political office in the USA, asserts that there are still many ways to engage with the world. He lists a host of activities which are a source of non-violent power to bring about change and resist evil. He incudes truth telling, dialogue, education, well-argued viewpoints, as well as strategic economic decisions such as boycotts, and non- compliance.[70] To that we could add the creative use of the arts and media. That this could lead to arrest, imprisonment or various other penalties under the current legislation must be considered. But that does not mean failure. As John Howard Yoder stated, "That suffering is powerful and weakness wins is true not only in heaven

66. Wilson, Church," 372-375.
67. Tom Wright, *Public,* 56.
68. Wright, *Public,* 129.
69. For example, Russian Orthodox clerics have challenged Russia's war against Ukraine. https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-orthodox-clerics-stop-war-ukrane/31730667.html
70. Sider, "Anabaptist," 185.

but on earth."[71]

7.2. The need for humility

When we approach matters of justice, we need to show humility in our claims about what we are achieving.[72] Firstly, there is a need for humility because we do not always see what the best option might be, or the long-term consequences of our actions. So often what might seem like a momentous victory in a cause we supported seems to fizzle out like a damp squib. Sometimes those we trusted to bring in justice turn out to be worse perpetrators than ones they replace. And at other times, small victories prove the steppingstone to wholescale change. Christian involvement in issues of justice ought to be undertaken with "utmost realism and wise caution" as well as limited expectations and in accordance with biblical principles."[73] To the extent that there is rule of law and the principles on which those laws are based are consistent with or based on biblical principles, there is the possibility of change. To the extent that the law is flouted with impunity or based on discriminatory principles, change will be that much the harder.

Christians who are active in doing justice can be self-righteous and judgmental of others who they feel are too slow, or too unconcerned, or simply think too differently. But we would do better to show humility in our advocacy and to be charitable and generous with those who think differently. We might also want to be tentative about what we think is the eternal achievement of our temporal activity. We do not have Biblical warrant for thinking we can bring in God's rule by our own efforts. There is so much diversity in the Church's eschatology that we would do well not to be dogmatic about how our temporal activities

71. John Howard Yoder, cited by Sider, "Anabaptist," 186.

72. DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is,* 217.

73. M Daniel Carroll R, "Human Government; Biblical Foundations" in *Christians and Political Engagement,* ed. Dieumeme E. Noelliste (Denver, CO: Denver Seminary Vernon Grounds Institute of Public Ethics, 2009), 11.

impact the eternal kingdom.

However, this humility must be matched with hope. The new creation, the kingdom in its fullness is on the way. And the fact that we may not see all the results we would like to see must not paralyze us.

7.3. The need for distinction between the church corporately and the Christian individually

We have looked at the dangers of dualism between the spiritual and the material world, between sacred and secular which is not biblical distinction. The result of this false dichotomy is people whose public life is either secular or apathetic to social ills. But there is a need to distinguish between what the church as a body, local or national is called to do can do as opposed to what an individual Christian may be called to. An individual may choose to enter politics and thus endorse a particular party or a policy. Even those who argue for a narrow view of mission (worship, edification and proclamation of the kingdom) still conclude that individual Christians will be called to use their gifts to do good to all by engagement with the State and society, through government, through political engagement and social justice .[74] This is a call for the church to equip the saints for tasks such as this through teaching, prayer and encouragement. Too often the church dismisses the role of the public servant and considers only "full time Christian ministry" to be a special call, discouraging and alienating those who are passionate about social justice .

7.4. The need for integrity

If we decide that submission and suffering is the only role of the church in the Sri Lankan context, then we must be consistent. The church cannot choose to be strident in opposition only when its own rights are violated, or for certain pet causes (e.g., against abortion and LGBTQ+) while it is quiet when the rights of others are threatened

74. Wesley, "Church," 371-373.

or violated.[75] Certainly, there will be issues on which the church is divided, because in a fallen world, we are often dealing with shades of great rather than black and white. However, there are certain evils which the Bible clearly denounces such as torture, illegitimate use of power, false imprisonment, and discrimination. If we believe we must obey God rather than men when it comes to the great commission, then we ought to be more discerning about other aspects of public life too.

Even if a church decides that they will keep themselves "unspotted" by the world (Jas 1:26-27), this definition of true religion makes two demands. Firstly, it requires confronting and dealing with issues of the heart that lead to our complicity in corruption, abuses of power, discrimination and poverty within the church. Secondly, it demands the application of "care for widows and orphans in their distress." How does the God of justice deliver the oppressed or oppose the oppressor? In the same way that he carries out every other work important to him–primarily, though not exclusively, through his church.

7.5. The need to listen to history

Stott writes that "it is exceedingly strange" that Christians should even ask if social involvement is their concern.[76] In a brief historical survey of Revivals in Britain and USA he shows how the spread of the gospel was accompanied by active engagement in social reform. He describes the degrading, violent and savage conditions which characterized society in the 18th century – including corruption, prostitution, gambling, slavery, and infant mortality. Then came a remarkable transformation in the 19th century – the abolition of slavery, the reform of the prison systems, education was made available to the poor, trade unions were formed, conditions in mines and factories improved, and the cause of the mentally ill and the child labourer upheld. The main force behind this

75. Kirk, *New,* 139.
76. Stott, *Issues*, 3.

was recognized to be the Evangelical Revival.[77] Zealous evangelists like John Wesley brought social transformation on a national scale. While this was partly due to the transformation of individual lives which were no longer attracted to vices like drunkenness, gambling and so on, it also gave rise to a social consciousness in people like William Wilberforce, and the Clapham Sect, As well as Wilberforce's well known dogged pursuing the abolition of slavery , the Clapham Sect sought penal and parliamentary reform, and campaigned against gambling, dueling, and cruel animal sports.[78]The seamless integration of what we call sacred and secular is illustrated by John Wesley's record:

> We set Friday apart as a day of fasting and prayer that God would remember those poor outcasts of men; and (what seems impossible with men, considering the wealth and power of their oppressors) make a way for them to escape, and break their chains in sunder.[79]

In the USA, evangelist Charles Finney preached Christ to his generation and saw "an army of young converts who became the troops of the reform movement of his age."[80] In Finney's view it was the task of the church to "reform the world."[81] Meanwhile, cross-cultural missionaries who took the gospel far and wide also took medicines and education and took up the cause of the weak and oppressed actively fighting to eradicate the opium trade, widow burning, infanticide, temple prostitution to name a few of the social evils they encountered.[82]

In one of the best-known speeches of the twentieth

77. Stott, *Issues,* 3. For many Evangelicals in the 18th and 19th century, evangelism and social action went hand in hand.

78. Stott, *Issues,* 4.

79. John Wesley, *Works Vol. IV, Journal, March 3, 1788*, 408. I am grateful to Dr. Ajith Fernando for sharing these quotes with me.

80. Stott, *Issues, 5*.

81. Finney, cited in Stott, I*ssues*, *5*. Vishal Mangalwadi, the Indian social activist has argued that William Carey could be called the Father of Modern India (*The Legacy of William Carey: A Model for the Transformation of a Culture,* Illinois: Crossway Books, 1999*).*

82. Stott, *Issues,* 6.

century, Martin Luther King Jr. was able to articulate how the biblical vision of the kingdom of shalom motivated him to pursue a nonviolent campaign for change:

> I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.... This is our hope. ... With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.[83]

One of the weaknesses of the church in Sri Lanka is its lack of knowledge of its history. What can the church learn from those who have gone before, to gain wisdom and courage? What can the church learn from their mistakes? Church history also calls us to creatively and persuasively articulate God's vision of the Kingdom and its claims, both inside and outside the church.

8. Conclusion

The Bible speaks more frequently than we might notice, of God's justice. God actively opposes injustice and works justice for the oppressed. In the Old Testament, no amount of personal or corporate cultic activity could make up for injustice and oppression in the community. God's people, as those who were to imitate his character, were called to love justice and do justice. This call for justice is not superseded or spiritualized by the New Testament but

83. Martin Luther King Jr. "I have a Dream" speech delivered in Washington, August 28, 1963. https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm.

presumed by it. God may choose to execute justice through the state, when the state recognizes its role as the protector of the innocent and punisher of the evildoer. But the State, like all earthly structures is fallen and will always fail its citizens to a lesser or greater degree. The State can even be a tool in the hands of Satan. God uses Christians, both individually and collectively to speak truth, point nations back to the values of the Kingdom and demonstrate those values in word and deed. The church, unlike the state must always recognize its role as an agent of the Kingdom of God, partnering with God in bringing justice to the nations. While Jesus' kingdom is not this worldly in its values, mode of operation or weapons of warfare, it profoundly affects this world as its citizens play their role of patient, hopeful, active waiting for the final consummation of the Kingdom in the new heavens and the new earth. This does not mean that we believe our nation can be saved through social, political or economic liberation. But as the church plays its role, the nations see a glimpse of what God's new creation will look like. They see an anticipation of the coming kingdom. Just as the sky brightens before the rising of the sun, so the engagement of the church brings a light that is an anticipation of the consummated kingdom. And we may discover that, in some way we do not understand, all that our acts of truth, beauty and love will endure into the new creation.

