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The ‘Hopelessness of Hope’ and the ‘Hope of Hopelessness’: Reimagining Dalit Eschatology

Rev. Dr Samuel Mall

Assistant Professor of Christian Theology, Bishop’s College, Kolkata. Church of North India

Correspondence to Rev. Dr Samuel Mall, Email: samuelsports@gmail.com

Abstract

This article interrogates the adequacy of dominant theological conceptions of hope for Dalit Christians in India, arguing that conventional eschatologies, whether the future-oriented optimism of Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope* or the exodus paradigm foundational to early Dalit theology, inadvertently function as instruments of pacification in the present and defer justice to the future. This reinforces caste-based oppression rather than challenging it in the present. Drawing on Miguel A. De La Torre’s methodology of *embracing hopelessness*, the article proposes a constructive Dalit eschatology grounded not in anticipation of a future kingdom but in radical present-tense praxis. Through a socio-historical reading of the eschatological dimensions of Jesus’s message, namely, the Kingdom of God, the Cross, and the Resurrection, the article demonstrates that Jesus himself embraced the hopelessness of the marginalised as the catalyst for transformative action rather than the consolatory promise of hope. This hermeneutical move is then applied to the triple burden of Dalit existence under caste discrimination, religious nationalism, and neoliberal globalisation. The article contends that authentic Dalit eschatology must collapse the dialectic between “already” and “not yet,” relocating salvation, liberation, and dignity entirely within the present moment of resistance. Resurrection is reframed not as triumphalist vindication but as the community’s generational persistence in the refusal to be dehumanised. The article concludes with a critical engagement with Dalit theology’s eschatological lacunae and a proposal for an eschatology of hopelessness that foregrounds class solidarity, present-tense confrontation with oppressive structures, and a prophetic ecclesiology that holds Dalit brokenness honestly rather than offering it false comfort.

Keywords

Dalit eschatology, Hopelessness, Dalit theology, Theology of Hope, Religious Nationalism

Introduction

Due to the casteist nature of Indian society and the adoption of caste practices within the church, Dalit Christians often conceal their identities and histories of oppression. This creates enforced forgetfulness that denies past suffering and present identity, undermining the Dalit community’s ability to envision liberation. This does not mean that Dalits have not engaged with hope. Dalit theology’s understanding of hope contrasts sharply with the privileged society’s conception. For those benefiting from caste hierarchies, hope remains abstract, individualistic, and future-oriented, a comfortable awaiting divine intervention without disrupting present social arrangements. This privileged hope emphasises spiritual salvation while ignoring material oppression. It further teaches the marginalised to accept suffering as divine will. It preserves the status quo under the guise of piety. Such hope costs nothing because it demands nothing.

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Therefore, beginning any theology with ‘hope’ proves dangerous for the marginalised. This raises critical questions: How can hope be reimagined? What would Dalit eschatology look like?

Christian eschatology connects to the future while illuminating the dialectic of ‘already’ and ‘not yet, where the future makes its presence felt in the present. Eschatology’s capacity to transform the present in light of the future is integral. Moving between the present and the future, it remains foresighted and dynamic while transforming current realities. This article is an exploration of what ‘hope’ means for Dalits, especially for those who haven’t experienced liberation till now.

1. Methodological Considerations

This article is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the eschatological aspect of Jesus’ person, message and ministry. Employing the socio-historical method, this article aims to grasp the implications of the eschatological message of Jesus in His own context. The socio-historical approach builds on the historical experiences of a person/community in their social group through the literary texts.¹ With this method, we tend to uncover social, cultural, political and religious aspects of society in which Jesus ministered. It also aids a relational approach that places Jesus in his own historical settings and enables us to understand eschatological dimensions of Jesus’ message of hope in the context of the Roman imperial world. While being attentive to the contextuality of Jesus’, this approach further helps us in staying rooted in the contextual realities of the modern world in which the church exists.

It is eschatology that helps us to reconstruct Jesus, and such reconstruction is significant for the present. As John Dominic Crossan puts it, historical reconstruction is necessary because it is always ongoing, unfinished and interactive with the present and the past.² The dialectic of the past and present emphasises that each Christian generation must develop a continuity between ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ and ‘Christ of faith’ and must write its own gospel anew by first reconstructing its historical Jesus and then ‘say’ and ‘live’ what that reconstruction means for present life.³ Therefore, the socio-historical method helps us to engage in a creative dialogue where the eschatological aspects of Jesus’ message can be read to address the needs of the suffering people and can thus become a valuable resource for reimagining hope. In other words, how Christ channels faith and life in the present world becomes significant.

The dialogue between Jesus’s world and the present context is further explored through what Cuban liberation theologian Miguel A. De La Torre describes as ‘*hopelessness*’. This hopelessness is not despair or resignation, but rather a methodology that propels toward praxis. He says, hopelessness is the reality for the oppressed, where the marginalised live in what he describes as the space of ‘Holy Saturday’, that is, between crucifixion and resurrection,

1 · Bart D. Ehrman, “The Socio Historical Method,” <https://ehrmanblog.org/the-socio-historical-method/>. Last accessed on 15th January 2020 at 2300 Hrs.

2 · John Dominic Crossan, “Historical Jesus as Risen Lord,” A lecture published by Rice University in *Jesus Controversy: Perspective in Conflict* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 47.

