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Editorial

Contextual indigenous theologizing is the main concern of this issue of the Mizoram Journal of Theology. Any contextual theology must be concerned, among other things, with justice. It should facilitate holistic growth, dignity of all persons, and partnership in giving expression to God's creative eschatological purposes on earth. And so this issue in particular addresses the concern of women: their status, partnership, role and ministry in the church. It is encouraging to note that the Presbyterian Church of India has taken up the matter for serious discussion. A consultation was organized during May 2009 at which there was equal representation of women and men and they freely and frankly discussed matters related to women's ordination. The Church in North East India needs to re-conceptualize ordained ministry in its twenty-first century context.

Not only Christian ministry but also the entire view and way of life need to be re-conceptualized. It is here that the Mizo ethos of *tlawmngaihna* has to permeate, inspire and activate Christian Theology. *Tlawmngaihna* is a spirit of community concern, of selflessness and dedication in service, patience in tribulation, exemplary courage and chivalry, all rolled into one. Jesus Christ serves as an exemplary model of *tlawmngaihna*. The individualistic, self-centred ethos of the contemporary globalized world needs to emulate the *tlawmngai* Jesus.

Globalization could be said to be a greed-based economy. Human beings are seduced by mammon. If wealth and prosperity enhance honour and respect for wealthy people, why do the eighth century biblical prophets sharply criticize them? At the same time if economic poverty is associated with dishonour and shame, why should the prophets treat the poor and the weak as their precious fellow beings who deserve honour and dignity? It is transformatively instructive to reinterpret Hosea from the Mizo concept of honour and shame in society.

Temptation or seduction is often symbolized by the form of a serpent. The Bible and Christian tradition have looked at the serpent as the veritable representative of Satan! It is high time that Christians had a closer look at Genesis chapter 3 to answer the query, "Who is the serpent in Genesis 3?" In this issue we have a Mizo scholar engaged in such a study, making use of different methods: translation, form critical analysis, narratological investigation and synthesis.

We hope this issue would intellectually stimulate the readers and spiritually commit them to a relevant understanding and responsible expression of Christian faith and practice.

RE-CONCEPTUALIZING CHRISTIAN MINISTRY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

*Roger Gaikwad **

As we are aware, the main concern of this consultation is to address the issue of women's ordination in the faith and practice of the Presbyterian Church of India. Therefore this paper is focussed on the subject of Ordained Ministry as it seeks to re-conceptualize Christian Ministry in the twenty-first century.

The Need to Re-Form the Present Structure of Ordained Ministry *The Reformation Tradition Legacy has to Undergo Change*

Why do we need to re-conceptualize ordained ministry in our times? The simple answer is that the present order of ordained ministry which we have inherited from the Reformation tradition is tending to be outdated, inadequate and oligarchical within a democratic set-up. Having evolved in patriarchal societies where men made decisions and governed, the structure of Christian ministry followed similar lines. Men were to be elders, pastors, deacons and church administrators. What was expected of women was that they should learn to be humble, sacrificial yet cheerful helpers of their fathers, brothers, husbands or sons engaged in full-time ministry. Christian ministry was thus a mirror image of the patriarchal society of the times. In the so-called Christian western mono-religious societies, ministry consisted largely of looking after the congregations. It was therefore natural that Christian ministry was reduced to ordained pastoral ministry, mainly the ministry of the word and the sacraments. Theological education was centred on knowing the Bible and cultivating biblical exposition skills, learning and teaching Christian doctrines, training in homiletics, conducting

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worship and sacraments, lessons in pastoral administration, care and counselling, and engaging in charitable activities.

In the context of the society's structure of monarchy, landlordism and early capitalism, and in a geographical, technological and cultural situation in which communication and travel were difficult, ministerial vocations had to belong to men. The political, economic and social structure fostered hierarchy or domination of one group over another at different levels and to varying degrees in different churches. The attraction to position and power gave rise to self-centred aspirations, different groupings and competition within the church polity, and temptations to corruption. How could women survive in such situations? Furthermore difficulties of travel, the related insecurities and hardships for women, the need to look after children at home, and the inherited traditional culture which said that a woman's place was in her home, made full-time Christian ministry the exclusive preserve of men. Martin Luther himself asserted that "the wife should stay at home and look after the affairs of the household as one who has been deprived of the ability of administering those affairs that are outside and concern the state..." John Calvin affirmed that "the woman's place is in the home."¹

True, in due course of time there came to be certain orders of deaconesses or sisters in some traditions, women missionaries (particularly zenana missionaries and Bible Women), women nurses and doctors and other women workers who gave their lives in full time Christian service. However their ministries were regulated by men. Their services were considered to be subordinate complementary ministries to those of ordained men.

Unfulfilling Impact of the Modern Period on Women in Christian Ministry

From the eighteenth century onwards as values of the enlightenment, rationalism, and modernism penetrated society, and as the impact of industrialization and urbanization began to be felt, the issue of equality

of sexes also came to the fore. Even theological education which operated from a patriarchal framework was also opened to women. Consciously or unconsciously, women have been and are being given the training meant for men. It is not that women are incapable of undergoing such a training; many of them even surpass men in completing this type of theological education. However the mould of this training is patriarchal. The principle of equality may well be respected, but the ideologies, structures, strategies and models that are being imbibed are basically male oriented.

As such, as was implied earlier, theological education was centred mainly on facilitating pastoral ministry for men in the western mono-religious Christian context, and so when women undergo such training it becomes all the more inadequate. For instance, in the Homiletics class a woman preacher is criticized if she gestures in the manner men usually do. She is thereby prevented from getting into the spirit of her sermon. If she preaches using a still posture, she gets criticized for being a boring preacher! On a much more serious note, a female theological student may use inclusive language, but the psychological conceptions and experiences of God deep down within her may still be patriarchal! So also, while being critical of authoritarian patriarchal ways of theological education and ministry, many women tend to behave just like men when they acquire positions of authority and power in the church and society. As per the patriarchal culture, a woman chairing a meeting in the P.C.I. is still called “Chairman.” The structural ethos of even women’s fellowship meetings is still “patriarchal.”

No Church Structure, though contextually suitable, can be Eternally Fixed

The church polity which was handed over by the missionaries to the Khasis, Mizos and other indigenous people groups in North East India fitted well with their patriarchal social structure. Though the matrilineal culture prevailed among some of them, their administrative socio-

political structure was still largely patriarchal. The system of ordained pastors and elders in the congregations matched the socio-cultural political structure of chiefs and the council of elders. It was they who made decisions and executed them. As in the indigenous set-up, women did the serving, provided hospitality, participated in social celebrations, and even in some cases had custody of religious artifacts, so also in the church, women have been serving, raising funds, and being channels of enhancing religious fervour. Women who submit to the authority and decisions of the leaders in the church and society have been considered to be virtuous and noble like the Marthas of Jesus' time.

This patriarchal structure as an ideal appears perfect for the church and society. It is similar to the view of Peter who approved of the Roman civil political system and exhorted the Christians saying, "Be subject to the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right." (I Pet.2:13-14). However Peter had realized that the system was proving oppressive because of the people who wielded authority in that system. Therefore he cryptically nicknames Rome as Babylon in I Pet.5:13, Babylon being the symbol of oppression and evil. Peter himself refused to obey the institution of the Sanhedrin when he was admonished not to proclaim the gospel. He along with John asserted, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." (Acts.4:19-20). While the civil political system was good for law and order in his time and therefore considered as divinely ordained, it could still be misused or manipulated by people in power.

Furthermore, no socio-political structure is eternally suitable and desirable. In spite of its weaknesses, a system may serve some good purpose at a point in time as monarchy did for the people of Israel under David. It united the warring tribes of Israel and gave them a

sense of identity and dignity as a nation. But, as we know, monarchy has given way in human history to people's nationalism and republics emphasizing liberty, equality and fraternity. In the historical background of those people's movements, we have also seen societies moving from agricultural economies to industrial economies. As contexts change, certain socio-political structures, no matter how ideal they may have been in the past, also need to undergo change. If they don't change with the times they become either a powerful, successful but burdensome tradition (like the monarchy of King Solomon) or a gradually corroding structure while newer attractive structures come up in competition (like the weakening of older churches in the U.K. where I.T. revolution, post-modernism, and other influences presently hold sway, and the rise of new church groups, charismatic fellowships, etc.).

The Changed Context demands Appropriate Modifications in Ordained Ministry

The situation in the world at large, in India in general and in North East India in particular has undergone change. People groups and their lands have been fitted into nations and political administrative units during the twentieth century. Education has been made available to both men and women. Higher institutions of learning including professional institutions have been set up. Women have come out of their homes. They have become academically and professionally qualified. They have become additional, or even in some cases sole, bread winners in their homes. Women have formed their own cooperatives and organizations. The governments have special schemes and projects for women. Customary tribal laws are now being questioned and reviewed by civil society bodies. Some of the women have become active in party politics. Deforestation is taking place rapidly, dams and super highways are being constructed through the length and breadth of the region. Environmental hazards and ecological problems are increasing. North East India is no more the romantic idyllic place of peace and tranquility. Political movements for affirming

of rights and dignity are churning the region. North East India is not a mono-religious and mono-cultural place. There is a greater mingling of people as well as increasing expressions of ethnic communalism. While the church in general seems to be growing in numbers it is faced with several challenges: HIV and AIDS, drug abuse, alcoholism, cyber cafe addiction, broken homes, charismatic movements, schisms, court cases, etc. Many young men and women are going for theological education, but the demands of Christian ministry are also becoming increasingly rigorous and challenging. In such a context can the P.C.I. rest content with following the ordained ministry pattern given to them in the early twentieth century by the mission agencies, who themselves have altered their ordained ministry structure in the changed contexts of their own homelands? While those patterns might have been relevant for the early twentieth century North East Indian context (where the number of converts was small, people were still largely agricultural, modern education was yet to spread, the land was thickly forested, and travel was difficult, etc.), are they now not needing to undergo change?

Therefore the church needs to look afresh at its understanding of ordained Christian ministry in the present twenty first century context. It is not simply a concern about the ordained ministry of women; rather it is a matter of the ordained ministry of both men and women. To do so, the church would have to clarify what it means by ordained ministry. The church needs to remind itself that ordained ministry is not some office to be filled, but it is a service which responds to the needs of the people just as Jesus rendered service to the people in his times. The church does require people to conduct worship, to administer sacraments, to study and teach the word of God, to chair meetings, to render care and counselling, etc. However the forms and content of the worship and sacraments need to be edifying, the hermeneutics of the scripture has to be relevant, the issues at meetings need to be wisely discerned and decided upon, and care and counselling need to go beyond simplistic quoting of scripture and

emotional prayers. Even in such so-called routine ministerial matters the service rendered is more important than the office that is occupied by the minister. One does not deny that the legacy of Christian ministry of the past with its history, tradition, and knowledge are important and should not be by-passed. However the past should not be allowed to determine the present and future forms of ordained ministry and ministerial formation; rather the lessons of the past should be used creatively and constructively in the service of the church and society.

Towards Re-Conceptualizing Ordained Ministry in the Twenty-First Century

Reconceptualizing in terms of Persons

One of the options before the P.C.I. is to bring about suitable modifications in its present structure of ordained ministry. As per Constitutional provision, there is no bar for women from being elected and ordained as elders and ministers of the Church. The wordings of the Constitution show no gender bias in describing the offices of Elders, Probationary Pastors and Ministers.² Almost 10 years ago, the Presbyterian Women's Fellowship in a consultation organized at Aizawl during November 5-7, 1999 suggestively stated, "We rejoice with those of our sisters in partner churches in India and all over the world who have accorded equal status and responsibility with men in Christian ministry. It is our desire, aspiration and prayer that in the new millennium, women in the Prebyterian Church (of India) would be enabled to serve as elders and ministers."³

In other words, some people are reconceptualizing ordained ministry in terms of the persons and not in terms of the nature and content of ordained ministry. Ordained women along with ordained men would be in charge of church administration and spiritual welfare including the ministry of the word and the sacraments. As such there is no spiritual or theological difference in the sight of God as to who performs such ministry. Both men and women could fulfill God's spiritual demands of service: Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in

God's holy place? *Anyone* who has clean hands and a pure heart! (cf. Ps.24: 3-4a). A person called to ordained ministry must be "above reproach, *having one spouse*, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money." (cf. 1 Tim. 3:3).

It is patriarchal society which has restricted ordained ministry to men for socio-cultural reasons. They have quoted scripture, used the cultural purity-impurity argument for religious services, and the biological physical strength factor in defence of their position. Today however this patriarchal society does not mind having women political heads of the nation, women government officers, women commercial C.E.O.s, women air pilots, women police officers, women surgeons, woman counsellors, etc. Women are considered mentally and physically fit, and biologically and culturally pure to hold such positions. If such is the case, why should the 21st century P.C.I. not consider women suitable for ordained ministry? If fathers, husbands, brothers and sons can allow the women folk in their homes to play a leading role in the society at large, why should they not allow the women to do the same in the church?. Christianity should transform socio-culture; socio-culture should not control and curb the gospel. As far as scripture is concerned, men are selective in their following of biblical culture. For instance Christianity has rejected slavery though slavery is part of the biblical socio-culture. From a liberationist perspective slavery and women's subordination are analogous. So if slavery is rejected why not women's subordination?⁴ What is required is a political inclination and a cultural reorientation. The spirit should be willing and the flesh should be strong!

However we need to remember that such conceptualizing of ordained ministry is being desired within the existing patriarchal culture. Even though women could be ordained, the structure of society, its thought process and ethos would still be patriarchal. At best, ordained women ministers would end up behaving like ordained men!

Reconceptualizing in terms of Principles and Practices

What is required is a reorganization of ordained ministry in particular and of society in general on non-patriarchal lines. One discerns insights of an alternative structure to patriarchy in the book of Ruth. Firstly, it is not the traditional male perspectival story of heroes and villains. All the main characters in the story are presented as being basically good. Secondly, in the story, the characters discern that there are different options in life, unlike the patriarchal traditions which have only rigid traditions to be followed in society. Thirdly, the story of Ruth emphasizes ecumenical inclusiveness unlike the patriarchal exclusiveness of the tribal society of her times as represented by books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Yes, there are alternatives to patriarchal structures. The Sermon on the Mount and the Love Chapter in I Corinthians (chapter 13) highlight such alternative paradigms. It is within such alternative structures that ordained ministry needs to be conceptualized.

Patriarchal society gives decision making power only to men. In the alternative structure, decision making power would be shared by both men and women, the elders and the young ones. Peter reminds us of God's vision for the Church: "And in the last days it shall be, God declares that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy." (Acts 2:17-18). If God is ordaining women to prophesy and to declare visions, should they not also share in the decision making process of the church?

In patriarchal society, sanctity, power and authority have been exclusively delegated to the elect body of church administrators, and ministers of the word and the sacraments. Should the electorate, the church, also elect and ordain people to be ministers of care and

counselling, of sacred music and other Christian arts, of Christian education, evangelism and social transformation, of youth, women and children's ministries, etc.? While equality of respect and status need to be maintained, it should be remembered that equality in ministry does not necessarily mean sameness or uniformity of ordained ministry. The uniqueness of individuals in ministry and their talents and creativity need to be cultivated and utilized. The gifts of the Spirit have no gender bias; no distinction is made between males and females in the conferring of gifts. Nor is there any hierarchy of gifts; all the gifts are intrinsically related to make an organic whole. Since the Holy Spirit grants individuals diverse gifts for the edification of the church and its ministry in society, they should all be granted corporate authoritative sanctity. The ordained workers will all be of the same mind, having the same love, doing nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility counting others better than themselves (cf. Phil.2:2-3; Rom. 12:3-5). Diversity and complementarity in ordained ministry, creative tensions and mutuality in ministerial services need to be recognized, cultivated and strengthened. The Reformation slogan of the 'Priesthood of all believers' needs to be appropriated afresh in our times.

End Notes

- ¹ "Women in Christianity," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Christianity.
- ² The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church of India, Part II, Chapter I, section 6 (Shillong: Presbyterian Church of India, 2004, seventh revised edition)
- ³ H.M. Rapphap, "Partnership of Women and Men in the Mission of the General Assembly of PCI," Unpublished Paper presented at the seminar on 'The Role of Women in the Church' at Shillong, during November 5-7, 2002, p.3.
- ⁴ "Women in Christianity," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Christianity.

ORDAINED MINISTRY OF WOMEN IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECCLESIOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF PCI

Lalnghakthuami *

Introduction:

The concept of ordained ministry and its inclusion of women, to many churches might not be a new issue in this 21st century. With the changing technological advancement and the impact of mass media on the community there has been a change in many of the concepts that the communities have valued and cherished. It is so with the idea and concept of ordained ministry. Our understanding of ordained ministry may not be the same with that of the past ten years and so mainly because of the new environment and other factors that cannot be resisted. While some of the churches may like to continue to preserve their orthodoxy and conservativeness, some of the communities may present themselves as liberal minded people mainly because of the external influences, which may be regarded as the necessary evils of our days.

Ordained ministry may be understood as “a liturgical action of the church by which some of its members are designated, commissioned and consecrated to public pastoral ministry.”¹ The word ordination may relate to the concept of church order, and may refer to the public organization of the church and community. The Manual of Worship of the PCI also defines ordination as “the rite of setting aside certain persons for distinctive functions in the Christian community as lay officers or as clergy.”² We may say from the above definitions that ordination is made by human beings and not a decree given from above as such. It emerges out of the necessity of the Christian community, as there is a need to consecrate certain persons to handle sacred sacraments. This is to say that God does not institute ordination but it evolves in the course of history.

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The topic given to us may lead us to probe further – Is ordination the demand of the day? If it is so how is the church going to give expression to it? Will the church be ready to ordain women as a pastor and elder? Let us consider the socio-cultural context and religious context of women's ordination in the context of PCI.

1. The Socio-cultural Context of NEI

The context in which we live now is so complex and diverse that it cannot promote the legitimization of 'absoluteness or definiteness' in stating the context of NEI. In almost all the societies (in NEI) the traditions and practices that were cherished by the community are dying out and are being replaced by other new cultural elements. Even the children are used to hear of 'gun culture' mainly due to the multiple insurgency groups in our places. As we are in an advance technological age we hear of 'computer culture' or 'cell phone culture' and so on. We cannot just say 'No' to the process of this globalization as it is in front of us. It is due to this factor that we are influenced by other foreign cultures that almost swept away the old practices of our fore parents. The present generations are blessed with the so-called development. However, we need to think seriously about the pros and cons of modern development. It may be true to state that socio-cultural confusion may be the prevailing trend in many of the societies in NEI.

(a) Patriarchy:

It is an undeniable fact that most of the societies are under the umbrella of 'patriarchy'. In its literal sense, the word "patriarchy" means the rule of the father or the "patriarch". It was originally used to describe a specific type of "male-dominated family", which included women, junior men, children, slaves and domestic servants all under the rule of one dominant male. Nowadays it is used more generally to refer to "male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways."³ It includes control over women's

sexuality, fertility and labour expressed in the different institutions in society like property relations, market, cultural realm (tribe, religion, community etc), political realm (state programmes, political institutions) and ideologies (including theology).⁴ We see exceptional case like the Khasis and the Garos, who represent a typical matrilineal society, where the children take the clan name of the mother.⁵ However, such societies still function along patriarchal lines and maintain the patriarchal nature and power in the family and society.

(b) Power and Resources:

At present most of us treat forests, land and water as renewable resources for sustenance. Those who practice jhum cultivation also regard the cultivated land as community resources. There is a strong belief from tradition that we ‘treat the resources as a livelihood that had come down from the past to be used according to the present needs and environmental imperatives, and preserved the same for prosperity.’⁶ It is observed that if the community owns the resources, women exercised partial control over it because of the gender-based division of power between the family and the social spheres. In most tribes, the woman has traditionally been in control of the family economy and production and the man has been in control of the resources and society. This is rightly observed by Fernandes that “the resources they managed equitably were not merely their economic sustenance but also the center of tribal culture, social system and identity”.⁷ Be it in the family or society, power was/is hierarchical and male centred.

Inheritance too was largely on the male side among the Mizo. The customary law states that in the absence of male relatives, a woman inherits to the exclusion of distant kinsmen. Among the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo one of the daughters is the heiress but some of her male relatives control her property. She needs their consent to sell it.⁸ We can observe that although woman inherited the property she does not have much power. However, “heavy responsibilities are laid on her to

ensure the welfare of the family and look after her old parents, where as men manage most of the wealth as well as their society.”⁹ Tilput Nongbri suggests that the Khasi saying ‘war and politics for men, property and children for women’ was a way of legitimizing male roles and mystifying the position of women. Women inherit property but lack the power to manage it.¹⁰

Living in a changing world of ours, the inherited traditions and practices of our societies are dying hard rather they still have a strong influence to the mind of the people. Those cherished heritages must be re-looked at and re-read by the 21st century men and women so as to discern their liberative elements for constructing a space for partnership of men and women in our world.

(c) Women in Public Decision Making:

The participation of women in public decision-making or politics is peripheral in our states. There have been persons like Mrs. Rano Shaiza, the ex-MP from Nagaland or MLAs like Mrs. Shira and Mrs. War in Meghalaya, or Mrs. Anwara Taimur, ex-chief Minister of Assam or Ministers like Ms. Lalhlimpui of Mizoram,¹¹ etc. However, women’s representation in the legislatures is less than half of that in India as a whole, which itself is abysmally low at 4 per cent. We do not find many women politicians in our areas. This reflects our realities that women’s participation in political institutions is almost non-existent. There can be various factors for the insignificance participation of women in politics:

- (i) Men who derived their political power from their prowess at war, their wealth and ritual status in the tribal clan have traditionally managed village affairs in most parts of the region.¹²
- (ii) Women are to a considerable extent occupied with the task of maintaining a home. Men, in contrast, have more freedom to move into political activity when they are younger, not only that they are encouraged to engage in politics.

- (iii) Political career is associated with the ‘male role’. It is considered ‘unfeminine’ for a woman to fight for power and fame or even to speak in public in a political campaign.

These reasons may be regarded as the ‘gender stereotyped ideologies’ perpetuated by the society and internalized by women themselves. There are capable, intelligent, educated women who are interested in politics but cannot actively participate because of prohibitive socio-cultural norms and ideologies. Moreover, the social conventional norms are so strong that women cannot be visualised or addressed as president, chairperson, and so on. These patriarchal ideologies are quite strong that leads to women’s secondary position in the political sphere. Therefore, women have very little access to elected public positions at the present stage.