Social justice is a matter of love and allegiance. Love for the God of justice and allegiance to him relativizes other allegiances and demands the courage to stand with patient endurance and costly obedience against those who seek to usurp that complete allegiance. Love for neighbour requires costly, risky identification with the most vulnerable and creativity, skill and perseverance in bringing about change that will offer them justice and a glimpse of the God of justice.

Those outside the church sometimes fear that Christians do not love their nation. Christians fear their lack of power or influence. But, as Martin Luther King Jr warned, "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love

without power is sentimental and anaemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."[84]

84. Martin Luther King Jr. "Where do we go from here" speech at the Sothern Christian Leadership Conference, Atlanta, 1967. https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/where-do-we-go-here.

WHAT DOES POLITICS HAVE TO DO WITH PENTECOST? FIRST STEPS TOWARDS A SRI LANKAN POLITICAL THEOLOGY

NATHANAEL SOMANATHAN

Abstract: *Pentecostalism in Sri Lanka has had a strong missional presence since its inception but this understanding has moreover, been devoid of socio-political engagement. While some political representees may be pentecostal, Sri Lankan Pentecostalism (SLP) has neither accounted for or articulated a political theology that might contribute to the Sri Lankan political discourse that has been dominated by a Buddhist-nationalist ideology. I argue that for SLP to construct such a political imagination, it must disentangle itself from dispensationlist eschatology and move toward a pneumatic eschatological imagination of hope. The Pentecost motif provides the basis for a genuine and indigenous Pentecostal political theology to emerge that can address the ethno-religious diversity and the humanitarian concerns that characterize present day Sri Lanka.*

Keywords: *Sri Lankan Pentecostalism (SLP), political theology, Pentecost, Spirit-baptism.*

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, Sri Lankan Pentecostalism (henceforth referred to as SLP) has experienced tremendous growth and has become the dominant protestant tradition in Sri Lanka.[1] Even though in terms of evangelism and church planting SLP is at the forefront, it has often been the least interested in social and political engagement. However, this is not to say that Pentecostalism does not have a rich history of social engagement and

1. G. P. V. Somaratna, "Pentecostalism in Sri Lanka," in *Global Renewal Christianity: Spirit Empowered Movements. Volume One, Asia and Oceania,* ed. Vinson Synan and Amos Yong (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma house, 2016), 30.

humanitarian activity. SLP's beginnings especially, are fraught with examples of mission that encapsulates both evangelism and service to the poor and needy. But as fundamentally a renewal and missional movement, Pentecostalism's success is a result of its tenacious commitment to spreading the Gospel to the ends of the earth accompanied by signs and wonders in direct resemblance to the New Testament church as seen in the book of Acts.[2] This is further supplemented by an urgent message about the end times and the signs that mark the world's *imminent* end. However, the looming question is if SLP's sole focus on the world to come has deprived itself of a holistic approach to engaging the present world and the various spheres of life, including political life?

This question is especially pertinent in present day Sri Lanka following the political upheaval of 2022. An autonomous uprising of the common people, similar to the Arab Spring, against the corrupt Rajapaksa regime led to the ousting of the then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. The people of Sri Lanka demanded a new government and accountability for the post-Covid economic crisis created by the mismanagement of resources due to political corruption. The eventual downfall of the dynastic rule of the Rajapaksas and their cronies despite their profound influence was the product of a collective effort involving representatives from various sectors of society, including religious figures. For instance, the Anglican church showed solidarity with the *aragalaya* (protest) cause through the priests' act of washing the feet of the protestors. Conversely, however, Pentecostal churches and institutions preferred in-house prayer gatherings for the country instead of public demonstrations of support. The lack of response on this issue, despite vocal support from notable Pentecostal figures

2. Ivor Poobalan in his Christianity Today article on the economic crisis and protest movement in Sri Lanka recounts the important role played by Pentecostal churches in spurring the increase in the Christian demography in Sri Lanka, especially between 1981 and 2012, "The Struggle for Sri Lanka's Second Birth," ChristianityToday.com, July 16, 2022,https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/july-web-only/sri-lanka-crisis-protests-rajapaksa-christian-churches.html.

in different capacities, was a telling message in itself.

This consistent pattern of bold public outreach in the form of evangelism but reticence when it comes to socio-political engagement is not isolated to the recent *aragalaya* situation; similar dynamics have emerged repeatedly in Sri Lanka's historical context. This is especially apparent in the Pentecostal responses (or lack thereof) during the 30-year civil war and ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Little to no theological reflection or discussion has been produced on issues of ethnic conflict, corrupt governance, or land from a pentecostal perspective by SLP. As a result, even though Pentecostal churches were often subversive spaces that hosted multi-lingual and multi-cultural churches services, prayer gatherings, and conventions, they were not entirely immune to church splits and controversies along ethno-linguistic lines.

It must be noted however, that in the last decade or so prominent Pentecostal denominations in Sri Lanka like AG (Assemblies of God) and Foursquare have sought governmental recognition by joining the NCC (National Christian Council). Yet, this shift toward church and state relations is best understood within the context and history of persecution and discrimination against Pentecostal churches, which were often viewed as illegitimate sects and distinct from established mainline churches such as the Catholic and Anglican churches.[3] Moreover, this development that now provides some political representation and security to Pentecostals does not elucidate SLP's actual theology and practice in regard to political engagement.

Nevertheless, the events of 2022 and prior have revealed the existence of competing political ideologies in Sri Lank. The young people favor a secular and unifying vision for the future of Sri Lanka whereas the "old guard" insist on the primacy of the Buddhist identity and some form of an authoritarian governance. While Pentecostals typically perceive their role in the world to be disassociated with matters of public governance and legislation,

3. Somaratna, "Pentecostalism in Sri Lanka," 36.

unless in exceptional circumstances that threaten their immediate existence, this new political phase presents both an opportunity and a pressing need for Pentecostals to actively participate in the political discourse. It is within this context that the following questions will be explored: Do these shifts, challenges, and directions in the Sri Lankan political imagination have any relevance to SLP? Does SLP have anything to offer to this discussion? As an adaptive and experience centered tradition, does SLP have anything to learn and develop in its own understanding? In other words, can SLP conceive of a political theology for its context.

I will try to answer some of these questions in this paper. While other strands of SLP's theology may also shed light on its apolitical (or adopted political) attitude, I will focus on the close entanglement of eschatology and the political imagination in Pentecostalism. I will first discuss the place and nature of SLP's eschatology in its self-understanding of its role in the world. In this section I will explain the impact and legacy of dispensationalism and thereby the influence of American politics on SLP. Thereon, I will argue that if SLP is to contribute from its rich spirituality and engage the convoluted Sri Lankan political discourse it must break free from its ties to dispensationalism toward an eschatology of hope.

Finally, I will attempt to imagine the first steps toward a political theology for SLP derived from the "Pentecost" motif in the book of Acts. Since the Pentecost (event) motif is a central theme to the theological and missional framework of Pentecostals, it is therefore, indispensable to the construction of SLP's political theology.

2. Methodological limitations

Before we proceed onto exploring the relationship between Pentecostal political dispositions and eschatology, we must acknowledge the methodological limitations for such a study in this condensed article. The difficulties arise from the nature of SLP's theological enterprise and the diversity of its views.

Apart from the historical recounting of the origins and expansion of SLP, literature on the theology and praxis of SLP is scant. A major reason for this is because SLP's theological sources and the modes of dissemination are not governed by conventional mediums like writing. Pentecostals, especially in Sri Lanka, rely on oral forms like sermons, testimonies, and worship songs as their primary means of theological education. Even when Pentecostals do publish books, the contents are usually anecdotal or devotional and resist any form of systematization. The only other instance of formal writing is restricted to short form commentaries on scripture. Theological reflection that is not imported from the West or neighboring India is simply lacking in the Sri Lankan context.