3 · Crossan, “Historical Jesus as Risen, 5

where hopelessness is their daily companion.⁴ S. J. Samartha calls such people 'Saturday people', who are squeezed between Good Friday and Easter, for whom easter never arrives.⁵ Thus, hopelessness is a recognition that, within existing power structures, there may be no realistic hope for liberation or justice for the marginalised. This shows that there is "Cross in every resurrection, but is there a resurrection in every cross?"⁶ Hopelessness is honest about the brutality of systemic oppression and refuses false comfort. Many of the marginalised, especially Dalits, continue to live in Holy Saturday without experiencing any hope.

In such a context, hope becomes a class privilege for those who are protected from the harsh reality of Friday. Miguel advocates embracing this hopelessness. In embracing, we become free to act anyway, not because we'll succeed, but because the struggle defines our humanity. It clears away illusions and forces a more radical response. Once we abandon hope in the current system's ability to deliver justice, we are free to act rather than wait for hope in future. We engage in the context of oppression not to succeed but to dismantle oppressive strategies. We build solidarity with shared struggle rather than optimism for the future. For Miguel, this becomes a radical praxis that does not solely focus on the future but leads to action in the present that makes justice a lived reality.⁷ In such a way, hope emerges from hopelessness and praxis and not from optimism. Developing from such an inquiry, the other section of the article endeavours to analyse the hopelessness that Dalits find themselves in and initiate a dynamic response as to how hope from a Dalit perspective can be further developed.

2. Eschatology in Jesus's Message

To elucidate the eschatological dimensions of Jesus's message, the Kingdom of God (hereafter, KG), the Cross, and the Resurrection would be our focus. These three aspects form the nucleus of Jesus' message in his own historical setting. We will endeavour to read the history of Jesus in such a way that it addresses the needs of the suffering people in a particular context. Thus, eschatology provides us with an opportunity to develop a working environment of action in the present, and this present engagement will direct what hope means for the marginalised

2.1 Inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God: Embracing Hopelessness

Eschatology formed a major part of Jesus' message of the kingdom of God (hereafter KG).⁸ In the New Testament, we come across both present and future sayings about KG. In the future sayings, God intervenes on behalf of the poor so that their fortunes soon change for the better.⁹ Secondly, the KG entails the joy of salvation that would come as a gift for both Jews and Gentiles, and it would be a reversal of all unjust oppression and suffering. J. P. Meier points out that Jesus

4 · Miguel A. De La Torre, *Embracing Hopelessness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 4-5.

5 · S. J. Samartha, *Pilgrim Christ* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1994), 137.

6 · Samartha, *Pilgrim Christ*, 138.

7 · Torre, *Embracing Hopelessness*, 5-6.

8 · G Theissen & Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 242.

9 · Theissen & Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 254.

acted out the present saying through his healings, exorcisms, and table fellowship.¹⁰ The present saying signified that the kingdom was not a territory to be desired in future, but the dynamic event of God coming in power to rule His people. It elucidated an ideal vision of political and religious power, of how this world here and now should run.¹¹ We see that Jesus establishes a link between the kingdom partially present and its full coming in future.¹²

Jesus synthesised both present and future kingdom sayings because he lived in a discriminatory world, where ruler group exploited the majority of people.¹³ The marginalised had no hope of liberation. The future 'hope' Jesus was providing was not escapist but grounded in present action. He embraced the 'hopelessness' of the marginalised and built his actions on it. Thus, hopelessness becomes the catalyst for participation in God's kingdom. Even though Jesus was not able to end discrimination with his actions, he disrupted life-negating the realities.

In embracing hopelessness, Jesus brings the marginalised to the centre. Therefore, salvation became a worldly event.¹⁴ The reality of life is analysed from the perspective of the poor by Jesus. Jesus shows openness to the marginalised and the oppressed¹⁵ through actions in present. The eschatological orientation makes Jesus' message politically and socially revolutionary. Therefore, the kingdom focused on building a community, and human participation is essential for its realisation in the present.

Jesus realised the dangers of the hope constructed by the dominant because it was a tool to justify the domination of the marginalised theologically. Therefore, Jesus's message is an address from the hopelessness of the marginalised to the oppressive 'hope' of the powerful. The message of the kingdom was of hope, but this hope was the outcome of Jesus' engagement with the hopelessness of the marginalised. It was not optimism provided to the suffering, but a critique of the dominant interpretation of hope. In such a way, the kingdom became a disruption of dominant hope and engaged in the transformation of unjust social structures.

2.2 Cross: Crucifixion of Dominant Hope

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem at Passover and 'cleansing of the temple' are the two most vital reasons for his execution. These actions were offensive to both the Roman Empire and the local aristocracy. Jesus's entry into Jerusalem portrayed him as the Son of David, and it had definite political overtones. The cleansing of the temple suggested that the eschatological kingdom Jesus proclaimed and acted out was in opposition to the functioning temple. He envisioned a present world where hope built on privilege and power would have no room. Jesus's scathing opposition to the temple showed that he was acting as a radical eschatologist who expected God to change things fundamentally.¹⁶ In His life, Jesus had frequently clashed with religious

10 · Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 452.

11 · J. D. Crossan, *The Essential Jesus: Original Sayings and Earliest Images* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1998), 8.

12 · John. P. Meier, *Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1994) 116.

13 · Richard A. Horsley, *Sociology and Jesus Movement* (New York: Crossroads, 1989), 68-69.

14 · Theissen & Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 264.

15 · E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1985), 179.