(e) Resource Management for Household Provisioning

Even as political participation remains illusory, women’s economic power is also being undermined. Despite the sharp diversities in the social situations in different parts of the region, women responsibilities for managing resources for household provisioning do not vary much whether it be in Manipur or Meghalaya. Sumi Krishna observes that resource management roles are gendered, but the knowledge base continues to be shared.¹³ It may be right to share her view that certain gender roles are firmly established by traditions at the same time changes are taking place because of the external factors. Men usually are engaged in the construction of house but all the other tasks in and around the house are the woman’s. Women cook, clean and wash; tend the home gardens and domestic animals, make baskets, spin and weave cloth. Childcare is wholly the woman’s responsibility. Some women say that their domestic chores give them a sense of worth in the family, despite being time consuming and energy sapping. Although women’s role in the resource management for household provisioning is appreciated, the gender bias ideologies undervalue the status of women.

Women's contribution to the economic life of family as well as society has gradually improved and has been recognized as they are engaged in various kinds of economic activities and work in various government departments. In most of the states in NEI women are engaged as administrators and business managers. In the Mizo society, it is observed that women occupy a center place in shops, restaurants, in the market places. Greengrocers are mainly women.¹⁴ Hnuni also states that even dropped-out girls undertake non-formal education like sewing, stitching, knitting, weaving, etc. and many of them are not only self-supporting, but they become the main source of income upon whom the family economy is dependent.¹⁵ It would be true even in the other states that education has considerably changed the position of women in order to win public recognition because of the job that they occupy as professionals. In spite of the enormous contribution women have made, they are not respected, as they ought to be. In other words, the social attitudes and beliefs remain the same even if she achieves the status of high professionals mainly because she is after all a 'woman'.

Women's visibility in the economic life among the Meitei women is worth mentioning. Meitei women's control of the rice trade gives them a powerful public voice. Although the Meiteis are also patrilineal and patriarchal society, men have the position of authority as fathers and husbands, the women's socio-economic power and collective strength counteracts male domination. Commenting on the 'political power of the market network' of Meitei women, Chaki-Sircar pointed out that 'the women can paralyze the political and administrative system when the need arise.'¹⁶

(f) Reflection on Women' Power Resources

The experiences, mobility, visibility and economic role of women in NEI differ as between elite and the poor, from state to state, and tribe to tribe but there are also some commonalities as we have pointed

out. Women in most of the states have little access to participate in community decision-making body in the family or in the states. It is rightly observed by Sumi Krishna that tribal customary practice has not been an obstacle to women's participation in political activity but patriarchal values dominate when it comes to representation in formal political institutions.

As Sumi Krishna states that there are inequitable gender relations and resource control embedded in tribal customary practices. This would inevitably raise the question of whether women's representation on local decision-making bodies would help in drawing out their power and enhance local resource control and management in future. We also need to think seriously the problem of why factors such as matriliney (Khasi & Garo), literacy (Mizo and Naga) and economic power (Meitei) seem to have little impact on women's political empowerment. Women's organizations in various states are struggling to gain self-respect, autonomy and political space. Let us consider once again whether a shared platform may be more empowering than literacy, economic power and inheritance of land or property in order to empower women in NEI.

II. The Ecclesiological Context of Women in Ministry

The Presbyterian Church of India claims to have its origin from the teaching of reformers. And thereby, try to be faithful to its theology, traditions and practices. Women's place or participation may not be a crucial question at the time of its formative period but now it has become an important hidden issue in the churches. Let us consider the legacy of reformers in relation to church and ministry:

(a) Protestant Reformers

One of the important contributions of Protestant Reformers was to redefine the doctrine of the church. The "priesthood of all believers" and the "community of believers" were commonly used images for the

church among the Protestant Reformers.¹⁷ The new images of the church also led to the new understanding of ministry in the church. The Reformers were of the view that specific authority of individuals is derived from the community of which he/she is a part. And the spiritual hierarchy, which was associated with ministry, was given up and ordination of ministry was viewed differently than in the Roman Catholic Church. Equipping Christian community spiritually and theologically is an important task of the minister; the Reformers put great emphasis on formal theological education as an important step towards ordination. Within this context ordination is defined as an affirmation of the calling for public ministry. It is with the new understanding of ministry ordination is also ceased to be understood as sacrament. Moreover, there was no specific teaching from Jesus Christ like baptism and the Lord's Supper. Wilson rightly observes, "Despite the emphasis the reformers placed on the church as community and the understanding of the ordained ministry within the framework of priesthood of all believers, in the institutional practice the hierarchal model remained in Protestant church communities. Women were denied ordination, thereby failing to uphold the theological insight of the church as a community of believers in practice."¹⁸ If we are to follow faithfully our reformed traditions and teachings there is a need to go back to the reformers' teachings or we need to have a new understanding of the church, ministry and ordination. Moreover, there are pertinent questions to ask: Is ordained ministry an office or a function? How is authority and power established through ordination? Who is eligible, and mandated for ordination?

(b) Structure of the PCI

The structure of the Presbyterian Church of India is patriarchal i.e., the leadership roles are meant for men. Women are expected to lead only within the women's fellowship group. Women may constitute half of the membership of the church but the leadership roles are denied to them totally. The patriarchal socio-cultural traditions and practices

are mirrored very clearly in the church. It may be true to say that the position of women in the society is much better than in the church because of the dramatic social change due to modernization and westernization. The following table may help us to know how the patriarchal structure of the church excludes women from the leadership roles. The table is based on the structure of the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram; we may apply it to other churches as well.

Administrative Secretaries of PCI – Ministers, no women
Presbyterian Women’s Fellowship - Women
Assembly Meeting – Ministers & Elders, no women
Synod Meeting – Ministers & Elders; Women’s secretary as ex-officio
No Women
Synod Executive Committee – Three Executive Secretaries, Ministers & Elders No women
Pastoral Committee – Ministers and Elders, No women
Departmental Committees –
Synod Mission Board – One woman
Synod Finance Committee – No woman
Synod Theological Education Board – No woman
Synod Literature and Publication Board – No woman
Synod Music Committee – One woman
Family Guidance and Christian Counseling Centre – One woman
Mizo Sunday School Union - the Coordinator is a woman and one more woman.
Presbytery Meeting – Ministers & Elders; lay men and a few women
Pastorate Meeting – Ministers & Elders, lay men and a few women
Local Church Committee – Pastors and Elders, no women
Local Church Women’s Fellowship – Women

The above structure of the church has shown the exclusion of women from top to bottom except in their own fellowship that is also directed by the male senior advisers. Though women are the backbone of the church and part and parcel of the religious functions they are

systematically excluded in all decision-making bodies and are simply ignored and invisible in the church structure. The structure does not allow women to develop their skills as leaders. This may be a serious sin committed by the church. Hnuni rightly observes that the patriarchal structure of the church excludes women from all leadership roles that they feel uncomfortable within, even if they cannot walk away from it. No church is free from patriarchy, not even those within matrilineal societies.¹⁹ She has also rightly said that this type of exclusion is 'structural sin'. It is a sin because it excludes and ignores women who represent half of its members in all matters in which important decisions are made concerning its life.²⁰

The ecclesial structure limited women's role and influence due to the process of cultural adaptation. This structural concentration of the church offices indicates the patriarchalization of ministry and theology. As Fiorenza has rightly pointed out 'this process was bound to eliminate more and more women from ecclesial leadership roles and had to relegate them to subordinate 'feminine' tasks.'²¹ And this alienation of women from the ecclesial leadership role in the church raises a number of questions regarding the church's theological foundation like the meaning and doctrine of priesthood of all believers, etc.

(c) Role of Women in the Church

We cannot deny the fact that there is participation of women in the life of the church at the grass root level although they are not included in any of the decision-making bodies. Hnuni has correctly discerned that 'within the church there has been a backward rather than a forward movement' in so far as the role of women in the church is concerned.²² Women were evangelists, preachers, Bible Women whose roles are similar to those of men in the same positions. The ordination of Women as "Tual Upa" (Church Committee members) in the church neither increased nor the Bible Women were continued especially in Mizoram Presbyterian Church. The trend has been in the opposite direction against women's ministerial leadership roles.

However, women are playing an important role in the church as:

- (i) Preachers
- (ii) Sunday School teachers (mainly for children & few are in adults)
- (iii) Wednesday' lessons as facilitator
- (iv) Looking after the collection and sale of the handful of rice
- (v) Decorators of the church
- (vi) Play active role within the women' fellowship
- (vii) Evangelists
- (viii) Missionaries, etc.

Though women have made a tremendous contribution to the church from the beginning of Christianity but the active participation of women in certain areas remains a critical question. Women's contribution for the growth of the church in PCI is hidden and private comparing to men's public and outward leadership. As Fiorenza says, 'it was made under the sign of the veil'²³ Women's contribution for the growth of the church is accepted but the cultural mores and societal attitudes towards women have an immense influence upon the life of the church which restricts women not to take an active leadership role in the church. It is noticeable that in some local churches women are neither engaged as Adult Sunday school teachers nor as preachers in the services. The church has to reflect seriously if there are qualified women within their members and make use of their services for the growth of the church.

(d) Factors responsible for the Exclusion of Women in the Church

There are several factors that are responsible for the exclusion of women from the full ministry of word and sacrament. It is important for us to critically look into the reasons so that it will not simply be for the sake of or assuming women's place alongside men but it will be a response to a call and a sacrificial duty. Let us consider the following factors:

- (i) The patriarchal structure of the church seems to be one important responsible factor. As the church became more institutionalized and established patriarchal structure, women have become more invisible and neglected. Although we claim to have synodical structure that encourages the participation of all people, our churches are hierarchical and men consider themselves to be at the top. If we do not allow re-structuring of our church, there is no place and space for women in the present structure. If we are to include women the structure must incorporate mutuality and partnership of men and women in the church. Therefore, in order to include women into full time ministry let the church depatriarchalize her structure in order to realize a new community of women and men in our churches.
- (ii) The Bible, interpreted from an androcentric and patriarchal point of view, has been used as a source for legitimizing the marginalization of women in the church and theology.²⁴ For instance, the twelve disciples are all men, Jesus does not select woman. Or women should be silent in the churches (I Cor. 14: 34 ff.). Many of the biblical passages are quoted to deny woman's full participation of ministry in the church. This is neither the original intention of the biblical writers nor the will of God. It is important for us to develop a new way of reading and interpreting the Bible in order to recover women's biblical heritage as religious empowerment for the present and the future. The Bible must be correctly understood in its own context and its relevancy for the churches in the 21st century must be brought out. The literal interpretation and application should be avoided so that we may read and understand the author's intention in writing such a specific view. Re-reading the Bible from the eyes of women is prerequisite in today's context.
- (iii) The rigid patriarchy of our socio-cultural context is another responsible factor for the exclusion of women in ministry.

The church exists in the patriarchal society and its structure, pattern and practices are also influenced by it. The patriarchal voice is much more stronger and influential than the Word of God. Whenever talking about the ordination of women, the first and foremost thing that came up very strongly is cultural arguments. Many of us have accepted the changes that have been taking place especially in the role of women in the family and the society, but we cannot accept the changes that have to occur in the church. It is appropriate to quote Rev. D. C. Haia, one of the former PCI administrators, “there is nothing against ordaining women in the church in the Presbyterian Church of India Constitution, but this is the practice... we are all for it but ordinary people still will not accept women, however, change is on the anvil.”²⁵

- (iv) The communities of NEI have witnessed certain change and challenges. But when it comes to women our culture and traditions remain the same. The cultural outlook and traditional attitude towards women is hardly changed by the western educational development. This is mirrored in the church very clearly that we cannot imagine having a woman elder or pastor because she is nobody but a woman. Unless we change our attitude towards woman it will remain a big obstacle for woman’s ordination even in this 21st century. Even though our father, husband and son are unable to cope up with life without mother, wife or daughter, we still give women secondary status and discriminate them in and outside of our homes.²⁶ This is unfair.

III. Participatory Model of Jesus’ Ministry

It is important for us to recover the participatory model of Jesus’ ministry or the discipleship of equals in Jesus’ ministry. It is interesting to note that Luke in his gospel introduces the women’s disciples of Jesus (Lk 8: 1-3). Lasetso states that Luke launches

his scheme to introduce the women followers of Jesus, a clear indication that women also enjoy the same privileges of following Jesus in discipleship. This story therefore becomes an introductory statement for the acceptance and involvement of women in the ministry of Jesus.²⁷ He continues to state that all the synoptic gospels witness to the fact that the women were also taught, traveled and participated with Jesus in his ministry (Lk.8:2-3; Mk. 15: 40-41; Mt.27:55-56). “It is true that these women are not specifically called ‘disciples’ but that they are ‘followers’ in the sense of discipleship is implied by the reference to the Galileans who went up to Jerusalem with Jesus” (Lk.23:49, 55; 24:10; Acts 1:4)²⁸. This is a clear indication for us to know that Jesus had positive attitudes towards women. Jesus accepted women to accompany him in his ministry because the use of ‘many others’ is stated in the feminine gender (Mk15:40-41). ‘These women broke with Jewish custom in order to leave their homes and travel openly with Jesus. Jesus also contradicted the accepted notions of women’s place by condoning/ignoring and encouraging his female followers²⁹. The gospel writers clearly mention that Jesus not only had women disciples but also that they literally followed him in his missionary journey from Galilee to Jerusalem.

Jesus chose women to be the first to proclaim the good news of resurrection. He did not reject women to be bearers of the good news. Therefore, he became the champion for the cause of women and their liberation. He transcends all the patriarchal socio-cultural norms and values in order to bring the community of women and men in his ministry. Moreover, he has set a participatory model during his earthly ministry where all people are invited to joint in his discipleship of equals. This is a role model Jesus sets for us today. Are we ready to accept ‘discipleship of equals’ in our church? Do we dare to follow Jesus as he transcends the patriarchal structure of the society and religion of his time? Do we dare to

break barriers in the church and society as Jesus lifts up women to equal status both through his words and deeds?

CONCLUSION:

Albert Einstein says, “the world we have created is a product of our thinking; it cannot be changed without changing our thinking.” If we want to create a better community of women and men, it is up to us by changing our attitude and thinking. It is not men alone who are to change, but even women have to accept their dignity, rights and self-respect among themselves. It is necessary also that women overcome their patriarchal natures and functioning and see themselves as persons with their own rights and dignity. Women need to take a bigger step in order to prove themselves as persons having high leadership qualities in the community.

Although the church does not recognize women’s dignity and their full humanity, let us remember that Jesus has already accepted their full dignity and humanity as created in the image of God. By acknowledging this we women today should shout with joy and acclaim the healing done to us by Jesus. Let us regain our ‘wholeness’ as human beings, reclaim our ‘dignity and humanity’ in Jesus. This is a life experience that women should celebrate through dancing. Though the patriarchal hierarchical structure of the church does not acknowledge women’s presence and make them invisible, still women of today should continue to dance in praise of Jesus’ healing touch. Jesus’ empowerment of women helps us to reclaim our dignity, right and humanity, which we have lost in the past. This is our vision and hope that the church should also realize the liberative and transformative mission of Jesus so as to create an equal participation of women and men in our church. Only then our church may experience fully the reign of God here on earth. As Paul says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” (Gal. 3:28).

End Notes

- ¹ Peter E. Fink, “Ordination” in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, edited by Alan Richardson & John Bowden, London : SCM Press, 1983, 419. (419–420).
- ² *The Manual of Worship of the Presbyterian Church of India*, 2008, 319.
- ³ Kamla Bhasin, *What is Patriarchy?*, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994, second impression), 3.
- ⁴ Ralte, Lalrindiki, *Women in Transition from Land Based to Cash Based Economy: An Inter-Ethnic Study in Mizoram*, (An Unpublished D. Th Thesis, 2009).
- ⁵ Narola Imchen, “Ordination of Women in North East India,” in *Weaving New Patterns of Ministry For Women in North East India*, edited by Narola Imchen (Jorhat: Eastern Theological College, 2004, 26).
- ⁶ Walter Fernandes, “Demography and Historiography of the Tribal People in India With Special Reference to North East India,” in *Theologizing Tribal Heritage: A Critical Relook*, edited by Hrangthan Chhungi (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 32.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ⁸ Syiem, I.M, “Women in Khasi Society,” in *Women in Meghalaya*, edited by Soumen Sen (New Delhi: Daya Publishing House, 1992), 22 – 35.
- ⁹ Gassah, L. S, “Status of Women in Jaintia Culture” in *Ibid.*, 36-45.
- ¹⁰ Cited by Sumi Krishna, “Gender, Tribe and Political Participation: Control of Natural Resources in Northeastern India,” in *Livelihood and Gender: Equity in Community Resource Management*, edited by Sumi Krishna (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2004), 386.
- ¹¹ O.M. Rao, *Focus on North East Indian Christianity*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1994, 7.
- ¹² Sumi Krishna, “Gender, Tribe and Political Participation: Control of Natural Resources in Northeastern India” in *Livelihood and Gender: Equity in Community Resource Management*, edited by Sumi Krishna (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004, 377).
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 382.
- ¹⁴ Vanengliana, *Khaw’nge Mizo Mipate?* (Where are the Mizo men?), (Aizawl: Synod Press, 1992), 5.
- ¹⁵ R. L. Hnuni, “Women in the Context of the Bible and Mizoram” in *Towards a Tribal Theology: The Mizo Perspective* (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1989), 18.
- ¹⁶ Cited by Sumi Krishna, “Gender, Tribe and Political Participation,” 385.
- ¹⁷ For John Wycliff and John Huss, “the true Catholic Church on Earth was the whole body of Christ’s faithful saints militant.” To Martin Luther, “the

word ecclesia properly means an assembly.” To John Calvin “the church is the communion of saints.”

- ¹⁸ H. S. Wilson, “Towards a New Understanding of Ministry: Some Theological Considerations” in *Walk My Sister: The Ordination of Women: Reformed Perspective*, edited by Ursdel Rosenhager & Sarah Stephens (WARC, 1993), 78.
- ¹⁹ R. L. Hnuni, “The Role of Women in the Church” in *Transforming Theology for Empowering Women: A Theological and Hermeneutical Reflection in the Context of North East India*, edited by R. L. Hnuni (Jorhat: Eastern Theological College, 1999), 68.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.
- ²¹ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesio-logy of Liberation*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 86. The structural elimination of women from leadership role and theology repress the emancipatory elements within the gospel since it is strongly influenced by the androcentric cultural ideologies. To some extent this has become the influential factor to determine the church theological articulations.
- ²² R. L. Hnuni, “The Role of Women in the Church,” 64.
- ²³ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 16.
- ²⁴ Elsa Tamez, “No Longer Silent: A Bible Study on I Cor. 14: 34-35 & Gal. 3:28” in *Walk my Sister: The Ordination of Women*, 53.
- ²⁵ Cited by Ezamo Murray, “Human Urge for Ministry Informed by God’s Unconditional Acceptance: The Divine Imperative for Women Ministry,” in *Weaving New Patterns of Ministry for Women in North East India*, 55.
- ²⁶ See R. Vanhnuaithanga, *Zalenna Thurin leh Mizo Hmeichhiate* (Aizawl: Lengchhawn Press, 2007), 222.
- ²⁷ Razouselie Lasetso, “Women in the ministry of Jesus and Its significance for women in ministry in Northeast India” in *Weaving New Patterns of Ministry for Women in North East India*, 88.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*

**Consultation on Women's Ordination
May 26 – 27, 2009, PCI Assembly House**

Findings Committee Report

The Bible and Women's Ordination

The general laity within the PCI is asking for convincing hermeneutics which would assure them of a sound biblical foundation for women's ordination. This is a difficult task since the Bible has been written by persons living in and influenced by the patriarchal societies of their times.

The concept of ordination that we follow is one that has been defined by church tradition. As such the Bible does not explicitly elaborate about the ordination of men for church administration and the ministry of the word and sacraments.

However the Bible does give us some indications that ordination has to do with the decision of the church to set apart some 'called' and 'committed' individuals for certain specific ministries of the church. Such persons are elected by the church and then prayerfully commissioned with the laying on of hands.

We do not find any directly related biblical references for either supporting or rejecting women's ordination.

Theological and Ecclesial Perspectives on Ordination

Biblically and theologically speaking, it must be asserted that ordained ministry is not an elevation of status in the church; rather it is the setting aside of persons for a particular kind of service in the church.

However historical, traditional and conventional factors have tended to make ordained ministry an elevated office, and to have made it

exclusively a ministry of men. As such the Constitution of the PCI does not exhibit any gender bias in favour of men for ordained ministry.

One has to carefully study the translations and explanations/interpretations of the Constitution in the regional languages of the member units of the General Assembly. The male gender bias if present in any of them will have to be overcome.

Views in support of Women's Ordination

Conscientized women in the PCI are convinced that a mature understanding of the message of the Bible and its theological interpretation call for the partnership of women and men in the church as equals. Such a perspective also warrants the ordination of women in Christian ministry. The subordination of women in the church is indeed 'structural sin.'

Conscientized women and men support the ordination of women on the grounds of justice, the call to, and commitment and capacity of women for ministry, the special need of ordained women ministers to address certain people groups and particular problems and issues in society, and the changing contemporary world-wide contexts.

Challenges related to Women's Ordination for the PCI

Though women's ordination may be justified biblically, theologically, ethically and on the grounds of meritorious capacity and the post-modern context, the North East Indian society of patriarchal men and 'patriarchy-internalized' women (the laity in general) encounter socio-cultural difficulties in accepting women's ordination.

A positive change in the attitude of the church members towards women's ordination will take considerable time. It cannot happen

rapidly. Some progress has already taken place in this direction since the mid 1990s. Women are now invited to participate in Assembly and other church court meetings. They are also included in some committees at different levels. A possible next step would be to gain the acceptance of the church for the ordination of women as 'elders.' Even this step will have to come out of a movement of conscientizing the members at the grass roots (local congregational) level. They will need biblical-theological orientation through writings, Bible-studies, seminars, etc., as well as a process of cultural change or adjustment. So also as per church polity requirements this matter will have to be pursued through church court procedures. It will also require a 'movement type' action by conscientized persons among the local congregations.

We need to go beyond the issue of women's ordination to articulate what we mean by 'Christian Ministry' and 'Ordination' in the context of the PCI today. Furthermore we need to clarify the need, rationale and purpose of ordination in general and of women's ordination in particular. Even the concept and phraseology of "the priesthood of all believers" has to be expressed relevantly afresh in the contemporary context.

**EXPOSITION OF PAULINE ECCLESIOLOGY
PAULINE ECCLESIOLOGY: ROLE OF WOMEN IN
THE CHURCH: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE
CHURCH AND ITS TRADITION**

*Rosy Zoramthangi Ralte **

Introduction

The role of women in the Indian church at present is a much debated topic among the theologians and lay people especially among the women folk. Women constitute more than half of the church membership but they are not represented adequately in the different decision making bodies and committees of the church. Therefore, to speak and discuss about the role of women in the church entails a critical evaluation of the church's position on women. It also involves re-reading some of the biblical passages employed to legitimize the prohibition of women in the ecclesial hierarchy and full participation in the church's life. Not to overstate, as Gnanadason points out, "The Bible has been used to indicate that the secondary status of women is divinely ordained –woman was made after man, she brought sin and death into the world, Christ had no women disciples, Paul called on women to be silent in the church and to be obedient to their husbands." In noting such scriptural strategies employed to deny women's full participation in the church, this paper espouses and expands on the roles and position of women in the church with a detailed analysis of selected text from I Corinthians.