Furthermore, Pentecostalism is not a monolith. As Allan Anderson has shown, Pentecostalism has become an umbrella term and has at least four distinct expressions with their own subcategories.[4] While the diversity cannot be always be neatly compartmentalized in the Sri Lankan context, Anderson's classifications are broadly applicable. Therefore, deriving an all-encompassing Sri Lankan Pentecostal theological framework, or even a universal pentecostal theology in general, would be too daunting of a task here. However, this is not to say that general patterns cannot be observed or that certain theological themes (like Eschatology) cannot be generalized.

Because SLP's formal and historical origins are tied to a western story of Pentecostalism, some of its present views across the denominational spectrum remain undeveloped or unchallenged. Even the indigenous Pentecostal denomination in Sri Lanka, CPM (Ceylon Pentecostal Misison) has retained certain doctrinal views of its leaders that were originally informed by western Pentecostal

4. These categories include (1). Classical pentecostals, subdivided into: a) Holiness pentecostals, b) Finished Work pentecostals, c) Oneness Pentecostals, and d) Apostolic pentecostals; (2). Older Church Charismatics; (3). Older Independent Church; and (4). Neopentecostal or Neocharismatic Churches. Allan. Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity,* Oxford Studies in World Christianity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5–7.

missionaries. Nevertheless, SLP's views of the end-times are homogenous to the extent that they encapsulate an urgent view of Christ's return and his millennial reign. These events are foreshadowed by intense and incremental birth pangs in the form of wars, disasters, and anti-Christ driven political activities (apocalypticism). Additionally, the above observations are necessarily inferred from experiential encounters with leaders and members of Pentecostal churches and cannot be substantiated with reference to a particular study or widescale survey. But I will attempt to point to different denominational literature and sermon material along the way in support of the aforementioned intuitions.

3. SLP and eschatology

SLP's attitude and posture toward political engagement is indelibly linked to its eschatology. The apocalyptic events that precede the second coming of Christ and the subsequent millennial reign preoccupy and for the most part, drive SLP's mission and spirituality. Therefore, it is common place in Pentecostal churches to hear sermons preached and songs sung regularly about the urgent return of Christ and the need for diligent preparation.[5] Interestingly, a well-known Pentecostal church located in Dehiwala, Sri Lanka displays a large board across its front wall with a clear message conveyed in bold, block letters: "JESUS CHRIST IS COMING AGAIN VERY SOON."[6] Another familiar symbol and name that is taken up by various Pentecostal ministries in Sri Lanka is "trumpet

5. Both the Tamil and Sinhala Pentecostal church in Sri Lanka draw heavily from the South Indian Pentecostal catalogue of worship songs. This song about the end-times with apocalyptic imagery with over one million views is by a popular Pentecostal worship leader and is used widely in Sri Lankan context. Ben Samuel "Unga Varugai | Ben Samuel | Tamil Christian Song," June 14, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbXRA-Ybntw.

6. This church does not have a visible name sign upfront. However, the Senior Pastor of the church, John Kitto is well known in Tamil Pentecostal circles and has a YouTube channel, possibly with the same name as the church: *The Trumpet Call from Bethel.*

sound." The symbol indicates a warning and call signaling the end-times and the impending judgment.[7]

Therefore, eschatological longing is at the heart of SLP's spirituality and what exactly SLP believes about the eschaton cannot be understood in a vaccum. For churches like AG and Foursquare that have American oversight and denominational influence, the eschatological convictions reflect the theological influence and teachings of their parental organizations. This is often an extension of Classical Pentecostal beliefs. Larry McQueen, in his constructive effort, *Toward a Pentecostal Eschatology*, reflects on his Classical Pentecostal upbringing. He notes the intriguing and formative experience he had when he first encountered an evangelist who unveiled the "mysteries of the books of Daniel and Revelation" and why the "rapture would definitely be 'pre-trib'!" McQueen goes on to say that it was not until college and seminary that he realized the inconsistencies in the view that he grew up on and began to share in the ambivalent feelings toward Pentecostalism's "'dance partner' in eschatology, classical dispensationalism."[8]

McQueen's experience is shared by many in the Pentecostal world as he himself acknowledges. When it comes to the subject of eschatology, it is safe to say that most, if not all, Sri Lankan Pentecostals draw from the same stream that is dispensationalism. The reason for this is situated within a larger story of how dispensationalism infiltrated Classical Pentecostalism and the legacy of missionary influence on SLP's theology. Therefore, what SLP imagines about the end is characterized by a specific system of biblical interpretation and a political worldview. In this section, I will take a step back and look at the historical context and beliefs of dispensationalism vis-à-vis Classical Pentecostalism. Before we can look at the particular manifestation of the dispensational eschatology

7. One such prominent Tamil pentecostal church is "Trumpet Sound Ministries," accessed May 24, 2023, http://trumpetsound.org/.

8. Larry R. McQueen, *Toward a Pentecostal Eschatology: Discerning the Way Forward*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology. Supplement Series 39 (Blandford Forum, Dorset: Deo Publishing, 2012), 1.

within SLP and its political imagination, we must explore what dispensationalism is, how it reads the scriptures, and its political implications.

3.1. Dispensationalism and the "Soon Coming King"

In Classical Pentecostalism, the fundamental conceptual framework that undergird their theology and evangelistic practice is the "full gospel." It consists of the five-fold (or four-fold according to some) *kerygma* that Jesus Christ brings (1) salvation, (2) sanctification, (3) baptism in the Spirit, (4) divine healing and the (5) eschatological kingdom of God. [9] However, the climax of the full gospel narrative, which is the "affirmation that Jesus Christ was [and is] the 'Soon Coming King,'" is for some the central lens to understanding Pentecostalism.[10] This eschatological affirmation is not only foundational to the Pentecostal theological framework, it is argued that it is the bedrock of Pentecostal spirituality. Land contends, "To locate the theological center of Pentecostalism in Spirit baptism… or to see tongues as the only thing that distinguishes the spirituality from that of the Holiness or evangelical movements is to miss the point altogether."[11] He claims that "[it] is the eschatological shift within the Holiness movement [from postmillennialism] toward premillennialism that signals what is decisive."[12]

The shift Land is pointing to is an important part of the Pentecostal story. Anderson notes that "[a] shift from the optimistic postmillennialism of early nineteenth-century Protestantism to a pessimistic, premillennialist 'secret rapture' dispensationalism swept through evangelical circles

9. Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 165.

10. Peter Althouse, "Eschatology," in *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology*, ed. Wolfgang Vondey, Routledge Handbooks in Theology (London: Routledge, 2020), 271–72.

11. Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology. Supplement Series 1 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 62–63.

12. Land, 63.

later that century."[13] With this came the notion that Christ can return at any moment to rapture the church while those left behind will remain to face judgment. Alongside an anticipation of the end to include a secret rapture and an apocalypse, the present world was perceived as evil and beyond repair. Therefore, Christians must do what they can to snatch souls out of hell and the awaiting judgment.

As mentioned earlier, the shift occurred progressively within the Holiness movement as a result of several factors. Anderson suggests that it was mainly because of the "influential teaching of John Nelson Darby of the Plymouth Brethren in Britain."[14] The Keswick convention also played an important role in terms of shaping mission service for the Holiness group with their emphasis "on the coming of a new Pentecost and an imminent worldwide revival to usher in the return of Christ."[15]

The dispensational movement and pre-millennial eschatology gained momentum in America amongst Evangelicals through conferences like D. L. Moody's annual Prophecy Conference in Massachusetts and the publication of Scofield Reference Bible in 1909. Yong observes that "[during] their first generation, pentecostals by and large adopted the dispensationalist framework even if they adapted various elements so that it would be more conducive to the outworkings of pentecostal spirituality."[16] Althouse has referred to this modification as "latter rain dispensationalism" as it differs in important ways from "classical dispensationalism."[17]

In the early years of the movement, "premillennialist eschatology and ethic of 'separation from the world' influenced pentecostal political views considerably."[18] Pentecostal were encouraged to avoid participation in

13. Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 165.
14. Anderson, 165.
15. Anderson, 166.
16. Amos Yong, *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology*, The Cadbury Lectures; 2009 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2010), 318–19.
17. Althouse, "Eschatology," 270–71.
18. Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 166.

political life, as politics was still in the realm of the evil world. However, post First World War, Pentecostals who were previously pacifists and apolitical underwent a radical change. Anderson remarks that in this period "pentecostals began to see governments in a more positive light and were influenced by prevailing warmongering cultures and a 'just war' theology."[19] With the exception of a minority of Pentecostal groups such as the African American denomination, the Church of God in Christ, who have maintained a pacifist stance, most white North American Pentecostals aligned themselves with American "right-wing" politics becoming part of the "so-called religious right."[20]

Another development in the story of Pentecostal eschatology that I will not explore here but is certainly a prominent phenomenon globally, is not so much a rejection of pre-millennial eschatology but a new emphasis on a "realized" eschatology.[21] In this system, the world is not necessarily evil and to be escaped, but is the stage for achieving financial and material success. The spiritualizing of upward mobility and the pursuit of prosperity has become mainstream within SLP due to the rise of neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity theology movement. However, for the sake of space, I will restrict the present discussion to the influence of classical dispensationalism on the SLP's political thought.