16 · E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: The Penguin Press, 1993), 262.

officials and the temple authorities because they sustained an oppressive system.¹⁷ The destruction of the temple put him in opposition to religious authorities, as it signified that in the rule of God, the rule of the temple had no place. It was better for the temple to be destroyed.

On the cross, we see three versions of dominant hope crucified. First, the religious authorities had built their hope on maintaining power through the temple system. The temple had become an institution from which the priests were getting their cut of all finances. They were becoming rich. Jesus threatened this entire corrupt system through the cleansing of the temple. The hope constructed by the religious elite was sustaining oppression. The religious leaders hoped that removing Jesus would keep their hopes alive in the corrupt temple system. However, the eschatological perspective on the cross exposed this dominant hope in the crucifixion.

Secondly, Rome's political hope was built on maintaining order through violence and fear. Crucifixion was reserved for political rebels who threatened imperial order. It was essential for the Romans to destroy any hope that Jesus represented. Jesus's embrace of the hopelessness of the marginalised made visible that God's kingdom was an alternative to Caesar's kingdom. In embracing hopelessness, Jesus refused to mirror the hope of the empire, and in the acceptance of the cross, Jesus revealed and exposed the illusion of Rome's hope in violence.

Thirdly, on the cross, Jewish hope and the hope of Jesus's own disciples for a king who would overthrow the Roman empire were also crucified. The Jewish people hoped for a messiah who would deliver them from Roman oppression through military and political victory. Even the disciples had this vision of hope, and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem would have further strengthened this hope. The crucifixion crucified such a hope because no victorious king dies in shame on a cross. The disciples were dejected. This is precisely what makes the cross so revolutionary: it crucified the hope built on domination, coercion, and worldly power, replacing it with a radical alternative based on self-giving love, justice, and resurrection beyond death.

2.3 Resurrection: Divine Solidarity

It is important to study resurrection to know Jesus' identity and its saving significance in light of his historical person. Theissen and Merz, through formula and narrative tradition, try to understand the chronology and the event of resurrection.¹⁸ The formula tradition comprises statements about the Easter event as an 'act of God in Jesus'. Jesus, being raised by God from the dead, would have been the earliest statement expressing belief in resurrection (Rom 10:9, I Cor. 6: 14, 15:15). On the other hand, narrative tradition includes accounts of the empty tomb and appearances of the risen Jesus. These were formed at a later stage to radically present the significance of formula tradition as it includes appearances of the risen Christ with commands (Matt 28:9–10, Luke 24: 36–49).¹⁹

Both traditions attest to the risen Christ in different ways that cannot be harmonised. There is

17 · Sanders, *The Historical Figure*, 44, 47.

18 · Theissen & Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 482.

19 · Theissen & Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 484.

no definite historical basis through which we could prove the resurrection of Jesus.²⁰ The lack of historicity does not undermine the importance of resurrection. The historical side of resurrection can be viewed from the side of the historical Jesus for new ways of interpretation.²¹ Resurrection was so significant that it changed the attitudes of the disciples. It was Rudolf Bultmann who highlighted the unity of the death and resurrection as one salvation-occurrence because the one who died is also the one who is raised. Through death and resurrection, salvation is made available to all; it is a work of God's grace and is given out for all.²²

Death and resurrection are radically related to the present human situation and are seen as transforming it. They are cosmic in nature as they take place in the present world, both in the proclamation of the word and in the sacraments.²³ Hence, death and resurrection are inseparable, and continuity between the cross and resurrection is essential. The eschatological understanding of resurrection provides continuity to the eschatological message of Jesus. Most importantly, the eschatological understanding of resurrection points out that it is connected to the aspect of being a witness and not evidential proof. As we intend to build Dalit eschatology, we now turn to the contextual realities of the marginalised

3. The Hopelessness of the Marginalised

The contextual realities of the marginalised that threaten their existence and make it impossible for them to survive are highlighted by Kim Yong-Bock. He says,

For people in Asia and in the world, the signs of the times have not been optimistic. The global marketisation or globalisation, despite its scientific, technological and economic progress, has not resulted in human well-being. Hunger and poverty, along with the consequent suffering of people in Asia and in the world, are intensifying, causing despair and hopelessness. The security of life, both human and social, and cultural identity have been radically eroded in recent decades despite economic growth. This tendency will continue unless there is a radical transformation in the world economic system of the global market. Of course, human suffering has lasted for many millennia. But the suffering of the people in the world today has a distinct character in the context of globalisation.²⁴

The above quotation is a structural analysis of contemporary hopelessness characterised by concrete material causes. The despair is not just psychological but more physical. Globalisation and technological advancement, which were supposed to materially elevate people, have both intensified and alleviated human suffering. Hunger, poverty, oppression and cultural erosion

20 · Eduard Schweizer, "Resurrection: Fact or Illusion" in *Historical Jesus: Critical Concepts in Jesus Study*, vol 3, edited by Craig A. Evans (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 343.

21 · G. G. O'collins, "Is Resurrection an Historical Event?" in *Historical Jesus: Critical Concepts in Jesus Study*, vol 3, edited by Craig A. Evans (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 320.

22 · Walter Schmithals, *An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 131.

23 · Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of The New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 303.