The Present Role and Participation of Women in the Church

There are many important roles women play in the church; their roles and responsibilities in the church vary by location, both regional and denominational. The list below compiles some of the common roles that women play in the church. By itself, the list is neither rigid nor exhaustive and there can be many other roles that we can suggest.

1. Women as regular church-goers : In most of the churches, women are the most regular in terms of attendance in church and form the majority of members. The traditional role of Indian women in religious nurture within the family made them a vital force of motivating the family and the church. Glancing at the history of Indian Christians, we see that women often were the first converts who brought in their family members to Christianity.

2. Women as indispensable preservers of religion and religious rituals : Women are assigned roles of passing on religious wisdom and household ritual to their children. Women in the past also played a prophetic role. Women, possessed by the Spirit, do time and again, give expression to critical outbursts regarding violation of justice. However, the consolidation of ecclesial hierarchy largely confines priestly and prophetic voice to men. The third millennium church too witnesses women accomplishing their role as indispensable preservers of religion and religious rituals, and of passing them on to the new generation.

3. Women as financial contributors to the church : Women are contributing actively to the mainstay of the clergy and for church undertakings. Moreover, women's fellowships in many churches mobilize their funds to make acquisitions of key properties for the church. In countries like the United Kingdom, many missionary societies are basically sustained through the efforts of their women members.

4. Women in the church's mission work : Taking the ratio of male and female members in the church, the women members are more in number when it comes to mission work. They constitute a major number by working in diverse areas including medical, women's ministry, counseling and house visiting, and care for the sick people. In the Roman Catholic Church alone, there are more

than 94,000 religious women involved in the health, educational and community development projects of the Church.

5. Women as Christian educators for the church : Educating and nurturing the children in the family make women effective Christian communicators. Families make up the church and the larger context of the Christian community. Therefore, mothers play an effective role in nurturing the faith of the child and imparting Christian moral values which shape the child's life. Women bear greater responsibility in child rearing as they spend most of their time with their kids especially during their initial stages of development. Therefore, their role as effective Christian educators in the larger context of the church can not be overlooked.

Their intrinsic quality of educating and nurturing children has positioned them as Sunday school teachers in most of the churches. Moreover, many talented women run and administer Sunday schools as Superintendents.

6. Women in prayer groups : In many churches, women form faithful prayer meeting groups creating one of the most important backbones for the successful running of the different church activities. These women prayer meeting groups provide a platform to express themselves and share their spiritual and domestic queries as well as problems. These kinds of small group meetings give the members encouragement and support for each other thus resulting in a constructive development and relationship between the members of the church. It can also bring in unity within the mainline church.

7. Women as supportive care-givers : The women members also render valuable service to the church as care-givers for the sick and less privileged members of the church. Visiting the sick and less fortunate members of the church are part and parcel of women's ministry. Providing and contributing for the spiritual and physical needs and well being of the needy is their important mission.

8. Women as preachers and counselors : There are many women who exhibit their talent of preaching and pastoral duties without any trace of being inferior to their male counterpart.

9. Women as leaders : Excellent leadership qualities are also found in the women especially in the management of their fellowship.

Critical Exploration of the Church from the Situation of Women's Role and Position

The above few points highlight that women are an essential part of the church with their diverse roles. However, careful analysis is required because women's role in the church does not necessarily imply a position in the church. As against the important place they occupy, they are rarely seen in positions of authority or in different decision making bodies. Although there are more women than men in most congregations, there are more men than women in the decision-making bodies. So in practice the minority leads the majority.¹ Women are not adequately represented in any of the administrative bodies in the local and higher levels and in ecumenical organizations. They are denied full participation in the church's rituals and voting rights.² Moreover, they have no access to executive positions by their default position that bars them from ordination. Of the handful of women who scrape through ordination, many are still denied full participation in pastoral duties, administration, and decision making processes. As such it can possibly be argued that ordination or being ordained does not, by itself, ensure equal participation of women in the church— as in the words of F. S. Downs “they still can continue to suffer discrimination.”³

Another possible explanation behind the church's closed attitude towards women's full and creative participation can be termed as cultural imperialism.⁴ That is the impositioning of the universalized standards and customs on women. These rules and standards then shape gendered rhetoric of cultural norms that seep deep into

established institutions like the church and society. The imposition of these cultural norms on women is oppressive since they construe female identity as inferior to male. They are often reminded that self-sacrifice and self-denial are women's best virtues, and they are also seen as subordinate to male supremacy, an inferior being who must always submit to male chauvinism. That is why in many instances, the church and the culture are found to form a coalition against women and Jesus' attitude to them in the Gospels.⁵ In other words, as Eric Lott has pointed out, "it has not been faith as such, but its cultural and institutional embodying, that have led to the dominating of women. Christian faith, in the Apostle Paul's words, affirms that 'there is neither male nor female'. Yet, in the same apostle's culture-formed ecclesial life the female is enjoined to public silence. This in fact illustrates just how faith has to struggle for cultural embodiment."⁶ Rev. D. C. Haia, former administrator for Women's Affairs of the Presbyterian Church of India (PCI), says that the prejudice against women is a cultural factor. "There is nothing against ordaining women in the church in the PCI constitution, but this is the practice."⁷ The andocentric theology and dogmas of the church and its patriarchal structures continue to subjugate majority of women. Women, have their roles defined for them not according to their gifts but merely on account of traditional orientations toward their femininity.

Misinterpretation or lack of proper understanding of some of the passages in the Bible, especially of Pauline letters, resulted in the denial of women's participation in the churches. Some of the letters written by women to Paul, compiled by Aruna Gnanadason, best illustrate the way Pauline letters are construed as circumscribing the interest and full participation of women :

I am puzzled with your writings which have brought a lot of damage to us- women- in the church where the authorities just cling to your ideas and deprive us of many of our right and position. I wish and pray that you would have acknowledged the status Christ has given us.⁸

Even though there are a good number of women who are theologically trained and influential preachers, they are not given due recognition and importance. It is not new to hear many male members of the church declare publicly that they do not want to hear women preaching! This attitude undeniably underscores the experience of women who, in addition to the many problems they face in the society and in the family, have to deal with discrimination within the church as well because of gender, class and caste. The patriarchal and kyriarchal elements present in the church render femaleness as an all too self evident bar to power even within the church.

In general, women in Asia are accorded a 'minority' and inferior status both in society and even in the churches. This is due because Asian Christianity as practiced in the church today is seen as a religion of oppression, for they find the church to be patriarchal and hierarchal in its structure, functioning, preaching and practice.⁹ Monica J. Melanchthon's remark with regard to the Dalit women's struggle would also sum up the general plight of women :

Despite all the problems they faced in the society and in the church, the Dalit women are the strongest in faith, in courage and perseverance, and are extremely resilient and dignified. They are hard-working and are very often the primary care-givers and bread earners even in cases where the husband is present. In spite of being the most marginalized, they sustain the community and the church."¹⁰

Reading I Corinthians 14: 34- 35 from Women's Lived Experiences

These two verses are the most quoted scriptural basis for legitimizing denial of women's full participation in the church. But how women signify this passage in their lives is a different story from the typical interpretation. The clogged and parochial interpretation that legitimizes women's subordination does not reflect nor take into account the condition of the marginalized signifiers that is women.

What is to be remembered is how we make meanings from a particular portion of the sacred scripture. Therefore the paper will try to look at this text from a different angle.

These two verses together have a singular concern, that woman 'remain silent' in the congregation meetings which is further defined as not being permitted to speak (v.34), because it is 'shameful' for them to do so.¹¹

These verses (I Cor. 14: 34- 35), as many commentators argued, are a post-Pauline interpolations¹² as they contradict I Cor.11: 5. They also reflect the misogyny of I Tim. 2: 11- 14 and most probably stem from the same circle.¹³ The Bezan Codex (D) and related Western MSS have vv. 34- 35 at the close of the chapter which suggests that they may have originated as a marginal gloss and were inserted into the text at different places.¹⁴

This passage is loaded with internal and external¹⁵ problems especially with regard to its authorship. Criticism for Pauline authorship lies with the phrase "even as the law says" because when Paul elsewhere appeals to 'the law,'¹⁶ he always cites the text (e.g. 9: 8, 14: 21), usually to support a point he himself is making.¹⁷ On the other hand, if Paul is the author, this seems yet to be the best of all the options, that some form of disruptive speaking out was going on, which then qualifies the apparent absolute of v. 34.¹⁸ The Greek loose verb *lalei* translated as "speaking" refers to a variety of sounds produced by human beings, animals etc.¹⁹ As such it cannot be taken as pointing to a meaningful talk.

The author of this piece seems intent on keeping discipline in the church. The role he wishes to apply he sees as universal and supported by the law. It is difficult to fit this into any kind of Pauline context.²⁰ The implication of this prohibition can be fourfold.

First, the author assumes that women would not understand what is being said in the community, probably with regard to the spiritual utterances being addressed in this chapter. He wants them to learn, but they are to do so at home from their own husband. It is plausible that for the glossator some form of asking questions was going on in the church that he wanted to stop. Various reasons have been given for the gloss, all relating to the known situation of the church at the end of the first century or the beginning of the second (e.g. the attempt to check a rising feminist movement c.f. 1 Tim. 2: 9-15, 5: 11-15), to reconcile I Cor. 14 with I Tim. 2. The insertions are both explicable; one comes at the end of the guidelines on “order” and before the ‘*ad hominem*’ argument of vv. 36- 38, the order simply occurs at the end.

Historically, the passage was taken as part of a long series of introductions on ‘order’ in the churches after he laid down rules for tongues and prophecies. The writer (Paul?) here probably laid down further rules for women apparently because they were out of order.²¹ Moreover, the prohibition to speak is not mentioned clearly and its intention is unclear.

Different interpretations have been given- the first option fabricates around the loose Greek term *lalei* and suggests that Paul urges the women to stop babbling inside the church.

Second, the prohibition is only for the married women, but the problem it puts forth is that Paul himself sent Phoebe as his representative to the Roman Church which probably will require some form of speaking before the church. Therefore, it is difficult to agree that Paul simply did not permit married women to speak in the church.

The third interpretation takes a very imaginary conception that Paul refers to a certain woman without mentioning her name.

The fourth interpretation revolves around the contemporary context of the Corinthian church which was disturbed by “Cephas’ party,” who were, based on internal description, followers of strict Jewish laws and who were against women teaching in the congregation. To retort their attitude, Paul spoke to them sarcastically and rhetorically.²²

The last interpretation seems to be the most persuasive for we know that the Corinthian church faced both internal and external problems. It would be best to view Paul as not against women because he also declared that “in Christ there is neither . . . male nor female” (Gal. 3: 28). Paul stated clearly that before God, whatever their differing situations, all people are accepted on the same basis of faith and together make up the one body of Christ covering in embryonic fashion all the essential relationships of humanity, and so need to be seen as having racial, cultural and sexual implications as well. However, Paul is often misquoted or misunderstood as against women.²³

Traditional interpretation which the church inherited from the West takes these verses as prohibiting women to speak in the church and therefore becomes one of the functional tools to place and restrict women to a certain place outside the authoritative arena. It also validates their docility.

After a brief look at this particular text, how are we to interpret it in our context? Do we still think that Paul has a negative attitude to women? We need to remember that St. Paul’s beliefs and practices also were conditioned by the context which he lived in. He naturally shared most of the beliefs of his contemporaries, though, by inspiration and revelation, at many point breaks through his context and looks beyond and forward. He breaks through his cultural framework when he stresses the mutuality and inter-dependence of men and women in saying woman is not independent of man nor man of woman (I Cor. 11: 11) and when he appeals to men to love their wives as their own flesh (Eph. 5: 28).²⁴

In most of our interpretation we ignore how people make texts “signify” as vectors for understanding, establishing, communicating, sometimes undermining, and sometimes securing their identities, positions, agency and powers in the world. The fact is scriptures are often utilized to dominate and oppress the marginal.²⁵ Typical exegeses often overlook the nuances of its liberative elements present. Studying the genealogy of biblical studies from the perspective of emancipatory movements helps one to realize that scriptural “meaning making” has been practiced for the most part not only by elite Western educated clergymen but also for the benefit of Western cultural and capitalist interests. A Western doctrinal, fundamentalist, or scientific approach declares its own culturally particular readings as universal divine revelation or scientific data that may not be questioned.²⁶ Hence we cannot simply agree with their conclusions since they may not fit well in our culture, and because we cannot ignore or underestimate the role Indian women play in religious life, that is passing on religious wisdom and household ritual to their children. Therefore, by quoting Paul, we cannot simply overlook and deny women’s participation in the church. As such we need to see the text as it is in its own immediate context before we come to any rigid conclusion that will make or break prejudice. Scripture should not be used to uphold any discrimination on grounds of gender, race, or caste. The mission of the church is wholistic that is not to assist the dominant to gain more power but to challenge oppressive powers so as to empower the marginalized groups and community to develop their full dignity.

The Cruciality of Meaning Making of Scripture

For centuries the prevalent paradigm of Christian biblical interpretation has been the first theological-canonical paradigm, which understands the biblical record as sacred scripture and revealed authoritative Word of God. This paradigm of biblical interpretation is at home in communities of faith but has been

practiced by a class of elite educated clergymen from which women and other marginal people were excluded. Scripture has become authoritative for communities of faith in and through the codifications and interpretations of educated clergymen.²⁷ This kind of isolated and partial interpretation resulted in the subjugation of women. Even in the present situation there is at least one denomination where women are denied voting rights and in many churches women are not allowed to preach.

Moreover, it must not be overlooked that marginalized and marginal people also have internalized the dominant cultural and religious values of alienation and domination and therefore, receive the icons and words of scripture as “true and authoritative” divinely sanctioned words, even if they inculcate domination and submission. For instance, women may continue to stay in violent abusive marriage relationships because they have internalized that sacred scripture teaches that they have to subordinate themselves to their husbands.²⁸ For instance, the arguments against women’s ordination, denial of voting rights have shown that the authority and tradition of religious and other communities has been and still is kyriarchal, in other words, defined by elite male power and domination. If reception makes words sacred and true (i.e. scripture), then marginalized people must be wary of such a definition because it sanctions the words of the dominant culture and religion.²⁹ Consequently the “sacredness” and “authority” of scripture and its use in marginalized communities may not simply be pre-supposed but must be critically investigated.

To argue that women are equal in creation but subordinate in function is no more definable than “separate but equal” churches for different caste communities. To argue that women should have political and vocational freedom in the secular world while declaring that they should be subordinate in marriage and silent in the church

is a total misinterpretation of the Gospel. The church must deal with its warped attitudes and practices with regard to women. To fail to come to grips with the issue is to fail both God and the world we profess to serve, in God's name.³⁰

In our interpretation and meaning making of the scripture we can either make scripture reveal timeless truth and universal principles and give definite answers to modern-day problems and questions, or sustain the hegemonic traditions and cultures. The powerful class used the Bible to dominate and subjugate the inferior but now the inferiors are also drawing inspiration and courage from the same Bible to challenge and resist the dominant tradition and interpretation so as to reclaim their rightful place in the society and in the church as well.

Conclusion

Paul envisioned an ekklesia wherein the old racial schisms and cultural divisions had been healed; that all share a new bond that is 'in Christ'. Even when early Christians spoke of being baptized 'into Christ' they also spoke of the old divisions between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and male and female having come to an end. Likewise the third millennium church should position themselves for the breaking of diverse contours that isolate the position of male and female, high and low caste within the church. The WCC member churches had already observed, 'The Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women'³¹ which yielded many positive results and changes within the churches nevertheless the church still has a long way to go so as to fulfill Paul's vision of a true ekklesia. At present many churches are in solidarity with the struggles of their women members and they are also opening up. Even the Bishops, Pastors and prominent leaders are now gender sensitized. The Catholic Bishops Conference of India's acknowledgement that the presence of women in Indian church

structures is still ‘inadequate’ and its decision to reserve 35 per cent of seats in church bodies for women that will gradually grow until it reaches 50% is a big step forward for the realization of ekklesia and is also joyful news for all women.

End Notes

- ¹ Ruth Kao, “Emerging Patterns in the Women’s Movement in Asia,” *In God’s Image* (Dec. 85/Feb. 86), p. 22.
- ² Saramma Jacob of the Syrian Orthodox Church of India wrote: “Women in our church have two urgent problems. They are (1) to have voting rights in the church, (2) to be admitted to theological seminaries. Though women are faithful in worship they do not have equal rights with men in the church. Men believe that they represent women as well. Regarding entering seminaries, there is a belief that women do not need theology.” Quoted in Erme R. Camba, “Women and Men in Church Leadership,” <http://www.warc.ch/dp/bs31/04.html>, (accessed on 3rd March, 2009).
- ³ Frederick S. Downs, “Women in the History of Christianity,” in *Women Reshaping Theology: Introducing Women’s Studies in Theological Education in India*, ed. Lalrinawmi Ralte (Bangalore: United Theological College, 1998), p. 21.
- ⁴ Cultural imperialism is to experience how the dominant meanings of society render the particular perspective of one’s group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the Other.” Cultural imperialism occurs when a more powerful group universalizes its standards and imposes them on less powerful persons. Not surprisingly, this imposition usually includes rules and standards about appropriate gender roles and behaviors. Quoted in Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 87.
- ⁵ Teresa Okure, “Feminist Interpretation in Africa,” in *Searching the Scriptures Vol. I: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1993), p. 82.
- ⁶ Eric Lott, *Religious Faith, Human Identity: Dangerous Dynamics in Global & Indian Life* (Bangalore: United Theological College, 2005), pp. 271- 272.
- ⁷ Quoted in Linda Chakchhuak, “Women of God Want A Place in Church” in <http://www.boloji.com/wfs/wfs047.html>. Accessed on 3rd March, 2009.
- ⁸ See Aruna Gnanadason (ed.), *Towards a Theology of Humanhood* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1987), pp. 135- 139, and R. S. Sugirtharajah and Cecil Hargreaves eds. *Readings in Indian Christian Theology Vol. I* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), pp. 139- 142

- ⁹ Aruna Gnanadason, "Indian Women: New Voices, New Visions," in *Third World Theologies in Dialogue: Essays in Memory of D. S Amalorpavadass*, ed. J. Russel Chandran (Bangalore: EATWOT, 1991), p. 150.
- ¹⁰ Monica J. Melanchthon, "Dalit Readers of the Word the Quest for Hermeneutics and Method," in *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*, eds. James Massey and Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore & Delhi: BTESSC/SATHRI and CDSS, 2005), pp. 48- 49.
- ¹¹ Despite protest to the contrary, the 'rule' itself is expressed absolutely. That is it is given without any form of qualification. Given the unqualified nature of the further prohibition that 'the women are not permitted to speak, it is very difficult to interpret this as meaning anything else than all forms of speaking out in public. See Gordon D. Fee, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians," in *The New International Commentary on the NT*, eds. NED B. Stonehouse, F.F. Bruce, Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdsman. Pub. Co., 1987).), p. 706.
- ¹² On the whole, therefore, the case against these verses is so strong, and finding a viable solution to their meaning so different, that it seems best to view them as interpolation. If so, then one must assume the words were first written as a gloss in the margin by someone who, probably in light of 1 Tim. 2: 9-15, felt the need to qualify Paul's instruction even further.
- ¹³ Jerome O' Murphy Connor, "The 1st Letter to the Corinthian," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown et al. (Bangalore: TPL, 2007), p. 811.
- ¹⁴ Clarence T. Craig, "The 1st Epistle to the Corinthians," in *The Interpreter's Bible Vol. X*, eds. George Arthur Buttrick et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, YEAR), pp. 212- 213.
- ¹⁵ Suspicion as to authenticity on textual grounds arose precisely because of the external evidence
- ¹⁶ Some commentators like Martin have argued that "Law" here does not mean the Torah but simply "principle" or "rule" thus referring to Paul's earlier instruction but in an unqualified form that lacks Pauline precedent. See Gordon D. Fee, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians," in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 707.
- ¹⁷ Nowhere else does he appeal to the law in this absolute way as binding on Christian behavior. More different yet is the fact that the law does not say any such thing. Gen 3:16 is often appealed to but that text does not say what is here argued. If that were the case, then one must admit that Paul is appealing not to the written Torah but to an oral understanding of Torah as is found in rabbinic Judaism. A similar usage is reflected in Josephus, who says, "The woman, says the law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her

accordingly be submissive”. This usage suggests that the provenance of the glossator was Jewish Christian, because under any view it is different to reconcile with Paul.

- ¹⁸ Gordon D. Fee, “The First Epistle to the Corinthians” in Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce and Gordon D. Fee Eds. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 708. Trying to make sense of this text face many troubles and difficulties therefore many interpreters concluded that these verses are inauthentic.
- ¹⁹ It was originally an onomatopoeic word meaning, ‘to chatter’ in classical usage. C.f. Gordon D. Fee...p. 703 and Jose Vadakkedom, “The Letter of Corinthians to Paul the Apostle” in *Bible Bhashyam* (XXXIV/4, December 2008), p. 290.
- ²⁰ Gordon D. Fee, “The First Epistle to the Corinthians,” in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 707- 708.
- ²¹ The context of 1 Corinthians 14: 33- 35 talks about interpreting and understanding the gifts of tongues and prophecy (1 Corinthians 14: 26- 32), therefore, 1 Corinthians 14:34 is not commanding women to be absolutely silent in the church all the time. It is only saying that women should not participate when tongues and/or prophecy is being interpreted and tested (1 Thessalonians 5: 19- 22; 1 John 4: 1). This is in agreement with 1 Timothy 2: 11- 12 which says that women should not teach or have authority over men. If women were involved in deciding whether a prophecy was truly from God, they would be disobeying what the Bible says in 1 Timothy 2: 11- 12. Therefore, Paul tells women to be silent when tongues and prophecy are being interpreted so that they will not be disobeying God’s word.
- ²² For a detailed discussion, see Jose Vadakkedom, “The Letter of Corinthians to Paul the Apostle,” in *Bible Bhashyam* (XXXIV/4, December 2008), pp. 292- 293.
- ²³ To Paul, from Chandra Victor, “*By your Jewish way of thinking and putting the place of women in the home and society with restrictions has given rise to a great paradox in the Christian community today. Please send your co-worker Priscilla with a strong worded letter to our bishops, priests and elders of the church to put them in their proper place and with instructions to treat the women as equal to men, in all respects, at home and church. Now women are educated they have started resenting the ill-treatment and subjugation by men and society. So your letter can help to restructure the hierarchical system of the church and to redress the grievances of women.*” In Aruna Gnanadason Ed. *Towards a Theology of Humanity* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1987), pp. 135- 139, also quoted in R. S. Sugirtharajah and Cecil Hargreaves Eds. *Readings in Indian Christian Theology Vol. I* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), p. 139.
- ²⁴ Gnana Robinson, “For Your Hardness of Heart: A Biblical Perspective on

the Ordination of Women” in *Women Re-shaping Theology: Introducing Women’s Studies in Theological Education in India*, p. 82.