Today, dispensational theology has undergone several iterations. The main perspectives can be classified as (1) classical dispensationalism, as taught by John Nelson Darby and C. I. Scofield, (2) modified/ traditional dispensationalism, as found in the work of Charles Ryrie and Dwight Pentecost, and (3) progressive dispensationalism, as promulgated by Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock. While the diversity in these viewpoints contain important variations, dispensationalism still holds a core set of beliefs:

19. Anderson,167.
20. Anderson, 167.
21. Anderson, 168–69.

1. that God works with humanity through distinct and successive "dispensations" or periods of time, "each with different covenantal or governmental features (here, there is often disagreement about exactly how many dispensations the Bible reveals or discusses);"[22]
2. that the present dispensation of the church is an intermediate period between two dispensations, with Israel being central to God's salvific plan in the world. Israel (consisting of Jews) and the church (primarily composed of gentiles) are connected but distinctly separate manifestations of God's elect;
3. that the next dispensation will be initiated with the "rapture" of the church (based on 1 Thess. 4:17) and then the inauguration of "a seven- year period of worldwide woe and suffering known as the Great Tribulation (from the various references to seven years in the book of Revelation);" [23]
4. that at the end of this period, the Christ (with the church) will come again to judge the world and establish the millennial reign (based on Rev. 20:4).

To analyze or provide an extensive critique of dispensational theology and its hermeneutics is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I will focus on certain features of the dispensational system that is especially problematic for the envisioning of a pentecostal political theology and exposes its counterintuitive nature to SLP's spirituality.

3.2. Futurist interpretation and apocalypticism

When pentecostals adopted the Dispensational system, it also meant the incorporation of a futurist interpretation of the book of Revelation. That is, as opposed to the preterist, historical, and symbolic views, the futurist view holds that the "end time" events described after

22. Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 319-20.
23. Yong, 319–20.

chapter three of the book of Revelation are yet to happen shortly before the *Parousia* (the second coming of Christ). According to Yong, the pentecostal commitment to this hermeneutic, has resulted in two misguided notions: First, the teaching of the secret rapture of the church prior to the Great Tribulation, founded on passages like 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, "invites an escapist mentality."[24] Moreover, this notion alongside the doctrine of final apostacy in the end times (cf. Matt. 24:12 and 2 Tim. 3:1-9), construes this present world as doomed to destruction. Therefore, the rapture for the church is in essence what the ark was for Noah and his family, a provision to escape the inevitable destruction of the world.[25] Second, Yong points out that "the dispensationalist focus on the future rapture, Tribulation, Parousia, and millennial reign of Christ minimizes the salvific work of God in the present."[26] When dispensationalism combined with the restorationist impulse of the Pentecostal movement, it further extended the view that the post-Constantinian church is apostate to the entirety of humankind.[27] That is,

> whereas pentecostal restorationism apart from dispensationalism at least viewed the modern pentecostal revival as a latter rain outpouring of the Spirit in anticipation of the coming kingdom, such restorationism combined with dispensationalism minimizes not only ecclesial history in general but also the pentecostal experience in particular by looking ahead to the "endtime events" as providing God's response to a dying world.[28]

The two notions discussed above, together indicate that

24. Yong, 324.
25. Yong, 324.
26. Yong, 324.
27. As explained by Yong, "primitivism and restorationism–involving the rejection of historical and contemporary religious life in favor of a pragmatic retrieval and reappropriation of "the" biblical way of life; this has remained as a central feature of new "waves" of pentecostal renewal, such as in the Latter Rain revival in the mid-twentieth century as well as the Third Wave movement in the 1970s and 1980s" Yong, 27.
28. Yong, 324.

the dispensationalist laden pentecostal reading inevitably leads to a focus on the end of history.[29] The exacerbation of the imminent end within Pentecostalism introduced by the dispensational framework produces a weak theology of history alongside a diminished view of the church based on the stark distinction between the church and Israel featured in the dispensationalist scheme.[30]

A final aspect of the dispensationalist permeation of Pentecostalism that must be discussed is the nature in which the end is understood and presented. Pentecostal construals of the end are rife with apocalyptic language. To understand this further, we can refer to the three theological presuppositions provided by Yong: "First, pentecostals believe in a cosmic dualism that pits the power of God against the powers of evil, and within this scheme view history as the battlefield between good and evil."[31] The ultimate triumph of good over evil, the power of God over the powers of evil in the defeat of Satan, his demons, and the unbelievers in the final battle is seen as the final segment of history as described in Revelation 19 and 20. Second, in the ongoing cosmic conflict, it is anticipated that powers of darkness will attempt to frustrate God's providential work in history. Things will get increasingly worse before it gets better with the final judgment where God will purge both evil and evildoers from the world (2 Pet. 3:7-12). "In this final cosmic inferno, the world itself will be purified and rendered a hospitable abode for the righteous people of God."[32]

In response to these, Yong and other pentecostal theologians have questioned the compatibility of the futuristic and apocalyptic features of pentecostal eschatology as informed by dispensationalism and the lived spirituality of pentecostals. The affirmation of healing and thereby the goodness of the material world and embodied existence runs counter to the docetic and Manichean

29. Yong, 325.
30. Yong, 325.
31. Yong, 327.
32. Yong, 328.

tendencies put forth by the dystopian imagination of the future within dispensationalism. Why must pentecostal care about the healing of the body or the full expression of spiritual vitality in everyday life if what matters ultimately is the disembodied soul and a celestial future existence?

The obvious incompatibility is, as shown by McQueen, is that "the ecclesiology upon which the eschatology of classical dispensationalism is built became the basis for a denial of spiritual gifts in the Church today, which is, in essence, a denial of one of the most core components of Pentecostal spirituality."[33] Even though this apparent discrepancy should in theory be a non-starter for a theological alliance from the very beginning, Pentecostalism for various paradoxical reasons has remained undeterred by this. Moreover, the striking inconsistencies between pentecostal assertions of a holistic soteriology, theology of embodiment, and healing and the escapism and strict other-worldliness found in dispensationalism necessitate revisions and new proposals for a pentecostal eschatology.[34]

Furthermore, such revisions are imperative because of the socio-political dimension to the eschatological imagination. Yong argues that, "... when political theology is understood in part to refer to the Christian understanding of history and the public square, then what emerges, in such a dispensationalistically informed pentecostal eschatology is an anemic ecclesiology and a deficient theology of history, and these combine theologically to undermine any quest for a viable theology of the political."[35] In other words, a robust political theology cannot at once emerge within a theological tradition that is captive to a system that is deeply inconsistent to its own spirituality and lacks essential

33. McQueen, *Toward a Pentecostal Eschatology*, 57.

34. See Larry R. McQueen, *Toward a Pentecostal Eschatology: Discerning the Way Forward,* Journal of Pentecostal Theology. Supplement Series 39 (Blandford Forum, Dorset: Deo Publishing, 2012); and Peter Althouse, *Spirit of the Last Days: Pentecostal Eschatology in Conversation with Jürgen Moltmann,* Journal of Pentecostal Theology. Supplement Series 25 (London: T&T Clark International, 2003).

35. Yong, *In the Days of Caesar,* 325.

ingredients like the significance of corporeality and history. As observed by those like Peter Althouse and Steven Land, pentecostal spirituality through movements like the "latter rain outpourings" has depicted a strong socio-political emphasis in its past.[36] However, its allegiance to systems like dispensationalism has rendered it moot in terms of producing political theologies for the benefit of church catholic—not least in the Sri Lankan pentecostal context as will be discussed in the following section.

3.3. *SLP and dispensationalism*

The "full gospel" narrative is quite evidently the central ethos of the traditional pentecostal churches in Sri Lanka. Along with this, SLP has also adopted the premillennial, apocalyptic, and futuristic eschatological framework of dispensationalism for its understanding of the implications of the "soon coming King." As alluded to earlier, there is not sufficient documentation to trace or reconstruct the history of dispensationalism in Sri Lanka and its entry into SLP. Also, very few pentecostal churches have made their "statement of faith" or "doctrinal beliefs" on their websites which makes it difficult to capture the nuances of the dispensational convictions of a given pentecostal church today. Therefore, we must rely on sermons, social media posts, and other non-formal sources if one was to a construct an account of dispensationalism within SLP.