24 · Kim Yong-Bock, "Practice of Hope: The Messianic Movement of People who Practice Hope," in *The Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology*, edited by David Fergusson and Marcel Sarot (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 115.

are not accidents of development but inherent features of the global market system. Therefore, hopelessness becomes a product of systemic violence and the experience of the marginalised. Contrary to the experience of the marginalised, the *hope* built by the dominant on 'development' and 'progress' actually masks, justifies and sustains exploitation. The marginalised are deceived and duped by promises of hope through globalisation. In such a way, dominant hope makes exclusion an intrinsic part of the system.

Dalit communities in India face a dual structure of hopelessness in the form of Caste-based exclusion and newer hierarchies produced by globalisation. Therefore, Suraj Yengde, points out that Capitalism is a manufactured system that, in India, works in tandem with the deeply rooted oppression of caste, whether in villages or urban *bastis* or in shiny offices of corporate boards.²⁵ Education, health, land reform, secure jobs, democracy, and modernity, the parameters that can result in Dalit empowerment, are all getting destroyed.²⁶ For Dalits, hopelessness is not an abstract theological concept but a concrete reality of daily existence. Contrary to the experience of the marginalised, the *hope* built by the dominant on 'development' and 'progress' actually masks, justifies and sustains exploitation.

This hopelessness becomes even more dangerous with the religious nationalism of Hindutva. The rise of Hindutva does not merely deepen Dalit hopelessness; it transforms it into a weapon wielded against their very survival. In 'Hindutva', religion is used as a political agency, where the Hindu religion is seen as originating within Indian territory, and this makes them the primary citizens of the land.²⁷ In the present context, the ideology of Hindutva has adjusted itself to parliamentary democracy and represents a Brahmanical counter-revolution to pre-empt the democratic aspirations of the downtrodden.²⁸ Hindutva and the neoliberal order are perfect allies. Hindutva tries to elevate identity questions by pitting Hindus against other religions. On the surface, it is presented without caste, and it attracts Dalits and subsumes Dalit identity into a pan-Hindu identity and co-opts subalterns into Brahminical culture.²⁹

Hindutva constructs hope exclusively for the dominant by reviving an imagined past where the Brahminic social order was supreme and unchallenged. This ideology builds on the hope of future restoration, where their power and supremacy can be reclaimed. This "hope" is not directed toward justice but toward the consolidation of an existing hierarchy that privileges the upper castes. The hope that Hindutva offers to the dominant functions as a mechanism of Dalit suppression in several interconnected ways. First, by constructing a pan-Hindu narrative and identity, Hindutva erases the historical and political consciousness of Dalits. Second, dominant hope never confronts or questions Dalit oppression. Hindutva's hope is built on silence on caste-based atrocities. Third, Hindutva offers solace by pointing toward a glorious imagined past. But

25 · Suraj Yengde, *Caste Matters* (Gurgaon: Penguin Random House, 2019), 241.

26 · Anand Teltumbde, *Dalits: Past, Present and Future* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 136-143.

27 · Romila Thapar, *Voices of Dissent* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2020), 104.

28 · Anand Teltumbde, "Hindutva Agenda and Dalits," in *Religion, Power and Violence: Expression of Politics in Present Times*, edited by Ram Puniyani (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 214.

29 · Ram Punyani, *Caste, Hindutva and Dalits* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publication, 2018), 136.

this solace is available only to those who benefit from the caste order. For Dalits, embracing hopelessness is an honest acknowledgement that neither existing systems nor capital offer genuine pathways to liberation. Herein, Dalits are free to pursue radical transformation without illusions. Now we turn to theologies that make a promise of hope.

4. Insufficiency of the Theology of Hope

Jürgen Moltmann is perhaps one of the most influential theologians who wrote the theology of Hope. Through his eschatological orientation of theology, he explored the dialectic of the ‘present’ and ‘future’ efficiently. He was concerned with who Jesus is for us here and now³⁰ Seeing from the eyes of an unattained future, he intended to make faith credible in the present world.³¹ He pointed out that Christian eschatology is of hope, forward-looking and moving while transforming the present.³² Christian hope is directed towards what is not yet visible. Christian faith for Moltmann is anticipatory hope for the future eschatological kingdom, when all things will be transformed into a new creation because God’s coming kingdom has the power to transform the present world.³³ Thus, the church should engage itself in the hopeful search for the future and act as an agent of change in the present world.³⁴ Eschatology for Moltmann was “the suffering and passion which arises from the Messiah and therefore the time of eschaton is all important for Christianity.”³⁵ Thus, the truth lies in the future and acts in the very present and orients faith to the future by anticipating it.

By anchoring hope in an unattained future, he unintentionally preserves the escapist tendency he claims to move beyond. Moltmann’s theology offers yet another version of deferred hope. For any hope to have meaning, it must be tied to space and now.³⁶ For the Saturday people, such hope becomes oppressive because the future kingdom becomes a horizon that never arrives, while present suffering escalates with every day and largely remains unchallenged. Miguel calls this the inability of hope theologies to pin down reality as it is while focusing on the future possibilities.³⁷ Therefore, looking at the present from the perspective of the future does not fundamentally question false promises of liberation; it repackages them in eschatological language. The tension between the future and the present remains unresolved.

For Dalits living under the intersections of caste, Hindutva and neoliberalism, the present is not a space of possibility but a space of active devastation. Moltmann does not critically engage

30 · Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 84-85.

31 · Peter Althouse, *The Spirit of Last Days: Pentecostal Eschatology in Conversation with Jürgen Moltmann* (London, New York: T & T Clark International 2003), 109 & 112. See also, Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 33.

32 · Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 16.