- ²⁵ Before the abolition of slavery the white masters quote Paul’s statement “slaves obey your master” to control their slaves and to make them obedient especially if the slaves are converted. Conversion to Christianity was also not welcomed due to the fear that Christianity and the Bible will enlighten them and will make them disobedient and they were also alarmed at the possibility of the slaves quoting passages from the Bible and ‘talk back’ to the master.
- ²⁶ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Powerful Words: The Social-Intellectual Location of the International Signifying Scriptures Project,” in *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), p. 258.
- ²⁷ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Powerful Words: The Social-Intellectual Location of the International Signifying Scriptures Project,” in *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon*, ed. Vincent Wimbush (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), p. 258.
- ²⁸ For discussion of the term “God,” see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and Gordon Kaufman, “God,” in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 136-159.
- ²⁹ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Powerful Words...” p. 265.
- ³⁰ V. V. Thomas, *Understanding Subaltern History: Theoretical Tools* (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2006), p. 112.
- ³¹ The Decade aims at: 1. Empowering women to challenge oppressive structures in the global community, their country and their church. 2. Affirming – through shared leadership and decision-making, theology and spirituality-the decisive 3. Contributions of women in churches and communities. 3. Giving visibility to women’s perspectives and actions in the work and struggle for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. 4. Enabling the churches to free themselves from racism, sexism and classism; from teachings and practices that discriminate against women. 5. Encouraging the churches to take actions in solidarity with women.

**TLAWMNGAIHNA THEOLOGY : DOING
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION FROM THE
PERSPECTIVES OF THE MIZOS**

*Tlanghmingthanga **

1. Introduction

The need for contextual theology or indigenous expressions of the Christian faith has long been felt, and indeed it has been the subject of discussion in many books and journals of theology¹. Mizo Christian theologians and others have expressed much interest and enthusiasm on the subject many times. And yet in spite of all this enthusiasm very little theology of real significance has come forth. Most of the efforts have so far concentrated on criticizing the work of early missionaries, and it is mostly talk about doing such a theology. The actual working out of such a theology is still a thing of the future. The question is why is it taking such a long time for Mizo theology to emerge? Perhaps even more important is the fact that some Mizo Christians and theologians are reluctant to accept or are even opposed to the whole idea of indigenization of the Church in Mizoram. Why this reluctance and opposition?

This paper is an attempt to look for an indigenous expression of Mizo Christian faith with the hope of developing a relevant Mizo Christian theology by means of the Gospel and indigenous culture and form. This raises a crucial hermeneutical question that must be clearly understood in any attempt to comprehend and interpret God's revelation in the Old and the New Testaments. These documents are products of specific cultures, and they were originally addressed to specific people who could only understand the message conveyed in the documents through

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categories of thought and symbols derived from their own cultures. Does the fact that Jesus' message about God has been mediated to us through these documents or through ancient cultural expressions mean that that message is communicable only through those ancient cultures and no other? This of course would mean that to become a Christian one would have to become a first century Jew or Greek or Roman. This is obviously against the spirit and the letter of Acts 15, and Paul's insistence that the Gentile Christian must not be subjected to Jewish law and ritual.

From the beginning of the early Church, Christian thought was very diverse in its manifestations.² Different theologies emerged, and even today there is no uniformity of theology among modern theologians. This shows that there cannot be a homogeneous monolithic theology, which is relevant, and significant for all places, for all people and all times. Contextual theologies like Liberation Theology of Latin America, Black Theology, Feminist Theology, Minjung Theology, Dalit Theology, Tribal Theology etc. have one thing in common. They have rejected the assumption that a theology that had been formulated in Europe or America has universal significance and is relevant for all places and all times.³ Instead they have started from the experience of the struggles of the people against different structures of domination and oppression. The structures, their histories and cultures are not the same for the different situations. But a critical and analytical understanding of the reality in each situation is the basis for doing theology in that situation.⁴

The emergence of recognizable and distinctive theology is therefore an obvious development wherever the Gospel is being preached. Like other peoples of the world, the Mizos have their own distinct cultural and religious traditions, symbols or categories through which they express themselves. Does the failure of Indigenous Mizo Theology

to emerge suggest that Christianity has failed to take root in Mizoram? This again raises the question of the relationship between Christianity and Mizo culture. Can Christian Theology and proclamation in Mizoram afford to ignore the culture and the religious traditions of the Mizos, and still hope to be meaningful and relevant to the Mizos?

To answer the question raised above the paper will begin with a definition of Mizo Christian theology, showing its relationship to Mizo Culture. It will then move to discuss the question of revelation and culture, and show that the question of God's revelation is inseparable from the question of human and culture. It will also study and investigate Mizo *Tlawmngaihna*⁵ with the hope that it would result in the evolution of distinct and recognizable relevant Mizo Christian theology.

2. What is Mizo Christian Theology?

The experience and interests of the Western people especially of Europe and America mould the Christian message and activities present and manifested in Asia today. While the Christian faith is presented as universal, valid for all times and all peoples, the content of its dogma, moral teachings and pastoral orientations has been largely selected to the needs, concerns and interest of the western peoples. It is as if Christianity, having converted Europe, had in turn been made European.⁶

It is also true in Mizoram, the current theological trends is directly imported from Western missionaries, which is culturally bounded, fashioned within their dualistic worldview, clothed with their culture, expressed with the help of philosophy and formulated for their particular context. With Euro-centric mentality and employing Western epistemological concept for theological interpretation.

Therefore, the necessity of contextualizing theology among the Mizo Christians arises out of the inadequacies of our inherited missionary theologies as well as Sanskritic or Brahmanical theology, which neglect Northeast India in general, and Mizo Christians in particular.⁷ The missionaries who gave the gospel to the Mizos also imbued their culture and thus Christianization was almost the same with westernization and many people hitherto regard western culture as Christian culture. Much has been done to make Christianity indigenous albeit the kind of Christianity that is being practiced in Mizoram today is still a legacy of the nineteenth century western evangelical theology.⁸

The context of Mizo Christians today is quite different from the nineteenth century western evangelical theological context and thus a mere adaptation of western theology cannot help the present context of Mizoram to cope with all its problems. Therefore, a time has come to develop our own theology that would squarely address our reality by taking into account the social, economic and political situation of Mizo Christians.

To address the socio-economic and political realities of Mizoram, theologies imported from outside would have to do less. Theology is not university-centred but life-based. The aim of theology is not to indulge in academic speculation, but to come to terms with the mystery of human existence.⁹ Theology is a reflection of the people's experience for the transformation of the whole humanity. Thus, to meet the need of contemporary Mizo Christians, an attempt to theologize indigenous resources for the development of a relevant theology is required. The task of indigenous theology is one of theologically creative interpretation of our history and discovering or capitulating our story of salvation.¹⁰

There has always existed the tendency to understand the Word of God in terms of what people already know. People everywhere will always bring their cultural presuppositions in their understanding

of the Gospel message, and these cultural presuppositions influence or help shape the peoples' formulations of Christian beliefs and practices. It is important to see that in order to accept the Gospel one does not have to abandon whatever was good, beautiful and true in older faith. The issue before the Jerusalem Council was about the relation between Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Jewish faith. The decision was that one did not have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. The new converts were told that there was no intention to lay any great burden upon them. They were only asked to abstain from "meat that has been offered to idols, from blood, from anything that has been strangled, and from fornication" (Acts 15:29). It is interesting that nothing is mentioned about their abandoning completely all their religious beliefs and practices. Only that which was discerned as evil or culturally objectionable needed to be given up. The new converts were free, guided by the Holy Spirit, to retain the beliefs and practices which were not in conflict with discipleship of Jesus Christ.¹¹ A. P. Nirmal is of the opinion that when people believe in Jesus Christ they are not required to renounce their religious beliefs and practices unless they are contrary to the mind of Christ, such as idolatry, superstitions, caste discrimination, corrupt practices etc. Christ came to fulfill, not to destroy, to enrich and not to impoverish.¹²

As the Scriptural messages have been mediated to us through foreign cultural symbols, it is the task of Mizo theologians to translate/reinterpret these symbols so that the message conveyed through them is rendered meaningful. This means taking Mizo religious experience seriously, taking Mizo culture seriously, and entering into a dialogue with Mizo traditional religion, and allowing for a serious confrontation between Christianity and the Mizo cultural and religious traditions. Mizo Christian Theology therefore should encourage indigenous responses to the message of Jesus and examine those responses in the light of the Word of God as revealed in Scripture.

Thus the task of Mizo Christian theology is to translate and make alive the message of Christ in a contemporary Mizo cultural setting. It calls for ecclesiastical structures that will reflect the Mizo identity, structures that are conducive to Mizo theology. Structures that despise Mizo culture will only hinder the development of such theology. This theology calls for introducing the structures that are meaningful and relevant to the Mizos.

3. The Word of God as an Address

The question of the relationship between the Christian faith and culture centers around what Wilder has described as “our understanding of God’s revelation and how and where faith takes hold of it”¹³. God’s revelation as we know it is revelation to people, it comes as an address to people, and it is communicated to people through people. It is in people, that this revelation of God becomes revelation. The task of Christian theology is to make that revelation understandable and meaningful to people.

As God’s revelation is revelation to people through people, it cannot be comprehended apart from people. To understand that revelation one has to understand the people through whom and to whom it is communicated. God’s word is addressed to people through language, and language is an important carrier of a people’s culture. Thus God’s revelation is inseparably bound to human and to his/her culture, since human as we know him/her is inseparably bound to his/her culture. Any attempt to translate God’s revelation must take the human element in it seriously in its transmission.

The point we are making here is that a people’s culture must be taken seriously in the effort to communicate God’s revelation. People as we know them cannot be separated from their culture. People everywhere will always speak, act, behave, and understand themselves and their world in terms of their culture. In short, human is a cultural

being. There is no acultural person on this planet, such a person is a nonentity. Even those who are often described as “uncultured” have a culture of their own, and it is not easy to define whose culture is superior. People and their culture are but two sides of the same coin. One’s culture conditions one’s language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, ceremonies and other related elements.¹⁴ People do not only create culture, but it also creates people. In other words we are all created in the image of our cultures.

As the question of God’s revelation is inseparable from the question of people’s culture, it follows that the question of God’s revelation is also inseparable from the question of Culture. Since God’s word is an address to people, it is consequently also an address to a people’s culture. Consequently, the task of theology calls for an understanding of the history, the culture and religion of the people from among whom that theology is worked out. Only from within the Mizo culture can we discover the Saviour. We can only discover that Saviour when we have learnt to feel, understand, see, and hear things the way Mizo feels and understands its world and environment.

4. The nature of God’s revelation and culture

The nature of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ shows that the Gospel can only become real and alive in culture. In Jesus Christ God chose to reveal Himself to humanity. This he did in culture and through culture. He did not appear in some unknown heavenly form because humanity could not have been able to comprehend him in that foreign form of being. In order to reveal himself God had to identify with humanity; he had to enter into culture and history. He had to concretize and contextualize his revelation.

By becoming human God did not only condemn the human form of existence in its rebellion against him, but he also sanctified

that form of existence by retaining it and infusing it with new life in a new social order. So also by entering human culture, the divine word in Christ not only condemns culture but also revives it, and fills it with new potency so that a new social, political, and economic order may be established in the implementation of the ideals of the Kingdom of God. In other words the transformation of human beings also means the transformation of their cultures. So also the redemption of the people must be at the same time the redemption of their culture and religious traditions. Just as God “emptied himself”(Phil. 2:7) in Christ so also in the Mizo context the Christian faith must empty itself, it must take upon itself the Mizo form. Its theology must be Mizo. It must enter into Mizo culture, die in that culture in order to live eternally in it.

There is always the tendency on the part of Christians to want to protect the Gospel. There is fear that by entering into the Mizo culture it will be polluted. There is fear that by letting it die in that culture it may not rise. There is the fear of the unknown. But God in Christ took that risk of dying in order to live. The Gospel is powerful enough to protect itself. Unless it enters and dies in the Mizo culture it will always remain foreign to the Mizos and no Mizo Christian theology can be born. The risk that God took in becoming human be repeated with each new encounter between the Gospel and culture.

This calls for a change of attitude towards the Mizo culture; it calls for listening to the voice of the Mizo culture in order to discover where we are. We must discover where and how God is speaking to us today in our individual and particular situations. Theology must rediscover the whole range of our cultural heritage, hear that culture speak and let God speak in it and through it.

5. The Importance of *tlawmngaihna* for constructing theology

The importance of culture in any attempt to understand and communicate with any people must not be underestimated. It is from our culture that we all know where we are. The Church must be involved in this effort if she is to evolve Christian theology that is distinctively Mizo. Our cultural heritage must be rediscovered, redefined and reinforced. It is noteworthy that while a number of Mizo cultural practices have been annulled by the teaching of Christianity *tlawmngaihna* remains intact and survives as the guiding principle of the contemporary Mizo Christian society¹⁵. Therefore, in our attempt to construct Mizo Christian theology, Mizo understanding of *tlawmngaihna* would be employed.

Some people thought that the practice of *tlawmngaihna* is limited within the Mizo society, and it is not possible to exercise it in the same manner and the same degree outside their community. They feel that they are bound to practice *tlawmngaihna* among their kith and kin and as such they considered shameful not to show it while they do not feel obliged to do so to other communities.¹⁶ Thanzauva writes, “The Mizo who are exposed to other culture have realized that it is practicable only within the society where it is understood and practised by people ... but rarely crossed beyond the boundary of Mizo society.”¹⁷ As anthropologist W.C. Smith expressed “Tribal Ethics ends at the village gate.”¹⁸ To some extent this seems true, but seeing from the real nature of *tlawmngaihna*, this is not true, if one study and examine *tlawmngaihna* carefully and systematically, they will surely find the presence of *tlawmngaihna* in the life of the Mizos wherever they are. The ethos of *tlawmngaihna* is universally applicable at the same time its social expression varies as time and space changes. At present time the social expression may not be necessary and may not be applicable to the Mizos because the

lifestyle and standard of living is quite different from the past. If the social expression has no universal applicability, it is still acceptable if it has contextual applicability. This shows that it has crossed the boundary of Mizoram. Where there is Mizo there is *tlawmngaihna* and vice versa. *Tlawmngaihna* cannot be separated from the people of Mizoram, without *tlawmngaihna* Mizo are nonentity, because *tlawmngaihna* is part and parcel of the Mizo life and it is the distinctive nature/character of the Mizos.

Some other people also think that *tlawmngaihna* has the negative aspects, that make the *tlawmngai* persons reserve and slow to express themselves which has led to the negligence of assessing their own action critically. They further thought that if a person is at the point of starving or thirsty, he/she is reluctant to tell his/her wants for food or water. For a sick patient, even at the point of death will tell others that he/she does not feel pain and so on. *Tlawmngai* people never reveal their true self, their feelings and pains to others by any means or at any time. But if we think carefully, because of the spirit of *tlawmngaihna*, whether in peace or in crisis, instead of hiding one's own nature, they rather reveal their true self and true nature. New insight offered by the Indigenous Mizo Culture like *tlawmngaihna* should not be ignored on the ground that they meet only local needs or solve a local problem. It should be recognized that their contribution is significant for the church and Christian theology as a whole.

In the pre-Christian Mizo society, *tlawmngaihna* was understood to be a virtue, which was exclusively of the Mizos. Every culture does not come by itself; rather it is initiated, developed and influenced by certain factors. The Mizos also do have their culture. It is amazing that they are not much influenced by the religion, culture and philosophy of the neighboring states around them.¹⁹ Lianzuala also rightly observes that *tlawmngaihna* is distinctly indigenous and Mizo exclusively.²⁰ On the basis of this,

some see *tlawmngaihna* as solely belonging to the Mizo culture and the personal nature of *tlawmngaihna* can be taken too seriously so that it over clouds community aspect of *tlawmngaihna*; in that case *tlawmngaihna* can lost its true meaning. But this is not correct; the social aspect as well as the personal nature of *tlawmngaihna* is prominent equally in the Mizo society. Sometimes, its personal nature is taken more seriously because *tlawmngaihna* can be best practiced by individual, and its true colour can be seen more clearly in the life of a person.

6. The Scope and Nature of *Tlawmngaihna*

As we have seen and known, the usual connotation of Mizo *tlawmngaihna* is that of male and female.²¹ In its true nature, it can be applied to both men and women. For me, this is one of the best concepts we have for developing the relevant theology today. *Tlawmngaihna* is comprehensive and inclusive in its nature. Any one can be *tlawmngai*, male or female, boy or girl. It can be practiced individually or in a group or in a community, it can be found in the life of the hero or heroine, in the family or in the *Zawlbuk*. In its original meaning and connotation, this concept is inclusive in nature. As the high quality of *tlawmngaihna* was found among the young men, it was also found among the women. All the hard works they did were done in the spirit of *tlawmngaihna*. They were not lacking in the spirit of *tlawmngaihna* in all the areas of their lives.

Therefore, this concept has provided many advantages for the Mizo Christians in order to develop a relevant theology rather than using the concepts of *Pasaltha* and *Zawlbuk*. Though the concepts of *Pasaltha* and *Zawlbuk* do have good contents, their main drawbacks are their exclusive nature and lack of universal applicability. For instance, the usual connotation of *Pasaltha* is that of a male and excludes a female. In its true nature and applicability, it generally focuses on the male dominant group. The

same thing applies to the concept of *Zawlbuk*. The name, *Zawlbuk*, (Bachelor's Dormitory) itself excludes women. For the Mizo, *Zawlbuk* is a good training place for all the young boys and lads of the village. No woman or girl is allowed to enter the *Zawlbuk*.

It is important to note that the Mizos do not make a claim at *tlawmngaihna* to be their exclusive possession. Bits of its ideal and practice are to be found in every tribe and nation around the world with varying degrees. And yet, considering the comprehensiveness of its ideal as well as practice, as shown above, Sangliana may perhaps be right, at least to a degree, in saying that the concept of *tlawmngaihna* is “so peculiarly Mizo”,²² so much so that one who is lacking in its qualities is regarded as “un-Mizo”, a censure which can hardly be met by any other. On the other hand, writes Sangliana, “A complete Mizo is one who has *tlawmngaihna*, in the fullest measure if that were at all possible”,²³ and still is, which makes Mizo life and society agile, attractive and enjoyable.

To address contemporary problems and the changing society of the Mizos, reinterpretation of certain traditions, beliefs and practices has become inevitable. For this, it is the task of a theologian to explore the theological implications or significance of the indigenous Mizo tradition such as *tlawmngaihna*. We shall now discuss the theological justification of *tlawmngaihna* as a paradigm for developing a relevant theology among the Mizo Christians today.

6.1. *Tlawmngaihna* as the Love of God

It is amazing that the word *tlawmngaihna* is neither a biblical word nor a theological term, but it is the most suitable word to express the love of God in indigenous language. For the Mizos, *tlawmngaihna* is a message of Jesus Christ hidden in their culture.²⁴ It is an active love or love in action. If love is the essence

of Gospel teaching, *tlawmngaihna* is the hidden gospel written in the hearts of the tribal people even before they embraced Christianity. Thanzauva observes that when the impact of *tlawmngaihna* upon the society is properly analyzed, the Greek word *agape* is more appropriate than *philia*. In the early Mizo society, many *tlawmngai* persons have laid down their lives for their friends and the community. Jesus as the highest form of *agape* depicts this kind of self-giving love; “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). The affinity of *tlawmngaihna* with love may be seen more clearly if we replace the Pauline definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7 with *tlawmngaihna*. It reads, “*Tlawmngaihna* is patient and kind ...”²⁵ Vanlalauva rightly said that many passages of the Bible might be clear and more appropriate if the Greek *agape* is translated by *tlawmngaihna*. For instance, “*Tlawmngaihna* does not wrong to a neighbor, therefore *tlawmngaihna* is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13: 10).²⁶

If *tlawmngaihna* is understood as the love of God, then *tlawmngaihna* can be seen as the essential characteristic of divine nature, which sent Jesus Christ to take the human form and die for the redemption of sinners. The love of God is qualified by sending his own son, Jesus Christ to the world. Without the sending of his son, God’s love would remain abstract. Therefore, God’s love is verified in active solidarity. The act of love is what the Mizo called *tlawmngaihna*. Chapman and Clark also observed in the same way, they say: “To the Mizos, to accept the teaching of Jesus meant to be *tlawmngai* and to serve this God, at whatever cost, was to fulfill the old Mizo ideal of *tlawmngaihna*.”²⁷

When the Bible was translated from English to Mizo language, the word *tlawmngaihna* was not used for the Greek word *agape* in the Mizo Bible. But the Greek *agape* is translated by the word *Hmangaihna* which is the Mizo word for love.

Though the Mizos have the term *Hmangaihna*, they seldom use this word. Liangkhaia says,

Formerly we never use the word *Hmangaihna* though we have it. Whenever we talk about love between young man and woman, we used the term *inngaizawng* (Meaning: To be in love with one another). The term *inngaina* is used for the love between a man and his friends (Meaning: To be fond of one another). The word *induhthiam* is used for the love between couple (Meaning: To admire one another). The term *inlainat* is used for love between parents and children (Meaning: Sympathize and compassionate or to tend with care)²⁸

The above quotation shows that the term *hmangaihna* has less significance and less impact to the Mizo society than *tlawmngaihna*. The word *tlawmngaihna* is a self-giving love which sets aside self-interest and seeks for the betterment of others, and is much nearer to the love of God for the Mizo.²⁹ From the above observation, it is convincing that if theological words or languages are to express Christian faith, *tlawmngaihna*, the richest and self-evident word is quite valid for the same. So it is quite appropriate and there is nothing wrong in using the *Tlawmngaihna* of God or Christ or the Christian *tlawmngaihna* among the Mizos.

6.2. *Tlawmngaihna* as Social Ethics - a Kingdom Principle

Tlawmngaihna, the social ethics was necessary for sustenance of harmony and integrity in the early Mizo community. For Mizo, harmony and sustainability of the community has been the primary objective, which included economic growth, well being and symbiotic society. In fact, *tlawmngaihna* was the principle for the establishment and improvement of the stated society. It was the state of *shalomic* society or the kingdom of God. Thanzauva rightly says, “The principle of *tlawmngaihna* is in essence a Kingdom principle”.³⁰ Although the kingdom of God is a gift, it is

something that must be sought (Matt. 6:33). Thus, *tlawmngaihna* is essential for the realization of the kingdom of God among the Mizos all over the world.