We know that the pentecostal missionaries instilled in SLP a sense of urgency about the rapture and the imminent return of Christ. From the very beginning of the pentecostal missionary enterprise in Sri Lanka, we can see this eschatological instinct. Sri Lankan historian G. P. V. Somaratna notes, "Eschatological urgency was at the heart of understanding the mission fervor of Pentecostals, producing in early days of movement 'missionaries of one way ticket'… Some missionaries thought of Christ's return so imminent that they never expected to see their mother

36. Althouse, *Spirit of the Last Days,* 179.

country again, once they had left it for the mission field."[37] An article in one of the early AG pentecostal magazines by William Farrand, also called the "Missionary to Ceylon," further elucidates the shape of the eschatological views that were streaming into SLP. Writing in 1955, Farrand, in his article titled "The Cry for 'Co-Existence,'" offers a potent reminder to his readers that the confluence of political interests and powers at the time was setting up the events for the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.[38] He forewarns that the only remaining event that needs to take place before God's wrath is fully poured out in judgment over the Satanic gentile kingdom of this world is the "removal of the Church" (rapture). The exhortation at the end of the article provides an insight into how pentecostals read the times and their role in it. He writes, "Surely the rapture of the Church, the bride of Christ, is nearer than we realize! Let us be sure we are washed in the Blood, and filled with the Spirit, and ready momentarily for that blessed event."[39] Farrand, like others, represent how rapture theology and pre-millennial apocalyptic theology were brought in by pentecostal missionaries and then absorbed into SLP from its beginnings. As a result, the AG Ceylon website, a conglomerate of AG pentecostal views in Sri Lanka, in fact records the following under its core doctrines section on the second coming of Christ: "With the world experiencing natural disasters, economic downturns and increasing uncertainties on many fronts, the doctrine of Christ's Second Coming is more relevant than ever. Believers must rest in the certainty of the imminent return of our Lord and share this hope with others."[40] Noticeably here, the gradual degradation of the world is highlighted by the signs of disasters and catastrophes that are somehow

37. G. P. V. Somaratna, *Origins of the Pentecostal Mission in Sri Lanka* (Nugegoda: Margaya Fellowship of Sri Lanka, 1996), 14.

38. William Farrand, "The Cry for 'Co-Existence,'" *The Pentecostal Evangel*, September 11, 1955.

39. Farrand, 11.

40. "Second Coming," *Assemblies of God Sri Lanka* (blog), March 6, 2015, https://agceylon.wordpress.com/our-beliefs/our-core-doctrines/the-second-coming/.

unique to the contemporary period. The only hope is the imminent return of Christ.

The asymmetrical relationship that exists between majority world countries like Sri Lanka and the missionaries over time has continued to fuel and foster apolitical attitudes toward local socio-political participation but at the same time, quite ironically, garnered a keen interest and engagement in right-wing American and Zionist politics. Even though aspects of worship and certain ecclesial practices of Classical Pentecostalism from the west are modified to adapt to the local contexts, SLP in its various expressions has uncritically adopted the dispensational worldview and even political allegiances. These dynamics have become particularly evident in two ways in recent years.

First, the 2016 presidential election in America had remarkable resonance in Sri Lanka. While this phenomenon was not restricted to pentecostal quarters, Sri Lankan pentecostal leaders expressed notable favor to one candidate in particular, Donald Trump. This affinity for Trump included a wholesale embrace of the assertions and prophecies made by prominent evangelical and pentecostal leaders that likened Trump to the pagan King Cyrus in the Bible. He was going to be the savior figure who will reestablish America's greatness through recovering its Christian identity and the exceptionalism of its story.[41] What this revealed was SLP's uncritical import of American political rhetoric despite Trump's moral failings. Trump's tenure as president and the controversies surrounding the pandemic in 2019 exacerbated the apocalyptic imagination of American pentecostals which was also then seamlessly permeated other parts of the world. During this time some

41. One popular preacher was criticized in the media for publishing his support for Trump in the 2020 presidential reelection by captioning an Instagram picture of himself wearing a MAGA hat that reads "President Trump 2020. Keep America Great." For the whole story see "Sri Lankan Preacher under Fire for Making Comments Seen as Political," *Colombo Gazette*, May 24, 2020, sec. Breaking News, https://colombogazette.com/2020/05/24/sri-lankan-preacher-under-fire-for-making-comments-seen-as-political/.

pentecostals groups in Sri Lanka intensified their preaching to propagate the imminence of Christ's return and some others went so far as to caution against certain vaccines that may contain the mark of the anti-Christ.[42] While fear surrounding the pandemic and its consequences were widely felt, within Pentecostalism (and certain quarters of evangelicalism) it took on a particularly apocalyptic mood.

Second, pentecostals in line with dispensationalism maintain a "sharp wedge between Israel and the church" that has not been critically assessed.[43] The biased status given to Israel is often paradoxically situated within the central pentecostal claim that the reception of the Spirit ("the Spirit being poured out on all flesh") and the confession that Christ is Lord are essential markers for entering the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, SLP's ignorance of such inconsistencies are manifested in the ultra-literal readings of the book of Revelation and other passages, public displays of the Israel flag in the church sanctuaries, and regular prayers for the blessing and peace of Israel with no mention of Palestine.[44]

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42. A good example of this is Sadhu Selvaraj, the founder of Angel TV. Even though he is from India, he is enormously influential within Sri Lankan-Tamil Pentecostalism through his media ministry. During the pandemic he had not only preached against vaccination but also produced skits that described them as being a mark of anti-Christ. The videos have since been taken down, but not before being extensively shared on the various social media platforms causing serious panic among many Christians. For more of the story see "Christian Evangelist Launches Propaganda against Coronavirus Vaccine," *OpIndia* (blog), November 18, 2020, https://www.opindia.com/2020/11/christian-evangelist-launches-propaganda-against-coronavirus-vaccine/.

43. Yong, *In the Days of Caesar,* 326.

44. Prominent pentecostal Pastors in Sri Lanka like John Kitto and Suresh Ramachandran are often proactive in ministries and associations that are essentially Zionist: "Israel Lanka Friendship Association | Facebook," accessed May 25, 2023, https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064690809490&sk=about; "International Christian Embassy Jerusalem | Your Embassy, Your Voice," ICEJ, accessed May 25, 2023, https://www.icej.org/; In a series of videos on fundamental Christian doctrines, Sri Lankan pastor and theologian includes the doctrine of the rapture, see *Doctrine14 Rapture | Fundamental Doctrines Part 16 |Dr.Suresh Ramachandran |Tamil Christian Messages*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQqCu3AUPro.

The political ramifications for the uncritical support for Israel cannot be ignored. Even though Jews have experienced oppression and horrific suffering at different stages of their history, sometimes even at the hands of Christians, the dispensational fervor for Israel is often at the risk of indifference to Israel's own cruelty to its neighbor. Namely, SLP's active support for all of modern Israel's actions based on Zionism has resulted in its unconscious participation in the dehumanization project of Palestine.

There is critical consensus within pentecostal scholarship that if Pentecostalism is to articulate and construct an eschatology consistent with its own spirituality, drawing from its own resources, and is contributive in general to the church catholic, then it must in some sense part ways from dispensationalism or adopt a radically revised version of it. With regard to SLP, I suggest that the former is most conducive for an indigenous Pentecostalism to flourish alongside theological reflection that does not need to retrofit itself into incompatible systems. However, such a revision for Pentecostalism necessitates a new eschatological imagination to replace the old one such that it does not need to default to "right-wing" politics and can critically address both local and global political issues.

As seen, the entanglement between eschatology and a socio-political theology is non-negotiable. Therefore, in the following section I will explore the Pentecost motif of Acts 1 and 2 to address the key elements required for a pentecostal political theology suitable for Sri Lanka within a pneumatic eschatological imagination as put forth by Amos Yong. But first we must begin with a brief description of the key elements that constitute the Sri Lankan political context and history.