33 · Althouse, *The Spirit of Last*, 109.

34 · Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1996), 9.

35 · Johann Auer & Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogmatic Theology: Eschatology, Death and Eternal Life* (USA: Catholic University Press, 1988), 55.

36 · Miguel A. De La Torre, “What Do You Do When the God of Liberation Fails to Liberate,” in *Stirring Up Liberation Theologies*, (London: SCM Press, 2024), 21.

37 · Miguel, *Embracing Hopelessness*, 24.

with present realities; instead, he sees them through the lens of a future optimism that promises transformation. Such eschatological visions have the potential to steer the oppressed away from rebellion and to create the possibility of a new reality.³⁸ Therefore, his theology sustains the dominant order by offering the oppressed a reason to wait rather than resist.

5. Proposal for Dalit Eschatology Emerging from Hopelessness

It becomes vital to approach eschatology from a relational and praxis-oriented perspective that refuses to defer justice to a distant future or to make the future realise itself in the present. For a theology of hopelessness, eschatology can no longer function as escapist comfort or otherworldly promise. Since eschatology is Christological, it demands that we understand the substantial coherence between Jesus's solidarity with the oppressed, his confrontation with religious and political powers, the violent consequences of his resistance, and the beginning of the Christian movement after his death.³⁹ This approach refuses to abstract Jesus into subjective devoutness or future hope, but instead encounters him comprehensively, as the one who embraced hopelessness in the face of empire. Let us now turn our attention to what Dalit eschatology might look like.

5.1 Kingdom of God and Eschatology: 'Here and Now' but Without Optimism

The message of KG is essential for interpreting the nature of Dalit hope that does not begin from the future but results from divine engagement in the present. Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, unlike the apocalyptic message oriented towards the future, entailed immediate actions in the present, which were illuminated through His own actions.⁴⁰ The radical present-tense confrontation was active in Jesus's ministry. Every thought and saying of Jesus was directed towards the realisation of the KG on the earth.⁴¹ The people who participate in God's rule are those who respond in faith to the message of good news to the poor, the outsider and liberation for those possessed by evil, and therefore, a relationship with God depends upon human action in the present.⁴² Jesus constructed his eschatology in the context of the Roman Empire, where oppression was a daily reality. He acted to heal the effects of the empire and inspired people to rebuild their community life in the present.⁴³

Jesus, through his eschatological message, constructed the subjectivities of people that were different from what the dominant had constructed for them. For Dalits, this becomes the most critical eschatological task. The dominant, through caste, Hindutva, and neoliberalism, have constructed Dalit subjectivity as one of inferiority and pollution. A Dalit eschatology rooted in hopelessness refuses to wait for a future kingdom to restore Dalit dignity. Instead, it demands

38 · Miguel, *Embracing Hopelessness*, 50-52.

39 · E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1985), 22.

40 · Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology*, 69-71

41 · Michael, Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospel* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1977), 10.

42 · Howard Clark Kee, *Understanding the New Testament, 5th Edition* (New Jersey: A Simon and Schuster Company Englewood Cliffs, 1993), 98.

43 · Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 105.

the immediate deconstruction of these imposed subjectivities. The kingdom is not a future space where Dalits will finally be accepted; it is the present act of Dalits refusing the identity the dominant has assigned them. Liberation begins not in anticipation of future hope but in the radical engagement with oppression in the present.

The most significant feature of a Dalit eschatology is its radical insistence on present-tense liberation as the only legitimate ground of salvation. We no longer anticipate a future, but confront structures that produce suffering. A Dalit eschatology does not separate spiritual salvation from material liberation. The healing of Dalit communities is not a future eschatological event but a present political necessity. Rebuilding community life for Dalits means constructing spaces of dignity and solidarity that exist outside and in opposition to the dominant order, not as an anticipation of God's coming kingdom but as the kingdom itself, enacted here, now, in the midst of hopelessness. Therefore, the kingdom of God was not only concerned with judgment against Roman rulers but entailed a constructive counterpart of deliverance, empowerment and renewal for the people.⁴⁴ The most significant feature of Dalit eschatology is the collapse of the dialectic between 'present' and 'future' that Moltmann advocated. The future has never been a space of hope for Dalits; it has been a space of continued oppression. Therefore, Dalit eschatology places everything, salvation, liberation and renewal, in the present. Not as optimism or anticipation, but as the defiant, hopeless persistence that resistance, dignity, and liberation must happen now, because the structures of death and domination have never and will never deliver Dalits on their own.

5.2 Cross as lived Hopelessness

There is a shared brokenness between Jesus and Dalits. The cross does not end the suffering. Jesus was rejected, forsaken and alienated on the cross. The one who was alienated, condemned and forsaken, became the fountain head of reconciliation as he frees and unites humanity, because through him we might become righteousness of God (II Cor 6:16-21).⁴⁵ For Dalits, hopelessness is their lived existence. Dalits have been rejected by the caste system, religious institutions and excluded by neoliberal structures that treat them as disposable labour. The cross does not promise Dalits that their alienation will end in a future kingdom. It shows that alienation itself is the space from which reconciliation becomes possible. A Dalit eschatology that embraces hopelessness does not bypass alienation for future restoration. It dwells in it, because it is precisely here that the broken Christ meets the broken Dalits. When everything has failed, it is hopelessness that has an opportunity to lead to liberation.