6.3. *Tlawmngaihna* as Voluntarism

Traditional voluntarism is regarded as a charitable work within the system for the purpose of keeping the society balanced, and not aimed at radical social change. But the fundamental presupposition of the voluntarism today is that people are primarily committed to change their own situation.³¹ The profound aim of the gospel is to transform people. Regarding the theological implication, Thanzauva writes, “*Tlawmngaihna* is a voluntarism which theologically advocates and empowers the voluntary organizations to bring about social transformation”.³²

Tlawmngaihna is concerned both with social equilibrium and social transformation through various voluntary organizations and movements. The voluntary organizations in Mizoram are known as *Tlawmngai Pawl* or *Tlawmngai Organization*. But, traditionally *Tlawmngaihna* pervades the entire fabric of society in order to bring about social transformation. It is not confined to institutions or organizations. Therefore, the Church, as a voluntary organization, is an institution of *Tlawmngaihna*. But *tlawmngaihna* cannot be contained in the institutional church; rather the church is one of the instruments of *Tlawmngaihna*.³³

6.4. *Tlawmngaihna* as a Discipleship

It is the community which calls the people to be *tlawmngai* for the sake of the community. In the same way, it is Jesus Christ who calls people, the Church to follow him in his mission to establish and extend the reign of God. There is a similarity between the call to be disciples of Jesus and *tlawmngai* persons in indigenous Mizo tradition, because the mission to which they were called is the same – i.e., to serve the interest of the people, the community. The goal of the disciples, indeed, of the whole Church, is service, not survival

at any cost.³⁴ The call to be *tlawmngai* before the coming of Christianity among the Mizos is also the call to that same mission through community. The aim of the calling of such kind be it in the pre or post- Christian era is the same, i.e., to serve the interest of God within the community. It is therefore, not wrong to say that *Tlawmngaihna* before the arrival of Christianity is a discipleship of Christ in a different form.³⁵

Discipleship, for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is obedience and commitment to Christ the one who called, not a confession of faith in Jesus Christ.³⁶ In this sense, the disciple is drawn out of his/her vested interest into a selfless life, a life for others. The *tlawmngai* persons experience the joy of suffering for others and for the just cause. For the Mizos, discipleship is nothing else but *tlawmngaihna*. For them, following Jesus Christ means serving others, for Jesus has also come not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (MK. 10:45). The faithful disciple is like *tlawmngai* for Christ who sacrifices his/her life for others. For the Mizo, *tlawmngaihna* is the hidden law of the cross in their culture. Realization of the Kingdom of God here and now would certainly be Christian *tlawmngaihna*, which is nothing less than discipleship. Therefore, *tlawmngaihna* is the discipleship of Jesus Christ and a social ethics of the cross that is willing to suffer any loss or seeming defeat for the sake of obedience to Christ.³⁷

6.5. *Tlawmngaihna* as the Gift of the Holy Spirit

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit gives every redeemed person at least one gift: “Now there are varieties of gifts, ... But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (I Cor. 12: 4, 7). One of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is love, but today love is seen as an emotion or feeling. Certainly there is emotion involved in love, whether it is love for others or love for God. But love is more than emotion. Love is not a feeling – love is doing. True love is love which acts. That is the way God loves us:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son” (Jn. 3:16). The love of God involves self-giving. It is also appropriate to identify *tlawmngaihna* as the gift of the Holy Spirit in the Mizo context, because the essential nature of *tlawmngiahna* is self-denial, self-giving and self-sacrifice. It is not only a feeling or emotion, but it is love in action. Without doing, without deed, without self-giving, *tlawmngaihna* has no meaning of its own.

6.6. *Tlawmngaihna* as Jesus Christ

It is fitting to perceive Jesus Christ as a *Tlawmngai*, who bravely fights unto death against the powers of evil that divide and oppress human beings and the world. To the Mizos, the picture of Christ as conqueror of evil forces is not a new thing. Lorrain and Savidge had experimented with this metaphor, and found that it “exactly met their great need.”³⁸ Renty also approved this metaphor. Knowing the situation of the tribal people in Northeast India where belief in the existence of evil spirits is real, Renty suggested that Jesus Christ could be interpreted as “Victor over sin”, “Conqueror of evil spirits,” and “Saviour and Lord.” He further said that Jesus Christ comes to us as ‘*Christus Victor*’ to liberate us from... evil spirits, from the superstitious beliefs of spiritism.”³⁹ The idea of *Christus Victor* is a prominent model for understanding the work of Christ in contemporary Christian theology.⁴⁰

The idea of Christ as *tlawmngai* appropriately describes much of the action of Christ. The evangelists reported that Jesus Christ was active among the poor and the oppressed people, bravely fighting with them in their struggle against the destructive forces of their lives. The mission of Jesus Christ is described in term of bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and liberating the oppressed people (Luke 4:18). Accordingly, as he proclaimed the advent of God’s Kingdom, Jesus exercised God’s power of healing upon the sick and cured many from various diseases. He

encountered demons and cast them out from persons they possessed. He fed the hungry. He shared the sorrows of those who were grieving and raised the dead. He dined and established friendship with sinners and the outcasts. He befriended women and rescued a helpless adulterer. And by the same token, he forgave sinners and restored their lives. In all these, Mizos can see Christ as their *tlawmngai*.

In a similar way, Christ's prophetic preaching can be seen as exhibiting the qualities of *tlawmngai*, who always identified with his people, particularly the poor. In and through Jesus Christ, God protests against innocent sufferings and oppression of the poor, and promises us that God will always be with the people who struggle for justice and liberation. Judaeo-Christian confessed that Jesus *Christ* is the expression and embodiment of the God-self. He is Emmanuel, "God with us".⁴¹ In other communities, he might have been called "Messiah", "Son of God", or "Lamb of God." But among the Mizos, Jesus can be perceived as a *tlawmngai*. Jesus is God's *tlawmngai* par excellence.

As noted earlier, the principle and practice of *tlawmngaihna*, which encompasses selfless service for others, humility, kindness, patience, honesty, hard work and trustworthiness, is not confined to the traditional Mizo hero and heroine alone. It also finds significant continuity and expression in the life and activities of many ordinary Christian men and women. In fact, Saiaithanga held that the ethical teachings of Christianity, which advocate doing good and helping others in need, refined the principle of *tlawmngaihna*.⁴² In line with this thought, Khuanga regards *tlawmngaihna* as "the fore-runner of the gospel",⁴³ and for Thanzauva "it is a message of Jesus Christ hidden in tribal culture".⁴⁴ Chapman and Clark also rightly said, "To the Mizo, to accept the teaching of Jesus meant to be *Tlawmngai*, and this made them feel that it fulfilled their highest aspirations," and "to

serve this God, at whatever cost, was to fulfill the Mizo ideal of *Tlawmngaihna*”.⁴⁵ Hence, it is in Jesus Christ, the central figure of Christian faith, that *tlawmngaihna* is most clearly expressed. His incarnation, his selfless life and his death on the cross may all be perceived as an act of *tlawmngaihna*.

7. Conclusion

Our theology is our way of sensing and doing things as revealed in our people’s struggle, for spiritual and social emancipation and expressed in the idioms and languages of cultures. Such struggles have created our search for theology in Mizoram that can find fulfillment only if we participate in the people’s struggle. The revelation of God in Christ shows that culture or tradition participates in it not only as an instrument of that revelation, but as a part of that revelation. Human is inseparable from culture, so also when God made the decision to become human, it was equally a decision to be identified with culture. It is in that identification that humans can come to know about God and allow him/her to become his/her God. Only in that identification could God achieve the redemption of human, which includes the redemption of his/her culture. Christian theology must take Christ into the Mizo culture and allow him to speak from within and to become part of that culture. In this way the Mizo *Tlawmngaihna* and Gospel will create a new human and a new culture in the image of God.

End Notes

¹ K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making* (Jorhat: M.T.C., 1997); *Towards a Tribal Theology: The Mizo Perspective*, ed., K. Thanzauva (Aizawl: M.T.C., 1989); Rosiamliana Tochwang, K. Lalrinmawia and L.H. Rawsea eds., *Ground Works for Tribal theology in the Mizo Context* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2007); Wati Longchar, (ed.,) *An Exploration of Tribal Theology* (Jorhat: The Tzudikong Baptist Church, 1997); L.H. Lalpekhluva, *Contextual Christology : A Tribal Perspective* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2007); etc.

- ² On the question of diversity in early Christian Thought, See Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971, and Helmut Koester, “Gnomoi Diaphoroi” in *Trajectories Through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971,
- ³ J. Russel Chandran, “Theologizing in the Context of the Marginalized and the Oppressed” in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol. xxiv, Nos. 3 & 4, (Sept & Dec 1992),. 7.
- ⁴ *Ibid*
- ⁵ *Tlawmngaihna* is the term used for the Mizo “code of morals”, “a highly prized” virtue and a “wonderful philosophy of life” which is so rich in meaning and so wide in scope, so that it has been found virtually impossible to render it in any single word or phrase of another language. According to Gaikwad, “*Tlawmngaihna* is a spirit of community concern, selflessness, and dedication in service, patience in tribulation, exemplary courage and chivalry all rolled into one” See Roger Gaikwad, “Doing Theology with Tribal Resources: Cautionary Remarks” in *Doing Theology with Tribal Resources: Context and Perspective*, eds., A Wati Longchar and Larry E. Davis (Jorhat: TBC, 1999), 135.
- ⁶ Balasuriya Tissa, “Towards the Liberation of Theology in Asia” in V. Fabella (ed.), *Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity*, 1989, 94.
- ⁷ Rosiamliana Tochwawng, “Contextualization of Theological Education in Mizoram - North East India” in *Ground Works for Tribal Theology in the Mizo Context*, eds., Rosiamliana Tochwawng, K. Lalrinmawia and L. H. Rawsea (Delhi: ISPCK, 2007), 164.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 164 – 165.
- ⁹ Joseph Putti, *Theology as Hermeneutics: Paul Ricoeur’s Theory of Text Interpretation and Method in Theology* (Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 1991), 65.
- ¹⁰ Arvind P. Nirmal, *Heuristic Explorations* (Madras: CLS, 1991), 172-173.
- ¹¹ J. Russel Chandran, “Rev. A. P. Nirmal – A Tribute” in *N.C.C. Review*, (January, 1997), 32.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 33
- ¹³ Amos Wilder, “The Word as Address and Meaning”, in J.M. Robinson and J.B. Cobb (Eds.), *New Frontiers in Theology*, Vol. 2, (New York: Harper and row, 1964), 202.
- ¹⁴ Bishop Thomas Menamparampil, “Cultures, Communities, Christ” in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (January, 1994): 7.
- ¹⁵ P.L. Lianzuala, “Towards a Theology of Mizo Tlawmngaihna” in *Towards A Tribal Theology: The Mizo Perspective* (Jorhat: Mizo Theological Conference, 1989), 54.

- ¹⁶ P.L.Lianzuala, “Towards a Theology of Mizo Tlawmngaihna” in *Towards a Tribal Theology: The Mizo Perspective*, ed., K. Thanzauva (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1989), 61.
- ¹⁷ Thanzauva, *Theology of Community ...*, 124 – 125.
- ¹⁸ Lecture delivered by Dr. Wati Longchar on 21st January 2005 in Aizawl Theological College
- ¹⁹ Zairema, “The Mizos and Their Religions” in *Towards a Tribal Theology: The Mizo Perspective*, ed., K. Thanzauva (Aizawl: MTC, 1989), 31.
- ²⁰ Lianzuala, *Mizo Tlawmngaihna ...*, 59.
- ²¹ See, N.E. Parry, *A Monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies* (Shillong: Government press, 1928); Challiana, *Pi Pu Nun* (Aizawl: Trio-Book House, 1978)
- ²² Sangliana, “Tlawmngaihna and the Mizos”, *Mizoram: New Magazine*, (August, 1984): 40.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ²⁴ Thanzauva, *Theology of Community ...*, 128.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ H.Vanlalauva, “Hmangaihna Vrs Tlawmngaihna” *Chhinlung Magazine* Vol.VI (1991-1992): 22. See also Ropianga, “Tlawmngaihna Theology” *Didakhe* Vol. XVI, No 3, (May – June, 1987):17.
- ²⁷ E. Chapman and M. Clark, “*Mizo Miracle*” ed., Majorie Kyles (Madras: CLS, 1968), 90.
- ²⁸ Cited in *Harh A Hun Ta* by Z.T.Sangkhuma, Unpublished MS (Aizawl: n.d): 42.
- ²⁹ Vanlalauva, “*Hmangaihna Vrs Tlawmngaihna*” ..., 17.
- ³⁰ Thanzauva, *Theology of Community ...*, 129.
- ³¹ T.K. Oommen, “Mobilisation for Social Development: The Indian Situation” in *Social Movement for Development*, ed., S.K. Srinava and A.L. Srinava (Allahabad: Chugh Publication, 1987), 1-16.
- ³² Thanzauva, *Theology of Community ...*,130.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 131.
- ³⁴ Gustavo Gutierrez, *Sharing the Word through the Liturgical Year* (Bangalore: Claretian Pubs.,1998), 171.
- ³⁵ Thanzauva, *Theology of Community ...*, 132.
- ³⁶ David Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. I (Great Britain : Billing & Sons Ltd., 1992), 60-61.
- ³⁷ Thanzauva, *Theology of Community ...*, 132-133.
- ³⁸ See, Baptist Church of Mizoram, *The Annual Reports of BMS*, 94.
- ³⁹ Renthly Keitzer, *In Search of a Relevant Gospel Meassage* (Guwahati: CLC, 1995), 23.

- ⁴⁰ Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 74 – 82.
- ⁴¹ Douglas John Hall, *Professing the faith: Christian theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 497.
- ⁴² Saiaithanga, *Mizo Kohhran* (Aizawl: RTLC, 1969), 172 -174.
- ⁴³ Khuanga, “The Role of Christianity in the Socio-Economic Praxis of Mizoram” in *Towards a Tribal Theology: The Mizo Perspective*, ed., K. Thanzauva (Aizawl: Mizo theological Conference, 1989), 97.
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**PROPHETIC RESPONSE TO GREED-BASED
ECONOMY AS REFLECTED IN HOSEA 2:2-5
IN THE LIGHT OF THE
MIZO CONCEPT OF HONOUR AND SHAME**

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The economic issue was one of the major concerns of the eighth-century prophets in Israel and Judah and their ideas concerning this issue are vital for understanding their fundamental values and ethos. It is generally recognised that the eighth-century prophets, namely Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah have anti-rich and pro-poor attitudes in their oracles. Even a cursory reading of the oracles of these prophets can easily give us the idea that they are very critical of the affluent whereas they have a deep concern for the poor. It is very interesting to see the prophets take this view, since wealth and prosperity are normally considered positively and poverty is often viewed negatively in the other parts of the Old Testament.¹ The question is: Why did they have such a negative attitude towards the rich and deep concern for the poor? What motivated them to be so critical of the rich and to commit themselves to fight for the cause of the poor? What values were they upholding in so doing?

Scholars usually approach the subject of wealth and poverty in the Old Testament via studies of the Hebrew terms for “poor,” and are less interested in the vocabulary of wealth.² Some scholars try to understand the Old Testament concern for the underprivileged in relation with other ancient West Asian peoples’ values and ethos, and they normally conclude that concern for the poor is not unique to Israel.³ In addition, there are certain scholars who attempt to reconstruct the socio-economic structure of ancient Israel and Judah

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in light of modern sociological, anthropological and archaeological insights in order to throw more light on the background of the prophetic protests in the eighth century BCE.⁴ Though these kinds of approaches add knowledge about wealth and poverty in the Old Testament in general and about the concept of the prophets in particular, they do not enable us to understand why the prophets are so negative towards the affluent and so committed to the destitute. This paper is an attempt to look at Hosea's attitude towards economic issue from a different angle, i.e. from the angle of the Mizo understanding of honour and shame. The desired conclusion is that this perspective can further illuminate some important aspects of the values and ethos of the prophet concerning wealth and poverty.

The prevalence of honour and shame vocabularies in prophetic literature and the importance of the subject of wealth and poverty in the teachings of the eighth-century prophets have been detected separately by scholars. However, a systematic investigation has never been carried out to show the relationship between the values of honour and shame and the issues of wealth and poverty in the oracles of the prophets. Even those who see the connection between these two concepts in the Old Testament normally accept that wealth and prosperity bring honour and respect to the rich people whereas economic poverty is often tied with dishonour and shame.⁵ Stiebert notes that the idea of honour represented by status or wealth, which is depicted as a social value to be striven and competed for, is rooted in the Mediterranean social anthropological understanding of honour and shame.⁶ However, this generally accepted assumption is rarely to be found in the oracles of the eighth-century prophets, where we get several points of contact between the values of honour and shame and the issues of wealth and poverty. As indicated above, the eighth-century prophets deny honour and respect to the affluent people and firmly support the

honour and dignity of the poor and destitute. The question is – if wealth and prosperity enhance honour and respect for the wealthy people, why do the eighth-century prophets sharply criticise them instead of showing them respect and honour? At the same time, if economic poverty is associated with dishonour and shame, why should the prophets treat the poor and the weak as their precious fellow human beings who deserve honour and dignity? These questions have never been adequately answered in discussions on the subject of honour and shame or in discussions of the prophetic responses to economic issues. This study aims to explore the significance of these concepts through the socio-economic and cultural lens of the Mizo people to illuminate the eighth-century prophets' concept of wealth and poverty.

We will first briefly look at some important features of the Mizo understanding of honour and shame in relation to concepts of wealth and poverty, and the impact of modernisation/globalisation on their traditional values and ethos. Then we will concentrate on the selected passage in order to demonstrate how Hosea's values of honour and shame function in shaping his messages as he responds to new challenges in the economic life of the Israelites.

1. The Mizo values of honour and shame in relation to wealth and poverty

'Honour' and its binary opposite 'shame' play significant roles in shaping the value-system of the Mizo people. 'Honour' may be regarded as the core value commonly shared by the different tribal groups in Northeast India. While the Mizo people consider community honour as the highest reputation, public humiliation or shame is regarded as the worst devastation. Unlike the legal mindset of the individual-oriented society, where everything is judged in terms of right or wrong, the community-oriented tribal mindset is largely dominated by what is honourable or shameful. In the Mizo mentality,

the highest honour is reserved for one who selflessly sacrifices his or her wealth, strength, time and ability for the common good of the members of the community. For this reason, generosity, bravery, loyalty, and selflessness occupy a very important place in the value-system of the people. For example, *thangchhuah*,⁷ the most honourable title conferred by the Mizo community, was given to a rich couple who generously shared their wealth with the community by means of giving community feasts and distributing their possessions to the poor. In order to achieve this title, one had to be economically well off with huge livestock and agricultural surpluses. However, wealthy people have never been automatically offered this title on account of their wealth unless they shared a significant amount of their possessions with the members of their community. In fact, an individual or a family in the tribal community could not claim any title of honour, as this kind of egotism was considered shameful. The community used to award public honour by consensus to the most deserving person.⁸ Though every member of the community admired *thangchhuah*, the only one who could really earn this title was a rich person or a great hunter who generously shared a large amount of meat with his neighbours.⁹ The whole practice of *thangchhuah* was dominated by the philosophy that riches and material resources should be shared with the members of the community.

The clearest and simplest way of describing the essence of the traditional Mizo socio-economic culture may be 'the culture of sharing'. They share with each other not only their valuable materials and possessions, but also all the resources they have including agricultural tools, hunting weapons, agricultural products, land, food, power, service and time. In the traditional Mizo society, wealth was not so much measured in terms of how much one saved material possessions, but in terms of how much one shared or spent one's possessions for the well-being of the community. There was a competitive spirit among the well-to-do families to share their

wealth with other members of the community. In the Mizo ethos, people would feel ashamed if they found out that their neighbours were starving without their knowledge when they had plenty to eat. Though all members of the community take collective responsibility in helping out the needy and helpless, yet the well-to-do families have key roles to play in times of emergency and in certain difficult circumstances. A family which is in a position to share its wealth for the benefit of others is highly admired and respected. Every family strives to be the one who is dependable for others rather than the one who depends on others. At the same time, a family who never shares its wealth with neighbours and uses its resources exclusively for its own benefit and interest is regarded as selfish and mean and its attitude is considered shameful. A person is valued and honoured on the basis of what he or she contributes to the community rather than what he or she has or accumulates. While they give honour and respect to the generous rich person, they look down upon the mean and greedy ones.

The traditional Mizo economic value was dominated by the philosophy “*Sem sem dam dam, ei bil thi thi*” - which can be translated as “sharing you live, greedily eating you die” or “let the one who shares live, and the one greedily eating die”. In the traditional Mizo community, an act of voracity that impoverished their fellow members and undermined the needs of their poor neighbour was considered utterly shameful and absolutely unacceptable. Those who maintained persistently anti-communitarian lifestyles were punished by means of *en san*.¹⁰ This was the most shameful and humiliating punishment in the tribal community as every member of the community turns away and refuses to co-operate with such a family even in times of death and other difficult circumstances.

Honour therefore creates incentives for adhering to commonly accepted standards of conduct whereas public shame is used as a

sanction against socially unacceptable behaviour. The most important thing for the Mizo people was to maintain healthy social relationships and to keep solidarity and harmony in the community. The *thangchhuah* feast given by the rich people was vital for strengthening community solidarity, and this practice ensured that every member of the community, irrespective of rich and poor, had a share in the riches of the well-to-do family. The wealthy families were the most valuable assets of the traditional Mizo community as their contributions had great positive impact on the solidarity of the community. They gave comfort, strength and security to the poor and weak. Thus, material resources were perceived to be fundamentally meant for safeguarding communal harmony. They put the importance of healthy social relationships and community welfare above the value of material goods and individual wealth.

Though the practice of *thangchhuah* was the pre-Christian Mizo tradition the values and ethos inherent in this tradition have continued to dominate their values even after they became Christians. For example, the community feast of *thangchhuah* has been transformed into a Christian community feast called *Pathian hnena lawmthu sawi*.¹¹ Even today, the people who possess wealth and sufficient agricultural surplus in the Mizo Christian community are still determined to sponsor a public feast for the whole community in the name of '*Pathian hnena lawmthu sawi*' especially in rural contexts. However, as the Mizo people are increasingly penetrated by the process of modernisation which now takes the form of globalisation, their traditions, customs, value-systems, and social ethos are seriously damaged. The traditional values are now being brushed aside by materialism and wealth, as moneymaking is the main driving force of globalisation. The common charge against globalisation is that it is an extension of western capitalism, empowered by a free market economy that perpetuates neo-colonialism. Under its sway, the

preservation of cultures and identities becomes impossible, especially for vulnerable people like the Mizo tribe. This pressure results in the alienation of identities on the one hand and, on the other, in cultural chaos.¹² Robert J. Samuelson comments, “Globalisation is a double-edged sword. It’s a controversial process that assaults national sovereignty, erodes local culture and tradition and threatens economic and social stability.”¹³ Globalisation promotes the idea that you are what you eat, wear, and possess rather than what you do and sacrifice for the well-being of the community. Money, possessions, appearance, and fame are the fundamental values advocated by globalisation. This new value-system fuelled by a profit-oriented market economy and consumerist lifestyle has promoted unhealthy competition for the accumulation of wealth among the Mizo people, which in turn brings conflicts in their community, as there are gainers and losers in this process.¹⁴ While a few Mizo people have benefited from globalisation, a large majority of them are still living in extreme poverty. However, the division brought about by this process among the Mizo people is much more than an economic class distinction. They are now profoundly drifting apart in terms of values and interests. What is painful for the people who still stand for the traditional values and principles is that the *nouveaux riche* who uphold the ideology of wealth and luxury now dominate their society without respecting their traditional values and ethos. A society where the strong and wealthy families shared their wealth and power for the benefit of the poor and weak is now being transformed into a society where the rich and influential oppress and exploit fellow members of their community in order to generate more wealth. The people whose actions were previously determined by what is honourable are now largely driven by what is profitable. What was previously regarded as the most shameful way of life has now become part of the lifestyle of the affluent people. Further, the rich people who were traditionally honoured and respected have now often become the objects of criticism. In fact, the lavish lifestyles

and self-centred value-systems of the rich that ignore the plight of their poor neighbours are seen as shameful, disgusting and offensive by those who want to protect their traditional values. In this situation, the Mizo people are facing social conflicts, clashes of values and interests, identity crises, and misunderstandings. The insights derived from the present Mizo situation may be able to provide scope for the illumination of the values and ethos of the prophet who opposed the affluent upper class in the eighth century BC.