4. Eschatological and political imagination of Pentecost

4.1. The Sri Lankan political context

There are two significant factors that are most notable in Sri-Lanka's socio-political history: colonization and Buddhist nationalism. Even though Sri Lanka gained

its independence from British colonial rule in 1948, the impact of colonization and the successive political developments continue to play a role in Sri Lanka's economic and political problems. Without getting into the weeds of what is the nature and impact of colonization, or the economic devastation that followed, I will provide a brief account of what led to the rise of Buddhist-nationalist political ideology in Sri Lanka and how that has defined the mainstream political discourse for the past seventy-five years. This will provide the context for what kind of a distinctively pentecostal political theology can emerge in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan anthropologist H.L. Seneviratnem in his seminal research, *The Work of Kings* notes that "the classical Buddhism of South and Southeast Asia as institutionalized in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand are historic establishments" in contrast to proto-Buddhist or Indian Buddhist systems.[45] With that came a routinized Sangha "ensconced in privilege and bounty and committed to their perpetuation, [and] is allied in mutual interest with a dominant linguistic, regional, ethnic, or other parochial group."[46] However, rebels in the form of ascetic movements sought reform in universalist terms and often challenged this established Buddhism. In colonial time for instance, "Socialist groups and anti-imperialist Sangha rebels expressed themselves as spokesmen for freedom and social justice, and some in the late colonial era allied themselves with Marxists."[47] Although, generally universalist movements tend to detract from the parochial interests and hegemony of the dominant group, Seneviratne cautions that, "such movements can also be quite misleading and could sometimes be parochial and sectional though disguised in the garb of universalism."[48] This was the case with the new modernist Buddhism that emerged in

45. H. L. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 23.
46. Seneviratne, 24.
47. Seneviratne, 24.
48. Seneviratne, 24.

colonial Sri Lanka through its contact with the western world. "Originally allied with Marxist universalism, it soon embraced a narrow ethnic, linguistic, and religious chauvinism that represented the interests of the Sinhala Buddhist elite and its hegemonic dreams."[49]

"Buddhist modernism" or "Neo-Buddhism," according to Seneviratne, "is in effect a new religion that the classes that successfully adapted to the changes wrought by colonialism needed and invented."[50] Virtually all realms of Sri Lankan life like the politics, the economics, and the culture had to adapt to the centralizing force of the British empire and so religion had to follow suit.[51] Even though Christianity itself was rejected, the economically privileged new classes emerging in society adapted Buddhism in the image of Christianity. This is why Gananath Obeyesekere, pioneered the term for this process as "Protestant Buddhism."[52]

It must be noted that the new Buddhists did not see what they were doing as a "reform" but rather a "renaissance." A renaissance that sought to recover "the true Buddhism and Buddhist Sinhala culture that had been corrupted by various outside influences and by the ritualism of the peasantry."[53] Seneviratne observes that the "tension between renaissance and reformation is the most striking feature and source of the inner conflict and ambivalence of the entire nationalist movement."[54]

Another aspect of the movement that had lasting effects is the integration of Sinhala ethnicity into the new form of Buddhism. Writing in 1999, Seneviratne claims that "[this] powerful merging of religious and ethnic identities held sway until very recently, when the ethnic crisis brought the Sinhala Christians and Buddhists somewhat closer

49. Seneviratne, 24.
50. Seneviratne, 25.
51. Seneviratne, 25.
52. Richard F. Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1988), 4.
53. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings*, 26.
54. Seneviratne, 26.

together in the same way as it did the Tamil Hindus and Christians."[55] Most recently, I would argue, the political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka (2022) has further broken down the ethnic and religious link described above.

A central figure behind the neo-Buddhist reform was a Buddhist monk called Anargarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) who envisioned a "regenerated Buddhist utopia… same as the one lost to colonial rule, except for one major difference, namely, that economically it would approximate a modern industrial society of the West."[56] He invented the widely held, yet false, notion of the monk's central role in precolonial Sinhala society.[57]

Dharmapala's plan toward utopian Sri Lanka "[involved] a vision of an ideal political and cultural order in which indigenous culture and morality are the preeminent determinants of value and behavior."[58] In other words, Dharmapala's vision is twofold: first, the economic and pragmatic and second, the political and ideological.[59] However, as Seneviratne remarks, "After the electoral victory of the nationalist forces in 1956, this ethos of the nationalist elites was translated into national policy, with adverse consequences for the minorities."[60]

In later years, the discrimination and subjugation of Tamils and other minorities transpired into a thirty-year civil war between the Tamil rebel group, LTTE (Liberation Tamil Tigers Eelam) and the predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist government. Even though a bloody and abrupt end was brought to the war, the fundamental issue of Land remains unresolved for Tamils. Due to the restriction of the scope and space of this paper, we cannot explore the details of this conflict or other conflicts in Sri Lanka that were motivated by a Buddhist-nationalist political ideology.

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55. Seneviratne, 26.

56. H. L. Seneviratne, "Religion and Conflict," in *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik,* ed. Douglas Johnston (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 82.

57. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings,* 27.

58. Seneviratne, "Religion and Conflict," 82.

59. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings,* 36.

60. Seneviratne, "Religion and Conflict," 82.

However, it is not a stretch to claim that the New Buddhism movement and the Sinhala-Buddhist ideology has had immense influence on the Sri Lankan political and social landscape. Today, the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology continues to undergird and shape the philosophy of any new development, whether that is economic policy or legislations, and dictate the terms of the Sri Lankan political discourse.

For Sri Lanka to truly overcome its cyclical issues relating to ethno-religious conflict, it cannot do so through secular political philosophies that either denigrate or are indifferent to religion. Spirituality and religiosity are immutable components of the South Asian ethos. This is where Pentecostalism can offer a fresh perspective that can address ethno-religious diversity and other social issues like gender equality, classism, etc. However, because of space I will restrict my reflection on the Pentecost event/motif to address ethno-religious diversity within a pneumatic eschatological framework in the following section. It will also seek to substitute a politics of fear and self-preservation based on apocalypticism and escapism that currently characterize SLP's socio-political orientation with a politic of hope and proactive engagement of the world in the power of the Spirit.

4.2. Pneumatological apocalypticism and the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3-8)

The event of Pentecost is of crucial importance in the Christian tradition for the Church's understanding of the doctrine of the Spirit and the mission of the church. It has been particularly important for pentecostals as a theological starting point. Pentecostal scholar, Daniela C. Augustine observes that "[the] event of Pentecost serves as the hermeneutical lens and anchor of Pentecostal theological inquiry, continually shaping Pentecostal theology as a theology of Pentecost."[61] Therefore, it is a fitting and

61. Daniela C. Augustine, "The Spirit in Word and Sacrament: Reflections on Potential Contributions of Eastern Orthodoxy to the

logical starting place for SLP's political project focused on addressing ethno-religious diversity while validating socio-political involvement.

Luke records in the book of Acts, that Jesus Christ, prior to his ascension, had instructed his disciples to gather up in Jerusalem and wait for the gift of the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5). In verse 3, Luke provides the immediate context in which Jesus said this: Jesus had been speaking to them about the Kingdom of God. In verse 7, in response to the disciples' quite mediocre understanding of the kingdom—they understood the kingdom only in terms of the Jewish nation and land— and when it will be restored, Christ says, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:7-8). In Jesus' response, Luke captures how the scope of the salvation-historical narrative that had so far been exclusive to the Jewish people, with some hints of future development, has now been expanded to the ends of the earth. Thereby, Luke at the very outset marks the Pentecost event as a global phenomenon within the context of the gospel of the kingdom yet extending beyond the confines of the Jewish ethnic identity.

In Steven Land's landmark work, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, he has argued that the "kingdom" paradigm is central to understanding pentecostal spirituality and its core affections relating to the "last days," at least as found in the beginnings of the movement. He writes,

> The distinctive apocalyptic affections of Pentecostalism [is] the integrating core for its narrative beliefs and practices. But the decisive context and ever present horizon for most usefully and comprehensibly displaying those beliefs, practices and affections is eschatological: the

Development of Pentecostal Liturgical Theology," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology 29*, no. 1 (February 17, 2020): 59, https://doi.org/10.1163/17455251-02901004.

> presence of God who, as Spirit, is the agent of the inbreaking, soon-to-be consummated kingdom of God.

This already present framework within Pentecostal spirituality can help circumvent the apocalyptic futurism wrought by dispensationalism with an apocalyptic understanding of the last days as in-between the present dispensation and the *Parousia* and as the in-breaking of the kingdom of God governed by the Spirit. Overcoming the notion that the end is a sign of desolation and moving onto a pneumatological apocalypticism that sees the end-time events as "nature's reactions to the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh" (Acts 2:19) is paramount for a Pentecostal eschatology of hope.[62] Yong's summary of Land's insights is helpful here: "the apocalyptic affections of pentecostal spirituality are indicative of both of its pietistic passions that are wholly responsive to the outpouring of the Spirit and of the ensuing missionary commitments that are motivated for the sake of the world and in the hopes of the world's reconciliation to God."[63] Not only does this alter the register of apocalypticism from a hostile view of the world to one of compassionate service, it recovers the true the essence of Pentecostal longings and mission.