Cross highlights 'life in its fullness' as it rejects the imperial tendency for the lust for power. Through crucifixion, God communicates his love. For Dalit eschatology, love must be redefined entirely. It cannot be love that anticipates renewal because renewal has never come for Dalits. It must be love that acts in the present without any assurance of outcome. This love is radical solidarity that accompanies Dalits into their suffering. This love refuses to look away from the

44 · Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 103.

45 · Kosuke Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 26.

violence of caste and does not wait for God's future intervention to act. Love in Dalit eschatology is not directed toward a future where suffering ends; it is directed toward the present where suffering is demanding a response, without the buffer of hope.

A Dalit eschatology that embraces hopelessness not only finds hope in the broken Christ but honest companionship. God does not promise to fix what caste has destroyed. God enters into the destruction itself and refuses to leave. This salvation results from solidarity with the broken, offered by one who is himself broken.

It is the broken Christ that heals the broken world. This image of broken Christ comes to us whenever we approach the Lord's Supper. In the Eucharist, Jesus' holiness and brokenness are brought together and made into one. There is no room for a Christian superiority complex.⁴⁶ Theologies of hope provide a sense of superiority to the dominant by placing it in the future. Hope is the oldest weapon of the oppressor. It says: *endure now, be transformed later*. The structures annihilating Dalit life were built by human hands. They must be dismantled by human hands, here and now, without worrying about the future. Dalit eschatology begins where every other eschatology refuses to go: it embraces hopelessness. Not as despair but as honesty. The significance of hopelessness is highlighted by Miguel as he points out that

I advocate a hopelessness that rejects quick and easy fixes. I reject the hope that may temporarily ease the conscience of the privileged but remains no substitute for bringing about a more just social structure. This hopelessness is not disabling; but rather a methodology that propels towards praxis. To embrace hopelessness becomes the means by which we work out our liberation (salvation) in fear and trembling. This liberation/salvation is not some egocentric project seeking personal saviours or exclusive heavens. What is being worked out is how we stand in solidarity with the hopeless who are struggling for their own liberation/salvation. Embracing hopelessness is never an excuse to do nothing. It may be Saturday, but that's no justification to passively wait for Sunday. To stand in solidarity with those who face genocide, pauperisation, and unmitigated hatred prevents any simplistic platitude on hope. Hearts that weep and bleed require brokenness and realism. To stand in solidarity with the minoritized of the world is to share their hopelessness. We embrace hopelessness when we embrace the sufferers of the world, and in embracing them, we discover our own humanity, our own salvation. This discovery provides the impetus for our own justice-based practises, making hopelessness the precursor to revolutionary resistance.⁴⁷

The cross does not promise that resistance will succeed. It testifies that resistance was met with crucifixion. It does not soften the cross into a symbol of eventual triumph but a source of authentic action. Cross directs action toward the present, where suffering demands a response. Love here is radical solidarity. It accompanies Dalits into the cross without offering rescue. It refuses to look away from caste violence.

⁴⁶ · Kosuke Koyama, *Mount Fuji Mount Sinai: A Pilgrim Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 240-245.

⁴⁷ · Miguel, *When the God*, 24.

Through the cross, Jesus reverses hierarchy in such a way that strangers become an epistemological locus for theological discussions. This is the basic orientation of *theologia crucis*.⁴⁸ It is through the cross and the suffering of Christ that we know who God is. Jesus was crucified because he extended hospitality to strangers. The church cannot be a space that offers hope to Dalits because hope functions as pacification. The church must become a space that honestly holds Dalit brokenness, the brokenness of the world, and the brokenness of Christ, without rushing toward healing or restoration. Holding brokenness will protect the church from becoming a triumphalist institution because it celebrates the cross through eucharist, the meal of the broken Christ shared with the broken people of the world. It is a church that resists not because it hopes for change but because resistance is the only faithful response to the cross.

5.3 Resurrection and Eschatology: No More Hope, the Chosenness of Saturday

Resurrection and eschatology develop in a framework of continuity between past, present, and future. This is witnessed in the theology of Moltmann and Pannenberg. Moltmann says that the theology of the cross should be carried out in the light and context of resurrection, and therefore, freedom and hope.⁴⁹ Resurrection is not merely a simple overcoming of death, but proclaiming the victory of life over death. This is the hope of resurrection. The cross and resurrection are in an open dialectical relationship, which would be resolved in the coming of the new creation, in which death and suffering will be no more.⁵⁰ Thus, we should understand eschatology from the standpoint of Jesus' mission and God's future for the world.

On the other hand, Pannenberg focuses on the person of Christ in the light of his resurrection and opines that Christological reflection must go back behind New Testament preaching to the historical reality of Jesus himself and start 'from below'.⁵¹ Resurrection has to be understood as the fulfilment of the promised life in the kingdom of God. Eschatological considerations are integral to the understanding of Jesus' resurrection as it relates to His eschatological destiny.⁵² This destiny shows the coming of the future in the kingdom, which is the essential future of human beings.⁵³ The fact that eschatological imagination takes place in the mode of future imagination, it has significant implications for the delay of Parousia. Therefore, Christian eschatology is dominated by visions of the future, *seeing* God's future as an appropriate mode.⁵⁴ Such an understanding of eschatology has to be rejected because Hope becomes a desired future, giving meaning to present suffering. The oppressed are given hope instead of justice. This theology benefits the privileged, even though it talks about the marginalised. For the

48 · Kosuke Koyama "Extending Hospitality to Strangers: A Mission of Theologia Crucis," *Currents in Theology Mission* 20/3 (1993): 167. *Theologia crucis* is a term coined by the theologian Martin Luther to refer to theology which points to the cross as the only source of knowledge concerning who God is and how God saves. It is based on 1 Cor. 1:18-25. Koyama, *Mount Fuji Mount*, 245-246.