2. Hosea 2:2-5¹⁵

The selected text is part of the larger unit of Hosea 2:2-13 [Heb. 2:4-15] which is generally regarded as the ‘kerygmatic sermon’ of Hosea.¹⁶ Though this passage is not a separate unit, it can be taken as a self-contained sub-unit.¹⁷ This passage is dominated by Yahweh’s accusations against his adulterous wife and his threat of punishment, which may well represent the main concern of the prophet in the whole unit. There is no serious question about the authenticity of this passage. It represents Hosea’s typical use of sexual imagery in prophetic speech, which is used effectively here to expose the shameful condition of the people of Israel. Even a casual reading of this passage quickly gives us the idea that shame is the vital rhetorical weapon of the prophet in denouncing the values and lifestyles of those who have been addressed.

2.1. Shame as Hosea’s Rhetoric Weapon

Hosea is one of the earliest Old Testament prophets who extensively uses the vocabularies and metaphors of shame in his prophetic speeches. The Hebrew verbs derived from the root *bosh* (to shame), and its noun forms *bosha*, *bosheth* or *boshna* occur four times, and another noun *qalan* (derived from the *niph’al* verb $\div\grave{\text{ä}}$ or perhaps a by-form of $\div\grave{\text{ì}}$ “to be light”) which means “to be lightly esteemed or dishonoured/ashamed” occurs once. Moreover, the noun *nabluth* that is normally rendered as “shamelessness”

also occurs once.¹⁸ In addition to the use of these shame vocabularies, the metaphors of the adulterous wife and the children of whoredom, who could be socially considered the most shameful individuals in Hebrew culture, dominate his prophetic speeches.

Hosea 2:2-5 is also dominated by the metaphor of a promiscuous wife whose character and lifestyle obviously represents the shameful behaviour of Hosea's audience. It opens with the words of Yahweh, the furious husband, addressing his children to plead against their mother who is accused of having committed adultery. The husband can no longer accept his children's mother as his wife, and neither does he want himself to be regarded as her husband any longer. He urges her to give up her habit of promiscuity or else he will strip her and leave her naked publicly. He will have no pity even upon her children as he considers them illegitimate, i.e. the children of whoredom. The main culprit, however, is their mother who has acted shamefully by following her sexual desire to have extra-marital sex with foreigners. The main driving force of her habit of promiscuity seems to have been a desire to gain material wealth (v. 5).

This metaphor clearly conveys the message that the present state of the people who are being condemned is absolutely unacceptable for the God of Hosea. The behaviour and activities of these people are not merely wrong, but are metaphorically described as shameful, irritating and disgusting. Hosea's metaphors of a promiscuous woman and her children of whoredom must have conveyed various messages in the patriarchal society of ancient Israel in which he proclaimed his oracles. It certainly expresses the shamefulness, seriousness, and unacceptability of the wrongdoings of those who are accused.

There is no certainty about the identity of the people represented by the metaphors 'mother' and 'children' from this passage.

Traditionally, the 'mother' is identified as the present generation and the 'children' are those who are to succeed.¹⁹ However, considering Hosea's targets of critique in other oracles, it is quite reasonable to argue that the metaphor "mother" might have pointed to the ruling elite, and the "children of whoredom" might also refer to those who had been influenced by the values of the royal circle.²⁰ Gale A. Yee suggests that "Hosea's accusations are targeted primarily at a male audience: the king and his political and cultic elite."²¹ For Yee, by reducing the male ruling hierarchy into a promiscuous wife, Hosea strikes a heavy blow against their exalted male honour and prestige. In the patriarchal society, "masculinity" is generally associated with superiority and honour whereas "femininity" is defined as inferiority, and so describing the male ruling class as a woman would have had a very negative and degrading effect.²² Here, they are not simply reduced to being a woman, but to being a sexually promiscuous wife who brings the greatest dishonour to her husband. In a male-dominated society, the worst deed a married woman could do to her husband and relatives was to commit adultery. An adulterous woman strips her husband of his honour, and spoils the moral integrity and honour of all people who are close to her.²³ Similarly, the rulers are those who cheaply sold the honour and dignity of the nation by their own shameful behaviour. The expression "let her put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts" can be taken as a demand to put away her unashamed and unrepentant face.²⁴ Yee takes these expressions as referring to the cosmetics and jewelry used to make the wife attractive to her lovers.²⁵ Jeremiah expresses the same idea in 3:3, "you have the forehead of a whore, you refuse to be ashamed." Instead of showing their feeling of shame, the people who commit such shameful deeds proudly continue to maintain their values and arrogant lifestyles. In the mentality of a male-dominated society, the metaphor of a shameless adulterous woman would have been an expression of the most offensive and disgusting behaviour. This kind of shameless behaviour

of the ruling elites certainly provokes the anger of Yahweh as he is prompted to say: “I will strip her naked and expose her as in the day she was born” (v. 3) and in v.10, “I will uncover her shame in the sight of her lovers, and no one shall rescue her out of my hand.” The ones who strip the honour of Yahweh will be humiliated. As an angry husband who has been robbed of his authority, humiliated, ashamed and devastated by the unfaithfulness of his wife, Yahweh will take action in anger by stripping her naked and uncovering even her genitals (ðâüä)²⁶ before those who sleep with her. In the shame culture, this kind of punishment could be worse than capital punishment. The languages and metaphors of Hosea clearly express that the dominant elites have committed the most serious crime against Yahweh and they deserve the worst of consequences.

2.2. What according to Hosea is the serious crime one should be ashamed of ?

There is no doubt that Hosea has chosen the most pricking language and metaphors to publicly shame the values and behaviour of the influential people who cause serious damage to the traditional customs, beliefs and ethos of Israelite society. But the question is – what exactly is he trying to shame by using the metaphor of the promiscuous wife? Commentators traditionally take the promiscuous wife’s shameful acts of whoring as primarily referring to the idolatrous fertility cults of the Northern Kingdom, and her lovers as Canaanite fertility deities - Baals.²⁷ The issue that dominated scholarly debate for a long time was the question of whether the prophet encounters the wholesale and unequivocal worship of Baal or the syncretistic worship of Yahweh as Baal by the Israelite people.²⁸ Within this idolatrous religious cult theory, Hosea is generally regarded as the champion of the covenant God Yahweh, who fights against Israel’s participation in the worship of Baal or in the syncretistic fertility cults represented by an adulterous woman in his metaphor. However, this kind of interpretation has

been challenged by feminist scholars who take quite a different view regarding the interpretation of Hosea's metaphors. Instead of endorsing Hosea's combat against the idolatrous fertility cults of Baal as a theological accomplishment, they have critically pointed out the role of Hosea's sexual metaphors in promoting the patriarchal and male-chauvinistic character of western religious traditions.²⁹ For them, Hosea's sexual metaphor lays a strong foundation for the construction of a religious tradition that has profoundly conditioned the way Western culture has thought about gender, sexuality, materiality, and the meaning of the sacred.

It is obvious that the social locations and perspectives of readers can bring out quite different meanings from the same text. Within their own frameworks of interpretation, both traditional and feminist scholars have provided significant insights for understanding the metaphors of Hosea. If we analyse the same text from a different perspective, we may be able to illuminate further some other aspects of Hosea's infidelity metaphor. As we have seen in the above discussion, the crucial concern for the Mizo people is the question concerning their socio-economic and cultural life in a context where they are being ruined by the cultural and economic values of the stronger nations through economic globalisation.

If we read the selected text from the social location of the Mizo people, Hosea's main concern described in his sexual metaphor can be connected with the economic and cultural issues of the Israelite people who had been penetrated by the stronger nations. Yee argues that the "lovers" of Yahweh's promiscuous wife, which scholars traditionally interpret as the Baals, should be taken as "the nations", because Hosea's only clear identification of the "lovers" is in 8:9-10, where the lovers are "the nations" with whom Ephraim is foolishly allied (cf. Jer. 22:20-22; Lam. 1:2; Ezek. 23:5-21).³⁰ Keefe also suggests that the lovers of Yahweh's wife may

be interpreted as Israel's foreign allies and trading partners.³¹ What is obvious from the oracles of Hosea is that he has two serious major concerns, which appear to be completely separate issues but can be tied together, namely, the Israelites' association with Baal/baalim and Israel's alliance with Assyria and Egypt. Just as with his critique of Baal/baalim, the prophet often makes negative comments on the relationship between Israel and the two political and economic superpowers in ancient West Asia, namely Assyria and Egypt (5:13; 7:11; 8:9-10; 9:3; 11:11; 12:1; 14:3).

Scholars have recognised for a long time how the two powerful nations – Assyria and Egypt - were driven by their economic and political interests and how they made significant impact on different states in this part of the world.³² In fact, the geographical location of Israel and Judah was an important bridge between these two superpowers in ancient West Asia. Ekholm and Friedman observe that Mesopotamia and Egypt were the early trade centres where an ancient form of capitalism was developed in the early period.³³ That means that the people of Israel and Judah occupied a strategic transit point on the north-south international trade route. In order to exploit the profit potential of the geographical location of their territories, the rulers had to develop strategic alliances with these two powerful nations. There is a strong evidence to suggest that Israel was interested in making alliance with these two superpowers – Egypt and Assyria - in the words of Hosea: "Ephraim has become like a dove, silly and without sense; they call upon Egypt, they go to Assyria" (7:11). Traditionally, this verse has often been interpreted as referring to Pekah, the king of Israel, who appealed to Egypt for military help, and nine years later another king of Israel, namely, Hoshea did the same thing to Assyria (2 Kgs. 17:4).³⁴ However, there is no explicit reference to these events and nothing specific is said about the names of these two Israelite rulers in Hosea's oracle, and there is no compelling reason to take it as

referring to a military alliance. Rather, this alliance could be political as well as economic; for this was very much in keeping with the eighth century situation, which can be perfectly tied with the royal policy of growth and development. There can be little doubt that the rulers of Israel approached these two ancient capitalistic states to make economic alliances. If this assumption is correct, it would imply that the two economic superpowers in the ancient West Asia of Hosea's time had a chance to dictate or at least to influence the socio-economic and cultural values of the ruling elite of Israel. In addition, the people of Tyre, who were known for their commercial and mercantile activities in ancient West Asia, also appeared to have close ties with Jeroboam's Israel, as political alignments were integral to elite strategies of profiteering.³⁵

What is obvious from Hosea's marriage metaphor is that third-party's interference into the intimate relationship between husband and wife has brought a clash of interests and conflicting values between the couple. The involvement of the outsiders in the most sensitive area of marital affairs is the main factor behind the breakout of the whole issue encountered by the prophet. Aberbach sees the connection between Assyrian imperialism and the prostitution of Israel in the metaphor of Hosea.³⁶ The wife has been carried away by the lure provided by her lovers. In v. 5, the adulterous wife says, "I will go after my lovers; they give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink." Keefe observes, "The grain, wine and oil were the 'commodities of choice' within a burgeoning market economy based on international trade."³⁷ Here the desire for these 'commodities of trade' becomes a signifier for the nation's promiscuity. This suggests that a market-oriented economic value-system is the main attractive lure that drives the Israelite dominant elite to go after the stronger nations, which was very much congruent with their desire to accelerate economic growth. Elsewhere the prophet says, "Ephraim seeks

companionship with the wind, chases the east wind all day long; lies and destruction they multiply; they make an agreement with Assyria, and carry oil to Egypt” (12:1 [12:2]). This seems to suggest that the Israelite leaders were driven around by commercial and economic values in making an alliance with the powerful nations.

Most of the scholars who read the texts of the eighth-century prophets from a social-scientific perspective can easily detect that the ruling class heavily imposed an increased demand for cash crops like wine, oil and grain for commercial purposes during this period.³⁸ The intensification of the production of cash crops motivated by the profit-oriented economic activities of the dominant elite would have seriously damaged the traditional rural subsistence economy along with traditional customs and ways of life of the ordinary and lower class people in the Israelite society. The increasing tension as a result of the widening gap between the rich and the poor witnessed by Hosea and his contemporary prophets are undoubtedly part and parcel of this development. In Hosea’s metaphor, the husband has been robbed, ruined and humiliated as his beloved wife is taken away by the lure provided by her lovers. This could refer to the damage done to the traditional socio-economic system and the erosion of the religio-cultural values and ethos of the Israelite people as a result of the infiltration of the economic and cultural values of the imperial nations that had been welcomed and supported by the state. The angry reaction of Yahweh, the husband, apparently represents the feelings of the victims who have been hurt, humiliated and ruined by the greed-based economic policy adopted by the leaders of Israelite society. This largely explains the reason why the prophets in the eighth century BCE had voiced strong language and sharp criticism against the affluent and dominant elite, presumably the collaborators of the colonialists, and expressed deep concerns for the poor and the weak, the hardest hit and the most helpless victims of the new economic system.

Hosea's Baal/baalim seemed to have been more than the traditional indigenous Canaanite fertility cult. The Hebrew verb *baal* (âðì) means "rule over, be lord, marry, be husband or master" from which the noun "owner", "husband", "lord" or "master" is derived. From the ninth century BC, the name of the deity Baal was strongly associated with the oppressive power of the royal circles, which had the majority of control over political and economic factors. A century before Hosea, the prophet Elijah encountered king Ahab and queen Jezebel's worship of the Tyrian god Baal, which seemed to have accelerated the process of *latifundialization* for the intensification of cash crops, and which in turn had a devastating impact on the traditional economy, cultural values and customs of ordinary people like the small landholder, Naboth (1 Kgs. 17, 21). Thus, the name Baal/baalim, which was inseparable from royal power and its oppressive commercial policy long before the time of Hosea, had undoubtedly gained a negative connotation at least among the subaltern peoples of the land. Anything associated with colonial power and its oppressive ideologies appeared to have been opposed by the prophet. If this assumption is correct, it is quite possible that Hosea used the name Baal/baalim figuratively to refer to the oppressive values and beliefs of the masters and landlords in his own society and their foreign allies who controlled colonial power in ancient West Asia during the eighth century BC. In fact, Hosea's prophetic expression was largely a combination of metaphors, similes, and wordplays.³⁹ Albertz argues that "Hosea uses Ba'al as a polemic term for anything that he declares to be 'alien religion'."⁴⁰ The ancient Phoenician deity Baal was the god of the storm and rain, and therefore the lord of the crops, land and agriculture.⁴¹ Thus, Hosea's Baal could be identified with the royal policy of intensification of agriculture, which ensured increased agricultural and farming products for large-scale commercial activities. Coote and Coote consider "Hosea's Baal as the 'god of commerce', whose cult was tied to the latifundial structures of land

ownership which had come to dominate the hills of Ephraim in Hosea's time".⁴² It is reasonable to argue that Hosea has specifically chosen the term Baal/baalim to express figuratively the oppressive economic dimension of the values and interests of powerful nations like the Assyrians and Egyptians that had driven the economic policy of the rulers of Israel. Hosea's Baal/baalim can, therefore, be largely regarded as representing the cultural and economic ideologies of the imperial power of Assyria and Egypt, which were manifested in the form of the economic and religious activities of the Israelite ruling elite that sanctioned agricultural intensification for commercial purposes. These ideological forces increasingly pushed aside the values and interests of the traditional Israelite society.

The first people infected by these new values and ideologies are the upper class who are at the centre of the state. Hosea singles out the king (5:1; 7:3,5,7; 8:4,10; 10:7,15; 13:10-11), priests (4:4-10; 5:1; 6:7-10; 7:1-7), prophets (4:5; 6:5) and royal officials (7:3,5,16; 8:4,10; 9:15). Yee argues that Hosea's adulterous wife metaphor can be connected with the complex social, economic and political relations among the king, priest, and prophet, both at home and abroad in eighth-century Israel.⁴³ In the eyes of the prophet, these upper class people are the ones who have been carried away by the cultural values and economic ideologies of stronger nations. They are considered to be puppets controlled by external forces (5:11; 7:11; 8:8;10:1). The spirit of whoredom leads them astray as they are mainly driven by the values of money and material possessions. Hosea proclaims:

The more they increased,
the more they sinned against me;
they changed their glory into shame.
They feed on the sin of my people;

they are greedy for their iniquity.
And it shall be like people, like priest;
I will punish them for their ways,
and repay them for their deeds.
They shall eat, but not be satisfied;
they shall play the whore, but not multiply;
because they have forsaken the LORD
to devote themselves to whoredom (Hos. 4:7-10).

Here, the increasing accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few dominant rich people as a result of their greed-based economic activities is seen as something unacceptable, and it is considered to be the factor that transforms their *kabod* (honour, glory) into *qalon* (shame, dishonour). It is certain that the accumulation of wealth is not regarded as an element that enhances honour; rather it is linked with shame. The greed-based economy of the upper classes is equated here with an act of whoredom for which they will surely be punished. They may have plenty to eat, but they will never be satisfied; they may apply all kinds of dubious methods to gain profits, but they will never really multiply.

Conclusion

Analysing Hosea 2:2-5 from a Mizo perspective reveals that the issues concerning wealth and poverty in eighth-century Israel are largely connected with the infiltration of foreign religio-cultural values and economic ideology. We have argued that the Baal/baalim encountered by the prophet are not merely fertility cults or idolatrous forms of worship, but the cultural and economic ideologies of foreign imperialists in the time of Hosea. The main targets of Hosea's critique are the king, royal officials, priests and prophets who are singled out as collaborators and supporters of colonial economic values and ideology. As these influential people are infected by the values and ideology of the colonialists, Israelite

society as a whole has been spoiled and confused, and people are facing an identity crisis. For Hosea, the upper classes are the main culprits who are responsible for spreading the ideology of greed in Israelite society, which destroyed the traditional tribal subsistence economy and related values. The prophet employs the most insulting language and metaphors to express his deep sense of anger and shame towards the rulers and their foreign allies. He identifies them as a shameless adulterous wife, and her children the result of whoredom, representing the most shameful individuals in the ancient male-dominated society. Hosea deliberately chose these metaphors to expose the shameful and unacceptable behaviour of the dominant elite. It is obvious that shaming is the fundamental rhetorical weapon of the prophet in condemning those who violate the traditional norms and value-systems of Israelite society. In his eyes the nation is being ruined, defeated, and gradually engulfed by the imperial cultural values and the hardest hit are the poor and other vulnerable citizens who depend upon the tribal subsistence economy, maintaining the traditional values and simple communitarian ways of life.

End Notes

- ¹ For example, in some places in the Old Testament we come across the idea that wealth is regarded as the blessing of God, the fruit of righteousness and the outcome of obedience and wisdom (Deut.28:1-6; 1 Kings 3:12-13; Job 1:1-5, etc). At the same time, poverty is also often considered as the consequence of unrighteousness, laziness, disobedience, and foolishness (Prov. 10:4; 12:11; 19:15 20:4 etc.). However, the eighth-century prophets did not share this kind of view, rather they hold completely different views in this regard. For them, a huge accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few rich and the stark reality of the poverty of the lower class people were the two opposite outcomes of social injustice.
- ² C. U. Wolf, "Poor," *IDB* 3 (1962) pp. 832-844; "Poverty" *IDB* 3 (1962), 853-854; J. David Pleins, "Poor, Poverty" *ABD* (CD-ROM); see also his "Poverty in the Social World of the Wise" in *Social – Scientific Old Testament Criticism: A Sheffield Reader* (ed. David J. Chalcraft; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 283-300; A. Kuschke, "Arm und Reich im Alten

- Testament mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der nachexilischen Zeit” ZAW 57 (1939) 31-57; E. Bammel, “The Poor in the Old Testament,” *TDNT* 6 (1968) 888-894; Mignon R. Jacobs, “Toward an Old Testament Theology of Concern for the Underprivileged” in *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium: Form, Concept and Theological Perspective* (eds. Wonil Kim et al.; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000) 205-229.
- ³ F. Charles Fensham, “Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature” *JNES* 21 (1962) 129-139; Norman W. Porteous, “The Care of the Poor in the Old Testament” in *Living the Mystery*, (Collected Essays by N. Porteous; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967) 143-155; David H. Engelhard, “The Lord’s Motivated Concern for the Underprivileged” *Calvin Theological Journal* 15 (1980) 5-26.
- ⁴ For example, D.N. Premnath, *Eighth Century Prophets: A Social Analysis* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003).
- ⁵ For example, Gary Stansell, “Wealth: How Abraham Became Rich” in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in its Social Context* (ed. Philip F. Esler; London: SCM Press, 2005) 92-110. Stansell sees the wealth and possessions gained by Abraham, David and Solomon as a means of enhancing their honour and social status.
- ⁶ See Johanna Stiebert, *The Construction of Shame in the Hebrew Bible: The Prophetic Contribution* (JSOTSup 346; London: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 2002) 95. She points out that in the teachings of the prophets honour, represented by status (ḥōd, ʿāzā) or pride in one’s claim to honour (ʾāzā), is not depicted as a social value to be striven and competed for but as a quality to be humbly conceded to Yhwh. In First Isaiah, wealth, sometimes regarded as an outward correlative of honour, is condemned or devalued.
- ⁷ *Thangchhuah* literally means “the one who fulfils the honourable ways”.
- ⁸ For example, the best young man in terms of practicing *tlawmngaihna* was awarded public honour in the community gathering. He was honoured by offering the biggest cup of rice beer called *No pui*, and he was supposed to be the first person to sip the beer in the community drink. The recipient of such an honour usually tries to avoid public ceremony as he humbly considers himself unworthy of receiving such a great honour, and sometimes he hides away from the eyes of the people. However, members of the community search him until they find him, and they compel him to receive the community honour which they think he deserves. This clearly shows that the title of honour is not to be claimed by an individual or a family; rather, it is purely at the disposal of the community in the value-system of the tribal people. See C. Vanlallawma, “Mizo Tlawmngaihna” in *Hringlang Tlang* (ed. C. Vanlallawma; Aizawl: MCL Publication, 1998) pp. 1ff.
- ⁹ There are two kinds of *Thangchhuah*. One is called *In lama Thangchhuah*

(Thangchhuah in the domestic affairs) and the other is called *Ram lama Thangchhuah* (Thangchhuah in the jungle affairs). In order to achieve the *Thangchhuah* title in domestic affairs, one has to give different public feasts to all members of the community, whereas to acquire *Thangchhuah* title in the jungle affairs, one needs to be a great hunter who can spare lots of time for hunting to kill the required specific animals. Great hunters are highly admired, as they are the ones who provide meat to the members of the community.