Yong, however, goes further than Land. He argues that the apocalyptic nature of the Spirit's in-breaking work "manifests and anticipates not just the *time* of the kingdom but redeems the many *places* of the world in anticipation of the kingdom."[64] Drawing on the correlation between Acts 1:8, referring to evangelism to the ends of the earth, and Acts 13:47, indicating "salvation" to the ends of the earth when the Spirit is poured out, Yong argues that according to Luke, not only the "*time* of the last days has begun with the coming of Spirit, but he also says that the *place* of the kingdom is now being redeemed by the Spirit."[65] Such an

62. Yong, *In the Days of Caesar,* 330.
63. Yong, 331.
64. Yong, 331.
65. Yong, 331. Yong makes the claim that the "ends of the earth" includes geographies, spaces, and places based on Vitor Westhelle's

understanding can further revises SLP's dispensational inclination toward escapism and a non-corporeal otherworldliness and establishes what is commonly known as the "already and not yet" tension of the kingdom. This invites an incarnational and holistic approach to mission and political engagement while maintaining the core features of pentecostal spirituality. That is, a "a pneumatological apocalypticism looks not merely for the future salvation of the world but for the present salvation of all flesh by the power of the inbreaking Spirit."[66]

4.3. The Spirit poured out on all flesh (Acts 2:1-21)

The outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost, and the book of Acts in general, is an important locus for the pentecostal distinctive of *Spirit Baptism*. Typically understood as the infilling and second experience of the Spirit, Pentecostals locate the energy and power for holiness and mission in this event. Not just as an event of the past, pentecostals consistent with a "this-is-that hermeneutic," see it as an experience available to anyone (*all flesh*) subsequent to conversion. However, this pentecostal reading of the baptism in the Spirit has been widely contested, most formidably by James Dunn, who sees Spirit-baptism as part of what he calls conversion-initiation than a separate experience.[67] He argues that

> if a theology of 'baptism in the Spirit' is to be based on the NT teaching on the subject, it must refer to the beginning of the Christian experience, the action by which God draws the individual into the sphere of the Spirit, into the community of those 'being saved', and thus makes a decisive beginning

"Liberation Theology: A Latitudinal Perspective," in Jerry L. Walls, *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 311-27, esp. pp. 320- 23.

66. Yong, 332.

67. James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-Examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

of the work of saving grace in that individual.[68]

Even though the character of this debate is not our present concern, the response of Pentecostal scholars in the last several decades to Dunn's thesis is key to understanding the missional scope and theological significance of Pentecost to pentecostals. Blake Shelton, an early pentecostal respondent to Dunn, asserts that Dunn has superimposed Pauline soteriology into the Luke-Acts narrative. He argues that,

> Luke does not show as much interest as Paul in the Spirit's role in conversion...rather, power for mission catches the majority of Luke's attention... The works of the Holy Spirit, though varied, serve one primary function in Luke-Acts: to witness to the ministry of Jesus and to bring about the working of salvation in the church. The primary function of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts is to witness concerning Jesus... Luke maintains the traditional divisions of salvation history in the different epochs up to a point. He sets aside these divisions, however, when he talks about the activity of the Holy Spirit... The dominant theme of the Holy Spirit directing inspired speaking is the connection between Luke and Acts... Many assume that the Pentecost experience is a conversion to Christ and an initiation into the church, when in reality, Luke primarily considers it an experience of empowering for mission.[69]

The emphasis away from a soteriological reading of Pentecost by pentecostals like Shelton also denotes the paradox between dispensationalism and Pentecostalism. That is, dispensationalism has historically maintained a cessasionist view on the charismatic gifts initiated at Pentecost based on the already described soteriological

68. James D. G. Dunn, "Baptism in the Spirit: A Response to Pentecostal Scholarship on Luke-Acts," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology 1,* no. 3 (1993): 6, https://doi.org/10.1177/096673699300100301.

69. James B. Shelton, *Mighty in Word and Deed: The Role of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 6, 10, 26, 120, 127.

conception, whereas pentecostals were quite satisfied to modify the system on that point by seeing Pentecost as a charismatic commissioning of the church.

Apart from the missional emphasis of Pentecost, the pentecostal scholar, Roger Stronstad points to other specific factors that characterize the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, three of which are pertinent to our discussion: First, he says, "the gift of the Spirit is eschatological; that is, it is a gift in the last days (Acts 2:17) … According to Peter, the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost is but one of many manifestations of the Spirit in the last days."[70] Second, "the gift of the Spirit is prophetic. Peter explicitly identifies the tongues-speaking of the disciples to be a manifestation of inspired prophecy (Acts 2:17)."[71] Since the people heard the tongue-speaking as praising "the mighty deeds of God" (2:11), Peter identifies it praise and worship that is inspired by the Spirit. "By virtue of their prophetic inspiration, the disciples constitute a prophetic community."[72] Third, "the gift of the Spirit is universal. At this point Peter emphasizes that it is universal in status, not geographical or chronological: it is for the young as well as the old, for female as well as male, for slaves as well as free (Acts 2:17–18)… Indeed, in the last days the gift of the Spirit is as potentially universal as the gift of grace (2:39)."[73] These three elements all cohere in the Pentecost narrative to form the basis for a Pentecostal political theology that is inspired by the missional, eschatological, prophetic, and universal nature of the Spirit endowed and Spirit empowered community. I will unpack these further within the narrative of Pentecost below.

Irrespective of the different views on Spirit-baptism as either conversion-initiation or a second experience, the main thrust of Luke's message is preserved when the expansive nature of God's mission to the whole world and

70. Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke: Trajectories from the Old Testament to Luke-Acts,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), *57.*

71. Stronstad, *57.*

72. Stronstad, *57.*

73. Stronstad, *57*

all people is not eclipsed by an exclusivist soteriology. Therefore, the empowering of the Spirit charges God's people in a profound sense to witness to Christ and the kingdom breaking-in in its multifaceted dimensions, not least in the prophetic and political sense. The unique characteristics of the event itself, like "tongue speaking" and the gathering of a multi-cultural and multi-national people, are markers of the kaleidoscopic vision of God and the telos of creation now manifest through the Spirit-baptized church.

Furthermore, many scholars have pointed out the salient connection between the "speaking in other tongues" at Pentecost and the confusing of languages at Babel. As seen in Acts 2:6-8, the upper room experience although beginning with the disciples of Christ attracts a crowd bewildered "because each one heard their own language being spoken." Again, Luke diverges here from a notion of the Pentecost event as limited to the Jews or even just the disciples to a universal community. Hence, Peter begins his address to the crowd in Acts 2:14 reciting Joel 2:28-32: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people…" The significance of "all people," sometimes translated as all "flesh," in the mission of God is never clearer than here as evidenced when the "Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs" heard the disciples declaring the wonders of God in their own tongues (Acts 2:9-11). Whereas at Babel humans collude to uphold the hegemony of Nimrod's empire and establish a name for themselves (Gen 11), in Acts the people of God come together in worship of the name of the one true God. The separation of the families of humanity that transpired at Babel is reversed at Pentecost with the unification of ethnicities, nationalities, races, and people of various languages. This unity is by no means uniformity or homogeneity since the diversity of language, culture, and ethnicity are preserved.

4.3. The Prophetic and the political implications

While pentecostals celebrate the diversity of this expression and early pentecostal gatherings evidenced the breaking down of ethnic and language barriers, the political implications are left unexplored. As Martin Mittelstadt observes,

> [due] to the explosive growth of Pentecostalism in politically sensitive areas, contemporary Pentecostals need to explore further the socio-political implications of Luke-Acts. Earlier categories such as peacemaking, suffering and persecution will remain acute in a culture of violence… Furthermore, in light of the prominent emphasis upon implications surrounding the Pentecost event, Pentecostals would do well to investigate the political significance of the diverse crowd mapped out in Acts 2.5-11. According to Gary Gilbert, Luke's list of nations expresses not merely the universal appeal and availability of the gospel, but also an alternative to a powerful Roman ideology. Gilbert argues that Luke uses the list of nations to advance the expansive nature of the gospel and thereby undermine Roman propaganda.[74]

That is, the Pentecost motif stands in direct opposition and serves as a subversive narrative to both the Babel and Roman ideology of ethnocentrism and homogenization. Not merely in spectacle or in passivity, as Stronstad has shown, the Spirit-baptized and Spirit-empowered church have been anointed with prophethood. He writes, "the creation of the disciples as a community of prophets is as epochal as the earlier creation of Israel as a kingdom of priests. That is, on the day of Pentecost, and for the second time in the history of his people, God is visiting his people on his holy mountain and mediating a new vocation for

74. Martin William Mittelstadt, *Reading Luke-Acts in the Pentecostal Tradition* (Cleveland, Tenn.: CPT Press, 2010), 154.

them—prophethood rather than royal priesthood."[75] This new found vocation that is not without political gravitas is what enabled the early Christians to confront the powers and principalities, the rulers and authorities, and the forces of darkness that resisted the kingdom of God.