49 · Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 4.

50 · Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 202.

51 · Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus- God and Man* (London SCM Press, 1970), 36.

52 · E Frank Tupper, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 150.

53 · Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology: Vol 3* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1973), 210.

54 · Garrett Green, "Imagining the Future," in *The Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology*, edited by David Fergusson and Marcel Sarot (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 80-84.

marginalised, future hope becomes a cage.

The marginalised do not reside in the hope of a narrative of resurrection moving toward Holy Sunday. They reside in Holy Saturday, after Friday's crucifixion, before an Easter that never comes. Saturday is not just a liminal space but a permanent location of oppression. For Dalits, Sunday's resurrection has not been delayed. It has been withheld. Hope is the opium that numbs Friday's violence. It is the mechanism by which the church administers violence while claiming to have ended it. Dalit eschatology must be approached from the recognition that Saturday has been manufactured to keep Sunday away.

James Cone stresses that for any adequate theological interpretation of Jesus' historical ministry, the church has to focus on the event of death-resurrection because it discloses that God is not defeated by oppression but transforms it into the possibility of freedom.⁵⁵ This is the cosmic nature of Christ. It is the 'here' and 'now' of resurrection that has to be explored. Cone suggests God is not defeated by oppression but transforms it. Easter's triumphalism is thus avoided by the assertion that oppression has not ceased, but God remains undefeated.

Dalit eschatology develops on the understanding that God has not been defeated on the cross, but neither has God overcome oppression for Dalits. This is not a theological gap. It is a lived indictment of institutions claiming resurrection while perpetuating caste death. Dalits must act in the present, not because the future promises transformation but because it has been weaponised against them. Resurrection is not resuscitated human life but transformed, transfigured existence. It opposes oppression that threatens all forms of life.

However, transfigured existence has not happened for Dalits. It is something the church has prevented by offering resurrection as a substitute for justice. Resurrection does not solve marginalisation. The church's theology sustains it. The church has not failed to live a resurrected life. It has chosen not to. It manufactures Holy Saturday by adopting discriminative practices that perpetuate death while proclaiming resurrection. Hope stunts liberation by replacing action with anticipation. Dalits do not require solidarity alongside hope. They require solidarity in its absence. Dalit eschatology, built on the theology of hopelessness, does not merely hold the church accountable. It exposes the church as a participant in the crucifixion it claims to have conquered. Jesus's solidarity with the outcast is the only credible ground. The future kingdom often preached and built on resurrection is dangerous because it has justified the present destruction of those told to wait.

Dalit eschatology does not refuse to let resurrection silence ongoing reality. It names resurrection as the instrument through which silence is imposed. The failure of the church is not to be solved but confronted. Resurrection is not a continuous experience confronting material reality; it has been a continuous excuse for avoiding it. A life that is characterised by grappling with material reality is to be lived regardless of whether the church responds, regardless of what the outcome is. Jesus does not sit with Dalits on Holy Saturday as comfort. He sits as evidence that the cross is real and the resurrection is to be lived out. Jesus' resurrection remains

55 · James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 118.

a promise not kept. The theology of hopelessness takes the here and now seriously; it does not let resurrection become an excuse but refuses to let the church call itself resurrected while perpetuating discrimination. No more hope. Actions in the present. Now.

6. Eschatology and Dalit Theology

Dalit theology (hereafter DT) emerged in the context of caste-based discrimination and the glaring neglect of Indian Christian theology to address it. Caste-based discrimination was not just an external factor (discrimination of Dalits by dominant castes), it was also an internal matter (discrimination within the Dalit community). Furthermore, the church also could not free itself from the clutches of caste-based discrimination and embraced caste-based practices. Analysing and embracing the hopelessness faced by Dalits, DT interrogated the context from the perspective of caste. Rather than jumping to liberation, it emphasised the importance of engaging in the context and cautioned against quick fixes and focused on the *doing* nature of theology. For M. E. Prabhakar, DT is 'doing theology' in community, within the context of Dalit suffering and struggles, through dialogue, reflection, and commitment to action for building a new life order.⁵⁶ V. Devasahayam highlighted the situation of hopelessness faced by Dalits and asserted that, on the long road, Dalits constantly experience fatigue after failures in their struggle and therefore, DT aims at providing comfort to those who are afflicted by their participation in their liberative struggles and encouraging them to go forward trusting in the risen and Ascended Jesus, who goes ahead of us.⁵⁷

DT also built on the elements of *pain* and the *suffering* of Dalit communities as sources of knowledge, as it was their firsthand experience.⁵⁸ The servanthood Christ was further used to provide impetus to Dalit theology. The affirmation of Dalitness became significant for the transformation of Dalit identity. Dalit theologians were serious about engaging within the context and realised that the struggle would be long and therefore resisted offering consoling hope narratives. What became significant was analysing and embracing hopelessness. Therefore, DT emerges out of Dalit bodies for transforming existing social practices by reimagining themselves as active social agents.⁵⁹

Though Dalit theology has not yet formulated a systematic eschatology, it has nevertheless substantially reimagined the core concepts that comprise eschatological discourse, the KG, the cross, and the resurrection. Devasahayam points out that the preaching of KG is a critique of the existing kingdom as Jesus is endeavouring to energise the oppressed with an alternative vision, suggesting that KG means the end of the present Kingdom.⁶⁰ James Massey brings the focus to 'whole salvation' and points out that Dalits not only need spiritual salvation but physical as

56 · M. E. Prabhakar, "The Search for Dalit Theology," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, edited by A. P. Nirmal (Madras: GLTCRI), 48.