- ¹⁰ *En-san* literally means “to turn blind eyes” “to turn away” or “to forsake”, which means to cease to care for or to refrain from helping. The whole community turns away or refrains from co-operating with the family who are being *en-san* for a considerable period of time even in times of joy, death and other difficult situations. This kind of punishment was intended to pressurize those who broke the community norms or standards of conduct/behaviour, and in order to sanction against anti-communitarian values and lifestyle. A public shaming of this kind was regarded as the most humiliating and devastating punishment which every family wished to avoid.
- ¹¹ *Pathian hnena lawmthu sawi* simply means “thanksgiving to God”. But it is not to be confused with the harvest festival or any other thanksgiving service derived from the western form of worship. Rather, it is the indigenous Mizo Christian practice whereby the rich and those who consider themselves to be the recipients of the blessings of God express their joy and gratitude to God in terms of sharing their wealth and possessions among the whole members of the community by providing a public feast.
- ¹² Kailash C. Baral, “Globalisation and Tribes of Northeast India” *Indian Folklife*, 22 (2006) 3.
- ¹³ As cited by Raj, “Globalisation and the Plight of Tribals” 3.
- ¹⁴ While the rich, professionals, creditors, large firms and global elites gain from this global economic force; the poor people with low skills, small firms, and people depending on subsistence economies like the majority of the tribal population in India lose out. See Raj, “Globalisation and the Plight of Tribals” 3.
- ¹⁵ In the MT, these verses are Hosea 2:4-7, as the last two verses of chapter 1 are added to chapter 2; hence the numbering of the verses in chapter 2 (English versions) is two behind that of MT. Here, we are following the enumeration of the NRSV.
- ¹⁶ H. W. Wolff, *Hosea* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974). Wolff coins the term ‘kerygmatic sermon’ which is followed by other commentators. See A. A. Macintosh, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Hosea* (The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997) 40.
- ¹⁷ While most of the commentators accept 2:4-15 [Eng. 2::2-13] as an unbreakable unit, W.D. Whitt raises doubts about the authenticity of vv. 8-11 and 15, but accepts 2:4-

- 7, 12-14 [Eng. 2:2-5, 10-12] as authentic to Hosea. This suggests that vv. 4-7 [Eng. 2-5] can be treated as a self-contained subunit. See his “The Divorce of Yahweh and Asherah in Hos 2, 4-7.12ff.,” *SJOT* 6 (1992) 33-34. W. R. Harper also challenges the authenticity of 2:8-9 [Eng. 2:6-7]. See his *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1905) 236-238.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Hos. 2:5,10; 4:7; 4:19; 9:10; 10:6.
- ¹⁹ Rabbinic commentators, namely Rashi and Ibn Ezra, interpret in this way. Another rabbinic commentator, Kimchi, suggests a slightly variant view: the mother stands for the people of Israel as a whole, the children for its individual citizens who are urged to bring their neighbours back to rectitude. See Macintosh, *Hosea*, 40.
- ²⁰ The king, priests, prophets and royal officials, in short, people in the royal circle, are mainly targeted by Hosea (cf. 4:4; 5:1; 7:3, 5-7; 8:4-6; 9:7-9; 10:7; 13:10,11).
- ²¹ Gale A Yee, “‘She is not my wife and I am not her husband’: A Materialist Analysis of Hosea 1-2’ *BibInt* Vol. 9 No.4 (2001) 368.
- ²² In male-dominated Mizo society, telling or speaking to a man “You are like a woman” or “Put on a skirt” would be the most humiliating and shameful comment conveying the message that “you are useless, cowardly, hopeless and unfit for manly jobs.”
- ²³ J. K. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964) 271. In the Mediterranean people’s mentality, a woman’s honour has to do primarily with sexual purity. If unmarried, her honour and that of her family depends on her virginity. A woman who wants to maintain her honour should maintain timidity, chastity, passivity, and restraint in her sexual life. While the unmarried women are expected to be virgins, the married ones must be virginal in thought and mentality. See p. 170. See also J. Schneider, “Of Vigilance and virgins: honour, shame and access to resources in Mediterranean societies” *Ethnology*, 9:1-24 (1971) 21. Even in the value-system of the people of Israel, the importance of sexual chastity can be seen in the story of the rape of Dinah (Gen. 34:2ff). Sexual intercourse between a married woman and a man other than her husband was prohibited and punishable by death (Lev 18:20; 20:20; Deut. 22:22).
- ²⁴ The face and breasts associated with the abstract nouns æðãðéã and ðãðãðéã denoting promiscuous behaviour, indicate a brazen lack of shame. See Macintosh, *Hosea*, 39.
- ²⁵ Yee, “She is not my wife,” 375.
- ²⁶ This Hebrew word can be connected with the part of the body with which the lewd folly was committed. See the different opinions of scholars in Macintosh, *Hosea*, 59-60.
- ²⁷ Macintosh, *Hosea*, 49; Ebehard Bons, *Das Buch Hosea* (Stuttgart: Verlag

- Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 1996) 40; Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea* (AB 24; New York: Doubleday, 1980) p. 230; James L. Mays, *Hosea: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969) 39; Wolff, *Hosea*, 35. Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC, 31; Waco: Word Books, 1987).
- ²⁸ The former thesis is supported by Wolff and his followers whereas the latter is supported by Harper and Rudolph. See Macintosh, *Hosea*, 49.
- ²⁹ Yvonne Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea's Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective* (JSOTSup 212; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); also her "Boxing Gomer: Controlling the Deviant Woman in Hosea 1-2" in *A Feminist Companion of the Latter Prophets* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 101-125; T. Drorah Setel, "Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea" in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985) 86-95; Rut Törnkvist, *The Use and Abuse of Female Sexual Imagery in the Book of Hosea: A Feminist Critical Approach to Hos 1-3* (Uppsala: Academia Ubsaliensis, 1998); Cheryl Exum, "Prophetic Pornography" in *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press) 101-128.
- ³⁰ Yee, "She is not my wife" 376. See also Alice A. Keefe, *Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea* (JSOTSup 338; London: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 2001) 195-196. Keefe argues that "a religio-political reading of these lovers in Hosea as allied nations and foreign gods fits well in the context of ancient Near Eastern theopolitics, where a singular national god and his cult undergirded the meaning and power of that state."
- ³¹ Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 195.
- ³² John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 4th Edition, 2000) 270. P. A. H. de Boer, "Egypt in the Old Testament," in *Selected Studies in Old Testament Exegesis* (ed. C. Van Dunn; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991) 152-167. Cogan's thesis is that alliance with Assyria demanded vassals unwavering loyalty in political and economic matters, and any trespass of loyalty oaths incurred immediate punishment. But there is no record of the imposition of Assyrian cults upon vassal states. See Morton Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (Missoula, Montana: Society of Biblical Literature and Scholars Press, 1974).
- ³³ K. Ekholm and J. Friedman, "'Capital' Imperialism and exploitation in Ancient World Systems" in *Mesopotamia Vol. 7 - Power and Propaganda: A Symposium on Ancient Empires* (ed. Mogen Trolle Larsen; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlog, 1979) 46-49. Their main argument is that "there exists a form of "capitalism" in ancient world, that there are "world economies" and that many properties of the dynamics of such systems are common to our own world economy."
- ³⁴ See Macintosh, *Hosea*, 274-275.

- ³⁵ Cf. Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 196.
- ³⁶ David Aberbach, *Imperialism and Biblical Prophecy 750-500 BCE* (London/New York: Routledge, 1993) 23-26.
- ³⁷ Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 197.
- ³⁸ Morris Silver, *Prophets and Markets: The Political Economy of Ancient Israel* (The Hague: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1983); D.N. Premnath, *Eighth Century Prophets: A Social Analysis* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003); also his "Latifudialization and Isaiah 5:8-10" in *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism: A Sheffield Reader* (ed. David J. Chalcraft; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 301-312; Marvin Chaney, "Bitter Bounty: The Dynamics of Political Economy critiqued by the Eighth-Century Prophets" in *Reformed Faith and Economics* (ed. Robert L. Stivers; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989) 15-30.
- ³⁹ Seong-Hyuk Hong, *The Metaphor of Illness and Healing in Hosea and Its Significance in the Socio-Economic Context of Eighth-Century Israel and Judah* (SBL 95; New York: Peter Lang, 2006) 131-132. He points out that Hosea uses the names, such as Jezreel, Ephraim and Canaanite to refer to different things in addition to many other metaphors and similes. In this context, it is quite possible that the term baal was also used to refer to different objects other than the Canaanite fertility god. J. L. Mays also observes, "Metaphors pour out from his mouth. There is hardly an oracle which does not contain at least one, and often they are multiplied within a simple saying as Hosea throws up one image after another to heighten the impact of his speech." See his *Hosea: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969) 7.
- ⁴⁰ Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*. Vol. I (trans. John Bowden; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) 332, n. 115.
- ⁴¹ Cf. Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 130.
- ⁴² Cf. Keefe, *Woman's Body*, 132; Robert B. Coote and Mary P. Coote, *Power, Politics and the Making of the Bible: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) 49-50.
- ⁴³ Yee, "She is not my wife" 257-258.

**AN INDIAN CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGICAL
THE SERPENT IN GENESIS 3: SATAN OR GOD’S
CREATED ANIMAL OR A SYMBOL ?**

*B. Lalnunzira**

I. Introduction:

The human world is characterized by dualism in which good and bad, moral and immoral, godly and ungodly, etc., have been part of life. Since the remote past, human beings have been engaged in attempts to respond to the dualistic impasse of life. In the world of religions, there has been a common inquisitiveness to comprehend the etiology of things and concepts. The traditional understanding of Christianity is that because the serpent beguiled the woman, evil and death have been inflicted upon the whole created world. Moreover, the serpent is personified as Satan, the archenemy of God. In the ancient world of religions, cosmic myths have often presented the serpent as a symbol of evil and power. Is such symbolic representation justified? One is tempted to investigate the identity of the serpent in the religious world. Christian faith as rooted in the Old Testament faith is also of no exception in this regard. In this paper an attempt is made to answer the query - Who is the serpent in Genesis 3? This includes – (a) a brief semantic study, a cursory survey of the serpent myth of the Ancient Near East, a brief examination of the Old Testament and post Old Testament usage, and (b) a closer look at Genesis 3 to answer the query - Who is the serpent in Genesis 3? This includes translation, form critical analysis, narratological investigation and synthesis.

II. Semantic Study:

The most common Hebrew term for the serpent/snake is נָחָשׁ (nachas/nahas) and it is also most frequently used in the Old

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Testament. The term has a Semitic root of Syriac *nehssa* meaning ‘evil omen.’ The closer root in Arabic is *mahusa*, which is ‘sinister,’ ‘ominous’ or ‘be disastrous.’ *Nahs* means misfortune.¹ The Hebrew nominative masculine term of $\text{v}j\text{ n}$ is usually translated as serpent/snake of viper. The verbal form in Piel denotes ‘practice divination’ or ‘observes the signs of omens.’ The nominative masculine of $\text{v}j\text{ n}$ is divination or enchantment.² $\text{v}j\text{ n}$ – *Nehustan* is probably a bronze god (II Kings 18:4). Other terms used for the serpent are $\text{p}e\text{t}e\text{n}$ (Deut 32:33; Isa. 11:8; Ps. 91:13) translated as serpent, and its cognates $\text{s}i\text{p}o\text{n}i$ (asp- Isa. 11:8) and $\text{h}e\text{p}e\text{h}$ (viper – Job 20:16). $\text{s}e\text{p}i\text{p}o$ (snake – Gen. 49:17) $\text{a}k\text{s}u\text{b}$ (snake – Ps. 140:3) $\text{q}i\text{p}o\text{z}$ (owl/viper)³ $\text{s}e\text{r}a\text{p}h$ (serpent – Num 21:7-9) $\text{t}a\text{n}i\text{n}$ (serpent – Deut 32:33).⁴

BDB lists out the use of the serpent ($\text{v}j\text{ n}$;) with the following characteristics: (a) serpent/viper as anything hunted (Amos 5:8); (b) as biting (Amos 5:19; Ecc. 10:8); (c) as figurative of enemies (Jer. 8:17); (d) as deadly (Num. 21:6, 7, 9); (e) as figurative of oppressor (Isa. 14:29); (f) figurative of Dan – ungodly (Gen. 49:17); (g) similar effect as of wine (Prv. 23:22); (h) that turns from a rod/stick (Exo. 4:3; 7:17; Prv. 30:19); (i) as figurative of Babylon - hissing (Jer. 46:22); (j) as eating dust (Gen 3:14; Isa 65:25f; Mic. 7:17); (k) as crafty tempter (Gen 3:1, 2, 4, 13, 14); (l) bronze image (Num. 21:9; II Kings 18:4); (m) fleeing serpent (Job 26:13); (n) symbol of world powers (Isa. 27:1); and (o) as the sea monster (Amos 9:3 cf. Num 21:6).⁵

III. The Serpent in Antiquity (ANE):

The serpent/snake was universally known through out the ancient world, more prominently in the Ancient Near East symbolizing different aspects of power and valor.⁶ It symbolizes sovereignty, life, fertility, wisdom, chaos, and death in various contexts of the

ancient world. As an animal it has peculiar characteristics: without limbs, sloughs skin, silent gliding, hard to combat, poisonous. These characteristics strengthen the impression of malice and subtlety. The snake is considered by humankind from ancient times to be a sinister and peculiar animal *kat exochen*.⁷ Foester classifies the distinctive characteristics of the serpent in the Ancient World of religions as:⁸

1. In religious history as a hostile animal :

In this aspect, the serpent is portrayed as an animal, which is hostile to life and gives rise to the feeling of fear and terror. This is to be found in the myths of Egyptians, Hittites, Illuyankas and in the Anat myth of Ras Shamra portraying the primal sea monster or the earth like serpent as being hostile to the divine being or gods. In the Gilgamesh Epic, the wise serpent robs the hero of a plant that could give immortality. In Babylonian creation account the snake (sea serpent Tiamat) is symbolic of death and chaos overpowered by god Marduk.⁹ In the serpent *apophis* of Egyptians it is a symbol of evil and harm.¹⁰ In dualistic religions the serpent became the demonic animal in a narrower sense.

2. In religious history as a symbol of power and life:

This portrayal advocates that the serpent is not always a symbol of evil. Over time, the serpent has also been associated with life, longevity, ancestry, generation, health, healing, and immortality. Many cultures regard the serpent as wise and clever. Egyptian Pharaohs wore headgear with an erect cobra in the front signifying divine power and manifestation.¹¹ In Canaanite religion the serpent symbol is borrowed from the Hyksos and is used to represent the divine power of life.¹² In Greece the serpent was linked with the Olympian gods. It is a symbol of fertility, in Greek mysteries it then becomes a phallic symbol.¹³ The serpent has been connected in

one way or another with both the female and the male sex.¹⁴ Thus, the serpent as a symbol of power and life assumes a prominent role in the world of religions.

IV. The Serpent in the Old Testament:

Before we examine in detail the meaning and nature of the serpent in Genesis 3, we shall have a glimpse of the views of the rest of the Old Testament books concerning the serpent. In contrast to the often-fantastic ideas of the ANE religions, the Old Testament as a whole observes the serpent with zoological exactitude. However, it also symbolizes religious significance in certain passages. In Genesis 49:17 it is used as a figurative explanation of Dan as ungodly son of Jacob. The transformation of Moses' staff into a snake serves two purposes: First to weaken his resistance to obey God (Ex. 4:1-5) and to strengthen Pharaoh's resolve to oppress God's people (7:8-13). When the Israelites in the wilderness complained against Moses and God, he afflicted them with venomous snakes (Num 21:4-9). Healing from these deadly bites comes only from looking at a bronze snake that Moses had made (Num 21:9). A Canaanite background is suggested for the erection of a bronze snake for healing.¹⁵ In Hezekiah's time the bronze snake, which was supposedly made by Moses, reappears as an object of idolatrous worship named *nehushtan*, (II Kings 18:4). Hezekiah in his reforms destroyed it possibly because it was related with idolatrous worship. Rowley understands this bronze serpent as a Jebusite fertility symbol associated with the Zadokite priesthood and that the narrative in the Pentateuch is an aetiology explaining its later presence in the Jerusalem cult. While Joines argues that Israel had two bronze serpents made by Moses under the influence of Egyptians,¹⁶ others deny it saying that the serpent cult originated in Israel.¹⁷ In the wisdom tradition, the movement of the serpent is sometimes compared with romantic love between a young man and woman (Prov. 30:19). Sometimes life's uncertainty

and the corresponding need for skill to live is compared with a snake bite (Eccl. 10:8). In the prophets it is taken as a metaphor indicating wicked behaviour that is harmful to and destructive for society (Isa. 59:5 cf. Amos 5:15; Jer 8:17). The serpent is also portrayed as a mythological monster that flies (Job 26:13) or mythical figure known as the Rahab or the Dragon (Isaiah 51:9). This cursory survey indicates that in the Old Testament the serpent is observed more in terms of its creatureliness as a symbol for wickedness that is against God and detrimental for human beings.

V. The Serpent in the post-Old Testament Literature:

The post Old Testament literature mentions the serpent, more frequently as a metaphor of temptation and deceit (IV Macc. 18:8; Psalm of Solomon 4:9). It is also taken as a metaphor of strength (Ezd 1:1e, 10:3d). While the earlier parts of the pseudepigrapha¹⁸ do not connect the snake in Eden to the devil (Jub. 3:17-25), the later parts equate it with the devil (III Bar 9:7). Jewish interpreters attributed credit for healing in the wilderness to God, not the serpent (Wisdom 16:5-7). The Qumran community understood the snakes of Deuteronomy (Deut 32:33)¹⁹ as metaphor for pagan rulers (CD 8:10, 11; 19:22, 23).²⁰

The New Testament use of the serpent as embodiment of evil or as a source of evil seems to be developed from the Old Testament usage. However, the personification of the serpent as the devil or Satan is foreign to the Old Testament usage.²¹ It seems that it had come from Apocalyptic and Pseudographic literatures of the Intertestamental period.²² Figurative use continues in the Gospel as we see with John the Baptist and Jesus calling the enemies of the Gospel a brood of vipers (Mt. 3:7; 23:33; Lk. 3:7). Images of Edenic snake appear in a warning against apostasy (II Cor. 11:3; Rev. 9:19; 12:9; 20:2). Pauline theology is also coloured by eschatological hope when imminent victory over Satan is predicted

as ‘crushing Satan under the feet of believers (Rom 16:20). Ironically, when Satan tempted Jesus, he lifted a text from a Psalm that, in fact, promises victory over the evil serpent (Lk. 4:10-11 cf. Ps. 91:13 cf. Gen 3:15). Authority given to the disciples over snakes is also constitutive of the defeat of Satan (Lk. 10:17-19; Acts 28:1-6). Jesus likened his future crucifixion and elevation to the elevation of the bronze snake in the wilderness (John 3:14-15). It is plausibly correct to say that the serpent theme acquires new meaning as personification of evil or as Satan in the NT. However, the role of the serpent as the tempter occupies a very minor role in the theology of the New Testament.

VI. The Serpent in Genesis 3:

Text: Genesis 3:1-24

¹Now the serpent was more subtle than any other beasts of the field which Yahweh God made. He said to the woman, “Is it so that God said ‘you shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” ²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden, ³but of the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, Yahweh God said, ‘you shall not eat of it nor you shall touch it lest you die.” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You shall surely not die; ⁵for God knows that in the day when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God knowing good and evil.” ⁶Then the woman saw the tree as good for food and that it was delightful to the eyes and the tree was desirable to give insight; she took of its fruit and ate and she also gave her husband and he also ate with her. ⁷Then the eyes of the two of them were opened as they knew that they were naked, they sewed fig leaves and made aprons for themselves. ⁸Then they heard the sound of Yahweh God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves

from the presence of the Lord God in the midst of the garden. ⁹Yahweh God called the man saying, “Where are you?” ¹⁰And he replied, “I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid for I am naked, and I hid myself.” ¹¹He said. “Who told you that you are naked, did you eat from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” ¹²And the man said, “The woman whom you gave me to be with me gave me from the tree and I ate.” ¹³Yahweh God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” And the woman said, “The serpent beguiled me and I ate.” ¹⁴Yahweh God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, you are being cursed above all cattle, and above all the beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. ¹⁵I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed; He will bruise your head and you will bruise his heel.”

²³ (Translation mine)

VII. Form Analysis of Genesis 3 - The Serpent Theme:

The serpent theme of Genesis 3 is part of the account of creation and fall that has been attributed to the so-called J narrator.²⁴ Scholars are generally of the opinion that Genesis 2-3 forms a different literary type from Genesis 1 which is the P account of creation account.²⁵ Even though the literary unity of Genesis 2-3 and the possible authorship of J has been out of question for many, the theory has been questioned especially with the rise of Form Critical Studies.²⁶ Westermann finds evidence that the text of Genesis 2-3 has been fused into unity by the J writer, who created it out of preexisting narratives.²⁷ Moreover, a possibility of various pre-literary sources has been advocated. This includes sagas, folktales etc. of the Israelites themselves and the ANE myths.²⁸ While Gunkel speaks of Genesis 2-3 as “faded myth, Otzen states

that the narratives do not have a character of real myths, but rather explains man's present situation and obligations in terms of primeval event. The passage is structured in the form of prose and poetry. Bengrich is of the opinion that the non-Israelite motif may be found in its original form but the narrative took its final form only in Israel.²⁹ Hence, we may conclude that the fall account of Genesis 3 may be a literary creation out of various mythological traditions, which finally came from the hand of the J narrator with a new meaning and purpose. Thus the author puts the narrative of the fall of human beings with a significant role of the serpent in vivid and memorable form in an absorbing yet highly symbolic story.

VIII. The narratological framework:

The nature and role/function of the serpent can be derived from the structure of the narrative. The Serpent theme as found in 3:1-24 consists of two parts: (1) the transgression (1-7) and (2) the punishment (8- 24). Wenham finds five scenes of narrative in Genesis 3 which are: (a) Dialogue between the snake and the woman (b) Action of the woman and the man (c) Divine inquest (d) Series of curses (e) Expulsion from the Garden.³⁰ The Couple's transgression in the garden where God puts them is elaborated by the temptation motif portrayed in an action. It is described as a personal event spelled out in a dialogue. The serpent is a candidate for the role inasmuch as it is the cleverest *Mwr* [*arum*] of the animals, and is introduced as such. The narrator portrays the serpent in the manner in which characters are presented in representative narratives by means of third person statement providing its central character trait.