Here, Alistair Roberts' description of the connection between the prophetic and the political implications of Pentecost provokes an image of SLP's potential for socio-political engagement. He writes,

> The prophet is a member of the divine ruling council, participating in its deliberations, and charged with playing the 'angelic' role of communicating its judgments to the powers of this world. The prophet is also often defined by suffering witness and frequent martyrdom. Luke's narrative identifies the Church as continuing the prophetic mission of Jesus, bearing the authorization and power of Jesus' Spirit, enjoying privileged access to the heavenly court, and delivering the judgments of God in Christ to kings and rulers. It should come as no surprise to us that the rest of the book of Acts is filled with confrontations and showdowns with various rulers and authorities.[76]

5. Conclusion

So far in this paper, we have seen that Sri Lanka has faced recurring socio-political and socio-economic crises and has failed to addresses the ethno-religious conflicts at its center. In this context, SLP has had minimal political engagement in terms of contributing from its own resources toward a robust political theology that addresses ethnic and religious diversity and seeks to uphold socio-

75. Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology* (Cleveland, Tenn: CPT Press, 2010), 53.

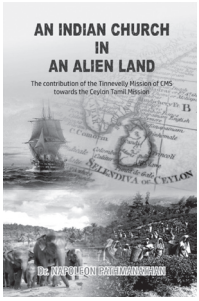
76. "The Politics of Making a Prophet—Acts 2:1-21 (Alastair Roberts)," Political Theology Network, May 18, 2015, https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-making-a-prophet-acts-21-21/.

political stability. While Sri Lankan pentecostals are an active and mobilized community committed to evangelism and mission, their current understanding of this mission is devoid of any political dimensions. Any political interest shown if often telling of American and Zionist influence. I have shown that this in large part due to the eschatological inheritance of dispensationalism via missionaries and other influences from the West. The apocalypticism, futurism, and radical dualism that is entailed in the dispensationalism system is neither congruent with pentecostal spirituality nor is it sufficiently cognizant of the Sri Lankan historical context. Due to inseparable link between eschatology and political theology, a renewed eschatological vision of hope must replace the dispensational one for an indigenous and genuine pentecostal political theology to emerge. I have attempted to provide the preliminary factors required for such a project through reflections on the narrative and implications of Pentecost. Namely, the missional and eschatological thrust of the Pentecost narrative reevaluates the soteriological readings that have typically been the dominant interpretation.

However, the pentecostal reading of Pentecost not only expands the missional vision of God for the world that asserts the dignity and value of ethno-linguistic diversity, but also confronts pentecostal misgivings about political engagement. Luke through the Spirit-baptism motif that is central to Pentecostal theology, presents important Old Testament correlations to establish the prophetic role of the Spirit-baptized-charismatic community that is the church. This means, for SLP to move toward a more robust missional presence in the new political climate of Sri Lanka, it must not only disentangle from its dispensational allegiance but also recover its prophetic voice. This may include, seeking to actively join forces with other communities wherever it can in humanitarian efforts, speaking truth to power and require accountability from corrupt regimes, seek to facilitate and demonstrate ethnic and religious harmony through non-superficial engagement and dialogue, and pray and protest against the forces

and agents of darkness that disrupt progress toward life, flourishing, and hope. As a community so formed by the Spirit of Pentecost, SLP must not only seek to announce the post-resurrection new world but also seeks to embody a new way of being in this new world by the power of the Spirit.

BOOK REVIEW



Napoleon Pathmanathan. *An Indian Church in an Alien Land: The Contribution of the Tinnevelly Mission of CMS towards the Ceylon Tamil Missions*. Madurai: Kirubai Publications, 2022.

This book is based on the doctoral research of Dr. Napoleon Pathmanathan, who has written with meticulous accuracy, documenting historical findings, and applying them to missiological and ministerial praxis. This work discusses the 19th century Tinnevelly Mission of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and its extension to British Ceylon among Tamil communities of Indian origin. The author's painstaking efforts to draw from the primary sources of the missionary reports archived at the University of Birmingham, Lambeth Palace Library in UK, and consult many other relevant secondary resources are to be highly appreciated. The author informs us that his motivation to explore this history is because it represents his own spiritual and cultural heritage. As an experienced academic theologian who has taught at Colombo Theological Seminary for decades and a committed lay preacher in the Anglican Church in Sri Lanka, Dr. Pathmanathan has contributed immensely to the historiography of Tamil Christianity and World Christianity in the following ways:

Firstly, the author's primary concern in the book is to correct the faulty narrative that Christianity is a foreign religion which came along with British imperialists to subjugate native peoples of colonized territories. He highlights the fact that missionaries must be distinguished from the colonizers because they fought for the rights of oppressed native peoples, contributing to their emancipation and liberation Particularly in the case of Sri Lanka, it was not the foreign missionaries who brought the Christian faith to the Tamil people of Indian origin but the

same Tamil community from Tinnevelly who brought their new faith and the new life of freedom, dignity, and agency they had found through the gospel to their migrant labour community in Ceylon.

Secondly, another common fallacy about colonial-era Christian missions is that it merely produced 'rice Christians', people who converted only for material benefits. Dr. Pathmanathan refutes this idea by his careful analysis of mass movement theory. What happened in 19th century in Tinnevelly was not a mass movement initiated by the decisions of leaders of large communities; rather it was a revival movement which produced large numbers of individual conversions carefully verified by missionaries with high standards personal faith and morality. Therefore, conversion was understood to be is the work of the Holy Spirit. Today, anti-Christian fundamentalists in India and Sri Lanka strongly advocate against conversions to Christianity, not knowing that conversion cannot be sustained by coercion or enticement, but by the Holy Spirit who cannot be manipulated or obstructed.

Thirdly, while doing apologetics against these false claims the author is critical of the blind spots of the Christian church both past and present. With careful attention to the missionary methods of the Tinnelvelly model, which was a Pietistic Lutheran one, Dr. Pathmanathan calls for the re-evaluation and correction of certain contemporary missional practices, calling instead for a return to the missional empowerment of indigenous people and the adoption of indigenous methods for the expansion of the kingdom of God.

Fourthly, the author announces emphatically and empathetically that this history is a subaltern one. It is written from the perspective of the native people of the Tamil communities 'from below' bringing to the foreground the real native agency operating behind the success of great missionaries like Charles Theophilus Ewald Rhenius ('Rhenius Ayer'), all the while without downplaying the importance of the contributions of those missionaries. Thus, the author exemplifies the way historians ought

to write history 'from below' to bring about unknown and undocumented stories of indigenous missionaries, movements, and practices in order to document, educate and transform.

Fifthly, there are five chapters in the book. They give us the contemporary approaches to historiography, the characteristics of the Tinnevelly Mission, the Tamil Coolie Mission, and the Colombo Tamil Mission. The final chapter is full of applications of the lessons learned. The author's extensive knowledge of the primary sources and secondary literature on the subject and his critique of earlier work by scholars like Dr. Jayasiri Pieris are illuminating and challenging.

My only criticism of the book is that it passes over lightly the issue of indentured Indian Tamil 'coolies', paying little attention to the inhumane way by which the British colonial government and European planters exploited migrant labourers to work on coffee and tea estates. The author treats this episode as if it is a cooked up story, whereas there are numerous scholars who have discussed this inhumane exploitation of Indian Tamil people by colonial British mercantilists. M.S. Muttiah's *Chithaikapatta Malayga Tamizharhal* (Vidiyal Pathipagam) and Donovan Moldrich's *Bitter Berry Bondage* (Neptune Publications) come readily to mind. These carefully documented accounts cannot be ignored or downplayed.

Nevertheless, this work ought to be widely read by Christian pastors, lay leaders, theologians, and interested lay readers to understand one of the most influential missionary and revival movements in Christian history, and apply the lessons learned for our contemporary Christian practice, particularly in the context of today's anti-Christian fundamentalism.

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