57 · V. Devasahayam, *Doing Dalit Theology in Biblical Key* (Madras: GLTCRI, 1997), 74.

58 · A. P. Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, edited by A.P. Nirmal (Madras: GLTCRI, 1988), 141.

59 · Y. T. Vinaya Raj, *Re-imagining Dalit Theology: Post-modern Reading* (Tiruvalla: Cristava Sahitya Samithi, 2004), 61.

60 · V. Devasahayam, *Outside the Camp* (Madras: GLTCRI, 1992), 29.

well, not only individual but community liberation.⁶¹ Furthermore, Sathianathan Clarke points out that Jesus embodied the practice of deviance, where he expressed his solidarity with the oppressed by announcing good news for them and by continually violating boundaries built by the dominant to execute oppression.⁶²

The hope on which Dalit theology was built was the exodus paradigm. This becomes problematic because it is a violent story. Liberation theologies have usually neglected the threat of its accompanying story: the conquest of Canaan.⁶³ The Exodus paradigm was violent; it required the genocide of the original inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites. This paradigm has been extensively employed in eliminating the Palestinians. Recognising its dangers, Peniel Rajkumar points out that the exodus paradigm is incompatible with Dalit experience because Dalits have not experienced miraculous signs in their fight against the caste system, and the image of the 'Victor-hood of God, derived from exodus, entails in itself an element of violence that becomes a means to establish control.⁶⁴

Exodus narratives involve many dangers, the danger of false hope, violence, passive resistance and the faith that God will ultimately intervene to overcome oppression. It runs the risk of encouraging patience and reinforcing what Dalits want to escape. A Dalit eschatology that embraces hopelessness would essentially reframe core eschatological concepts. KG would not be a movement of liberation, but a movement of resistance, and the kingdom will be present wherever Dalits resist dehumanisation and oppression. The cross becomes the primary eschatological lens where God's solidarity is promised, but without guaranteed vindication. God is found in solidarity with those experiencing hopelessness, not in the promise of hope. This does not deny or undermine the experience of resurrection. Here, resurrection becomes the community's persistence across generations. Resurrection becomes visible in the refusal to be tamed by the dominant, rather than becoming a proof of ultimate victory. Eschatology becomes solidarity of the oppressed rather than divine rescue or future fulfilment. This element of solidarity helps Dalits to build solidarities with all those who face discrimination rather than limiting it to caste solidarity. What Dalit theology requires is class solidarity, recognising the shared experience of discrimination with the hopelessness faced by all the marginalised. Eschatology built on embracing hopelessness makes this possible.

Furthermore, Eschatology is expressed in being radically present. Every moment Dalits assert their full humanity against oppression constitutes an eschatological event. Community survival and mutual dignity become eschatological realities in themselves because they endeavour to make sense of the reality around them. Theology results from such actions, and eschatology becomes a divine presence engaging with permanent suffering. Salvation is a result of such an

61 · J. Massey, *Dalit Theology: History, Context, Text and Whole Salvation* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2013), 211.

62 · Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 202-203.

63 · Luis N. Rivera-Pagán, "God the Liberator: Theology, History and Politics," in *The Invention of History: A Century of Interplay Between Theology and Politics in Palestine*, edited by Mitri Raheb (Bethlehem: Diyar Publishers, 2011), 118.

64 · Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities* (England: ASHGATE, 2010), 62-63.

engagement. Eschatological claim for Dalits, who haven't escaped their hopelessness, becomes this: the KG is now or never, present in every act of Dalit resistance. Dalit eschatology is without hope, but not without meaning, dignity, or theological significance.

Conclusion

Dalit hope cannot be of the future alone. It must be born from engagement with lived suffering. It has to emerge as both memory and resistance. It must not forget the wounds of caste violence, the humiliations of untouchability and the systematic erasure of Dalit humanity. This hope must be collective, demanding recognition of past atrocities as the foundation for present transformation. Where dominant theology offers hope as consolation for enduring oppression, Dalit theology proclaims hope as the courage to name oppression, challenge oppressors, and reconstruct community on the foundations of dignity and justice. Therefore, engagement within the community is the first step, and theology becomes the second step.

Through this article, an attempt was made to reimagine hope from the perspective of Dalits. Central to this reimagining are several crucial insights: First, that authentic hope cannot be divorced from memory. The refusal to forget is itself an act of resistance and a foundation for transformation. Second, that hope is not passive waiting but active making as it emerges from present engagement with hopelessness, which aims to dismantle oppressive structures. Third, that hope must be embodied and communal, rooted in the lived experiences of the oppressed rather than the abstractions of the privileged. Fourth, a theology of hope which serves liberation must critique and destabilise dominant power arrangements rather than sanctify them. This article explores how such a reconceived hope might transform not only theological discourse but also the practices and commitments of the church in a casteist society, moving toward a prophetic witness that stands unambiguously with the oppressed in their struggle for dignity, justice, and full humanity.

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