From the very outset of the **first scene**, the narrator emphasizes explicitly that the serpent is not outside the circle of beasts of the earth, that it was *one of the animals Yahweh had made*. The narrative is characterized by a fairy tale or fable as the actor (the

serpent) talks. As we encounter in the passage, the serpent initiates the dialogue with innuendo. This is suggested by the use of *ykipaa* (*aph ki*) which means, “Is it so that?”³¹ The narrative is then in the sequence of thrust and counter thrust dialogue. In the sequence of dialogue, the serpent’s interjection of the half-truths is corrected by the woman, but not quite correctly. She corrects the serpent by adding ‘*the fruit*’ but composed her own words - ‘*nor shall you touch it*’ which is beyond the command of God as in 2:17. She also agrees with the serpent omitting the ‘*Lord*’ simply saying *God*. The shrewdness of the serpent is clearly indicated by the reply: ‘*You shall surely not die*’³² Here the infinitive absolute form *twm ad* (*lomoth*) (literally “*to die you shall not die*” is used for emphasis.³³ The ancient myth motif of jealousy of the gods of the humans may also be alluded here.³⁴

In the **second scene** (vv. 6-8), we find the actions of the man and the woman. This scene is characterized by seven series of *waw* consecutive clauses that suggest the rapidity of action.³⁵ Thus, “*she saw... she took... she gave...*” As beguiled by the serpent the woman plucked it and ate the fruit of the tree in the consequence of which is the knowledge of nakedness *MMir-ŷ[e(aerumim)* The word play here is on the cleverness of the serpent (*arum*) which resulted in the nakedness (*aerumim*) of the two of them (cf. v.1 & v.7).

In the **third scene** (9-13) divine inquest is pictured in a reverse order in terms of the actors. As seen in the preceding scenes, the order of the actors is serpent, woman and man (vv.4&5). But now the inquiry is taken to man, woman and the serpent (v.9ff.). Delitzsch finds a clue to redemptive significance of this sequence.³⁶ It might also be a clue to undermine the role of the serpent. But the effect of disobedience as seen in the **fourth scene** (14-21) is a series of curses upon the serpent, woman and man represented in a poetic style.³⁷ After a series of dialogue with the man and the woman,

finally the narrator budges to the serpent in which the serpent is given no chance of reply. Westermann observes that a kind of curse formula is applied here only to the serpent.³⁸ Judgment due to disobedience is indicated that there will be unending enmity between the serpent and the seed of the woman. The narrator carefully differentiates the prediction of doom that the word *rᵐra*: (curse) is used only of the serpent and the ground (because of Adam).³⁹ The prediction that serpent will bruise the heel of the woman and the seed of the woman will bruise the head of the serpent has been interpreted in diverse ways. It is often understood as the Protoevangelium for the early Church fathers.⁴⁰ While we find detailed description of the sentence upon the man and the woman in the next verses, it is surprising that no detailed description of the sentence upon the serpent is seen. Even in the **final scene** of the fall narrative (vv. 22-24), we come across severe punishment of human beings. Nevertheless, any reference to the serpent is silent. The serpent's role whether minor or major is clearly indicated. The story runs in such a way that the serpent is the tempter, so agent of evil in general sense. But the way how the narrator portrays the nature and role of the serpent makes it difficult to designate the real motif of the serpent theme in Genesis 3.

IX. Synthesis: Who then is the serpent in Genesis 3?

As highlighted in the foregoing investigation, we can infer that the J narrator carefully drafted and insinuated the nature and role of the serpent in his/her projection of the fall of humankind. The role of the serpent as the tempter is clearly seen from the narrative of Genesis 3. Christian community including biblical scholars has been in dialogue in relation to the identity of the serpent. Who is the serpent in reality? How shall we define the identity of the tempter as a serpent? To respond to this query we may propose the following assumptions to which one may find a clue to the answer Viz:

1. The serpent is Satan:

Traditionally, the Christian identification of the serpent is Satan, the archenemy of God whose desire has been to oppose the eternal will of God. This view has been advocated by many proponents. The advocates of this view maintain that the literal snake did not talk to Eve in the Garden of Eden but that a rebel spirit son of Jehovah orchestrated the snake's actions.⁴¹ This is supported by the shrewdness of the serpent which is unlikely of an animal world. As Fichtner argues, it's refined skill in temptation, its knowledge of things hidden from a man (sic), its intention and action to bring that of disrupting the harmony between creator and creature indicate that it is more than a mere animal.⁴² Arguments primarily from the Hebrew Scriptures will be submitted to make the case. There are some hints as to see the role of Satan or at least the demonic being in some cases of the Old Testament.⁴³ In those texts, the anti-God activities with an event involving animals, and snakes, are seen where demonic force(s) against Jehovah employed them to serve his/her purposes. It is not less reasonable to see that this could have been the case at Genesis 3 as well. Ezekiel 28:13 states about the archenemy of Jehovah that the being addressed was listed as being in Eden, the Garden of God. There is no doubt that the King of Tyre was the object of Ezekiel 28 but there appears to be incontrovertible evidence that someone else (Satan) was also the target of this pericope.⁴⁴ As stated earlier, the post-Old Testament literatures persuade more on the personification of the serpent. Thus, Satan is the real tempter in Genesis 3.

Satan is called a serpent, not once but three times in the book of Revelation (Revelation 12:9, 12:15, 20:2). In these passages the expulsion of Satan, being the deceiver is pictured. When combined with Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 11:3 (seduction of Eve by the serpent), the identification of the serpent in Genesis 3 with Satan is unmistakable. So, Genesis 3 is teaching us about Satan's deception

of Eve, the sin of Adam, God's judgment of the whole creation, and His first promise of the coming Messiah to overcome the work of Satan and the sin that infects us all, inherited from Adam.⁴⁵

It is plausibly right to say that the most common view among Christian interpreters has been the view that the serpent was none other than Satan. However, the personification of the serpent as Satan is not found in Genesis 3. Presumably there is hardly any Old Testament text which describes the serpent as the agent or power of evil. Skinner asserts that the serpent appeared as a personification of evil only after exile.⁴⁶ Thus, it has been argued that Satan as a personal incarnation of evil is a later development in Jewish and Christian thought; that was not the view of the author of Genesis.

2. The serpent is God's created Animal:

Another possible identification is that the serpent is none other than God's created animal (serpent) itself. As we highlighted in the previous paragraphs the narrator emphasizes explicitly that the serpent is not outside the circle of beasts of the earth that it was *one of the animals Yahweh had made*. The personification as devil or Satan is not found as such. Here in Genesis 3 the role of the serpent even though very significant, is portrayed as very minimal in the sense that what role it played is just to beguile. Moreover, the fate of the serpent as the consequence of temptation and fall is that by your *belly you shall go and you shall eat dust all the days of your life*. Thus the serpent was physically changed (to crawl on his belly). This is a sign of the creaturliness of the serpent. While the Bible is not clear as to whether or not the serpent stood up or walked before the curse, it appears likely that like other reptiles it probably did walk on four legs.⁴⁷ Thus Genesis 3 introduces the snake as one of God's creations, not a dualistic counterpart to Yahweh. The narrator says, the snake is crafty (*arum*) forming a word play with the adjective *erom* in 2:25 and 3:7 meaning nude. The serpent is further distinguished from the

other animals in the garden. Once more crafty than all the animals, now is cursed than all the animals, now it is inferior and must forever crawl on its belly. According to Targum Pseudo Jonathan, the snake then lost its legs.⁴⁸ Thus the sentence upon the serpent indicates that it is neither Satan nor any other angelic being, it is still the serpent, an animal who is banished from the company of honourable beasts by the curse.

Even though there is a strong argument for the claim that the serpent of Genesis 3 is God's created animal there can also be certain opposition to the hypothesis. The nature and role of the serpent as portrayed by the narrator seems to be paradoxical. In his picture of the nature and activity of the serpent, the narrator uses colours not taken from animal world. Its knowledge and skill to beguile the couple suggests capacity beyond animal wisdom. The serpent talks could be one of the points that could lead one to open criticism. Zimmerli rightly points out that the creature of God leads human beings to disobedience must be left a riddle.⁴⁹ If we look into other Old Testament and the post Old Testament texts, we are not much impressed by the serpent as God's created animal that leads human beings to sin.⁵⁰ Hence, we may suggest that the serpent though represented as God's created animal might be more than an animal.

3. The Serpent is a Symbolic Representation:

As hinted from the above investigation, the identification of the serpent with Satan occurs in the post Old Testament period and no concept of a demonic figure such as Satan can be traced in Israelite belief or at least of the period when Genesis 3 must be dated. The idea of the serpent as God's created animal tempting the same created being is also unlikely. Hence, the most likely identification is that of symbolic. The symbolic representation might be traced back to either in its mythological representation in the

ancient Near East or in the Israelite fertility cults. As we have done a cursory survey we see ancient myths of the serpent symbolizing hostility towards the gods and the created worlds. Moreover, the serpent myth symbolizes power and life for the majority of ancient world of religions. From the sketch of the narratological framework one may also find the minimal role of the serpent in and through the serpent theme. Therefore, there is still an open question as to what the serpent symbolizes.

One most popular belief is that the serpent is nothing but the **reminiscent of ancient Near East religious symbol of the serpent myth**. This suggestion holds a view that the religious cults of Israel's neighbours shaped the perception of the nature and role of the serpent in biblical texts including Genesis 3. McKenzie observes that since the symbolic value of the serpent was common in the ancient Near East, it seems altogether probable that both writer and readers would see symbolic value in the serpent of Eden.⁵¹ While this statement is valid for certain reasons as one may find adequate parallel traditions of serpent myths in ancient Near East religions, the distinction of Genesis account might not be undermined. Some have tried to identify the presence of the serpent with other ANE myths but none offers a sufficiently significant parallel. Thus, no complete extra-biblical parallel to the account of the serpent theme had been found.⁵² Therefore, the connection of the serpent myth of the ancient Near East with the serpent theme of Genesis may be abandoned.

Some have identified the serpent as a mythological representation of the **seduction of Israel by the deities of fertility**, which to the writer of the story is the most fundamental sin of Israel. To a certain level this view ignores that the serpent theme is connected with ancient Near East cosmic serpent. This view may be disseminated in the light of Canaanite serpent cult taken over by

the Israelites. Genesis 3 explicates the choice for Israel whether they would obey Yahweh or follow Baal (Canaanite god).⁵³ Thus, the symbolic representation is Israelite origin in which the fertility cult of Canaan may be in the background of its evolution.

One of the proposals for the symbolic use of the serpent is **human curiosity**, as being purely symbolical.⁵⁴ This view argues that the fall of human being as beguiled by the serpent is not the real motif of the J narrator, rather intended to narrate a question of human being and his/her guilt. Wenham asserts that the Garden of Eden story explains man's (sic) present situation and obligations in terms of primeval event which is of abiding significance, and this narrative is replete with powerful symbols - rivers, gold, cherubim, serpent, and so on – which hint at universal significance.⁵⁵ Thus, the curse on the snake (3:14-15) is not an aetiology concerning the age-old antipathy between human beings and snakes, but a rich theological statement full of reversals. Von Rad impressively concludes that the theme of the serpent purport to narrate a question only of human and his (sic) guilt, carefully guarding against objectifying evil in any way.⁵⁶ The narrator thus wants to say that it is not possible to come to terms with the origin of evil as Westerman says, "There is no aetiology of the origin of evil."⁵⁷ Thus, the serpent is a symbol of human curiosity, which is responsible for his/her guilt. In line with this interpretation but with a slight departure Cassuto takes the serpent to be a personification of Eve's own inner dialogue. The temptation ultimately lies within Eve and the serpent merely awakens what is already fomenting (arouse discontent). Perhaps the narrator is 'verbalizing the psychological dynamics of temptation.'⁵⁸ It is therefore symbolic of human psychological tendency to choose right or wrong that is pictured in the Serpent theme. The narrator carefully and skilfully made use mythological traditions, both of the Israel and her neighbouring worlds as a vehicle to narrate the account of human being and his/her guilt.

Let me summarize the symbolic nature of the serpent in Genesis 3 as follows: The portrayal of the serpent as the tempter has close affinity with the ancient Near East world of religions as well as

Israelite tradition. However, from a closure look at the nature and role of the serpent in the passage and an investigation of the portrayal as found in the narratological framework, it is obvious that the role of the serpent is secondary and quite minimal in the fall. Therefore, to personify it as Satan is not the author's intention. Moreover, the projection of the role and function of the serpent in the fall is beyond an animal world. Hence, it cannot be a real serpent or created animal. Then our conclusion will point to a symbolical representation. The serpent is a symbol of human tendency towards sin. His/her guilt as the disobedient created being is symbolically represented here. God created the world with human being as the crown of creation. But human being in his/her own distortion (serpent's temptation) spoils the world and him/herself.

X. Conclusion:

The serpent's power to kill, its alien character, the total otherness of its appearance, and above all its sinister quality gives it such a prominent role in the world of religions. The biblical concept of the serpent is also not far different from the world of religions. Attributing it as a symbol of evil and hence personification of it as Satan has been the traditional interpretation of the Christian Church since the early church fathers. Genesis 3 has been projected as the account of the fall of human beings as beguiled by the serpent of Satan. Nevertheless, an investigation of Genesis 3, specifically of the serpent theme concedes that it is not the origin of sin. It neither purports to tell the role and function of the serpent as the culprit of the fall. It rather makes it clear that Genesis 3 talks about the fall of human kind and his/her guilt in his/her own choice.

End Notes

- ¹ Robert C. Stallman, *ἄβυσσος*, *NIDOTTE*, vol. 3, edited by William A. van Gemeren et. al (Exeter, UK: Paternoster Press, 1996), 85.
- ² Francis Brown, S.R. Driver & Charles A Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 8th ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson

- Publishers, 2004), 638. (See Gen 44:5, 15; Lev. 19:26; Dt. 18:10; I Kings 20:33; II Kings 21:6).
- ³ The Hebrew *z/pqj* is translated in the English Bible in different meaning. RSV, NRSV, KJV translate it as owl, NEB and REB translate it as sand-patridge. Jerusalem Bible translates it viper.
 - ⁴ See elaborate treatment of the terms in Fichtner, “The Serpent in the OT: “otis” *TDNT*, vol. V, edited by Gerhard Friedrich, translated and edited in English by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), 571-576.
 - ⁵ Brown, Driver & Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 638.
 - ⁶ Snakes are plentiful in almost all the southern territories of Asia including Near East. In Palestine 33 kinds have been listed. See Fichtner, “The Serpent in the OT,” 571.
 - ⁷ The Greek ‘kat exoyen’ (*kat ekzochen*) means par excellence. Foester, “The Serpent in Antiquity – otiV, *TDNT*, vol. V, edited by Gerhard Friedrich, translated and edited in English by G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1968), 567.
 - ⁸ See detail discussion in Foester, “The Serpent in Antiquity,” 568-570.
 - ⁹ See detail in Robert C. Stallman, *vj n°85*.
 - ¹⁰ Foester, “The Serpent in Antiquity,” 569.
 - ¹¹ Stallman, *vj n°85*.
 - ¹² Stallman, *vj n°85*.
 - ¹³ Foester, “The serpent in Antiquity,” 569.
 - ¹⁴ Christopher LCE Witcombe, “Eve and the Identity of Women,” in <http://witcombe.sbc.edu/eve-women/serpents.html>
 - ¹⁵ Joines suggests that a Canaanite bronze serpent had been taken as a symbol of life. Wenham, however suggests that its meaning fits naturally into the inverse logic of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Among ANE religions, the Egyptians used snake models as charms to prevent snake bites as an instrument of healing. A small bronze snake was also found from a Midianite sanctuary (c.a. 1150B CE). See discussion in Stallman, *vj n°86*. Also Wenham, *Genesis 1-11*, 72.
 - ¹⁶ Stallman, *vj n°87*.
 - ¹⁷ Scholars such as McCullough denied Israelite origin and rather argued a Canaanite origin. Thus it represents a fertility deity recognized in Jerusalem long before David’s time, and whose veneration continued under the Hebrew regime down to the reign of Hezekiah. See W.S. McCullough, “Serpent” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. R-Z (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 290.
 - ¹⁸ Pseudopigrapha are writings with false names or assumed authors, i.e

pseudonymous author (Eg. Letter of Aristeas, the book of Jubilees. The Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah, The Psalm of Solomon, The Ascension of Moses, The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarch, The life of Adam and Eve, etc.) See J. Alberto Sogin, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1983), 11-18.

- ¹⁹ This is the song of Moses, which talks about the godless, and the enemies of God. Here ‘poison of the serpents’ is used as a metaphor for the wine of the godless.
- ²⁰ For details see Stallman, vj n° 88.
- ²¹ Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 238-239.
- ²² See J.H. Walton, “Serpent” *Dictionary of Old Testament Pentateuch*, edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David E. Baker (Secunderabad: OM Authentic Books, 2007), 736.
- ²³ Here vv. 16-24 is not brought out as the serpent theme is ended in v.15.
- ²⁴ According to the Welhausen hypothesis the J narrator was the one responsible for the collection of considerable amount of passages of the Pentateuch. He is called the J narrator as the title Yahweh/Jehovah (J) is employed for the name of God by the author. According to the Hypothesis the J document might have been collected and completed by the time of united monarchy in the Southern part of Israel. The date suggested for the J source is c.a 900-950 BCE.
- ²⁵ The P account of creation is supposed to have originated from the hand of a priestly author or authors whose literary characteristic can be squarely traced. This is suggested by a special interest in the cults. P’s material has been considered to have been compiled by the 4th century BCE.
- ²⁶ Form Critical Study of the Bible as a critical study had come into being in the late 19th and the beginning of the twentieth century with the work of Hermann Gunkel entitled, *Creation & Chaos* 1896. See detailed discussion in Richard N. Soulen. *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1997), G.W. Anderson. *A Critical Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (London: Gerald Duck Worth & Co. Ltd., 1994), and also Gene M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). John H. Hayes, *Old Testament Form Criticism* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974).
- ²⁷ See details in Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, translated by John J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1984), 187.
- ²⁸ Points of comparison between ANE myths tradition and Genesis may not be discussed here in detail as it will be treated afterwards. See the detail treatment in Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15 Word Biblical*

Commentary, Volume 1 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), 52-54.

²⁹ Cited in Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 187-189.

³⁰ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 72-85.

³¹ Gesenius translates the serpent's first speech as: "Is it true what I have heard that God will not let you eat any one of the trees of the garden?" Cited by T. Whitelaw in *Pulpit Bible Commentary Vol. I – Genesis*, edited by HDM Spence et al. (London: Frank and Wagnals Company, n.d), 57.

³² Scholars are not of the same opinion as to how this phrase is to be translated because the word order as in Hebrew is ambiguous. It can be: "certainly you will not die" or "It is not certain that you will die" or "no, you will certainly die." Wenham advocates the last type suggesting that here the snake is partially quoting God's words in 2:17, "you will certainly die" prefacing them with "not" and then going on to give a different divine motivation. Wenham, *Genesis 1-11*, 74.

³³ The infinitive absolute expresses emphasis and sometimes serves as imperative. See J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 79-80.

³⁴ Pedersen opines that the narrative is something like the Gilgamesh Epic where the dying Edkidu and the woman had dialogue regarding knowledge. See Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 240.

³⁵ See the use of *was* consecutive in *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, edited and enlarged by E. Kautzsch, translated by G.N. Collins and A.E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), 339-354.

³⁶ Cited by Wenham, *Genesis 1-11*, 76.

³⁷ Here the narrative style of the passage is disrupted by a poetic style. Though in poetry, the meter is irregular and still contains clauses in prose that make the rhythms still more uneven. See Wenham, *Genesis 1-11*, 78, 82.

³⁸ Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 258.

³⁹ Here in v. 17. The nominative *Adā*; could be translated as Adam as a personal name since the article *h* is omitted here unlike the preceding verses.

⁴⁰ Such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and others interpreted so. See Wenham, *Genesis 1-11*, 81.

⁴¹ Flemming argues that except the man and the woman created in the image of God, there are no intelligent rational creatures capable of processing and relating information on the level of humans, that would have been, it seems, candidates for testing as well. (Gen. 2:15-17; 3:1-5) See the quotation in Hal Flemings, "Who is the Serpent in Genesis 3?"

in <http://jehovah.to/exe/general/serpent.htm>.

- ⁴² Fichtner, “The Serpent in the OT,” 573.
- ⁴³ For example, in the book of Job, we see Satan in the midst of the sons of God. (Job 1:6; 2:1). Also we see the rod turned to snake of the Egyptians as opposed to Aaronic rod-snake in Exodus 7:12.
- ⁴⁴ Troy Lacey, “The Serpent” <http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/2008/09/05/feedback-satan-lucifer-serpent>. If this passage is talking about Satan, Many scholars believe, based on Job 38:7, that all the angels, including Lucifer, were created on or before Day 4 of creation week along with the Sun, Moon and Stars, only two days before the creation of Adam and Eve.
- ⁴⁵ Satan by the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ. See discussion about *protoevangelium* in the naratological presentation.
- ⁴⁶ J. Skinner, *The International Critical Commentary (Genesis)* edited by S.R. Driver et.al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 72.
- ⁴⁷ Adapted from “The Serpent of Genesis 3” <http://www.gotquestions.org/Satan-serpent.html>.
- ⁴⁸ Cited by Stallman, vj ¶ 86.
- ⁴⁹ Cited by Westermann, *Creation* (translated by John J. Scullion) London: SPCK, 1984), 92.
- ⁵⁰ Some of biblical texts that represent also do not portray the creatureliness of the serpent, but rather often emphasize on the sinister quality and craftiness of the serpent depicting as more than a mere animal. See II Isa. 59:5 cf. Amos 5:15; Jer 8:17; Kor. 11:3; Rev. 9:19; 12:9; 20:2.
- ⁵¹ J L. McKenzie, “Serpent,” *Dictionary of the Bible* (Bangalore: TPI, 1998), 791.
- ⁵² See detail discussion in S.J. Davries, “The Fall,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by G.A Buttrick et al., (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 235f.
- ⁵³ Israelite cult concerning the serpent myth may also be seen in the tradition of the Bronze serpent of Moses which was later destroyed in the time of Hezekiah.
- ⁵⁴ For this see the detailed presentation given by Th. C. Vriezen as quoted by Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 237.
- ⁵⁵ Wenham, *Genesis 1-11*, 54.
- ⁵⁶ G. Von Rad, *Genesis* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 87.
- ⁵⁷ Westermann, *Creation*, 92.
- ⁵⁸ Cassuto, “Explanation of Genesis Three, Part 1,” Cited in <http://www.suite10.com/lesson.cfm/19167/2760>.