



P. Solomon Raj: *Biblia Pauperum. The Poor Man's Bible.* A Book Review

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It is rare for an author in his late 80s to still publish books.¹ Dr. P. Solomon Raj, a Lutheran theologian and creative artist from India, is an exception to this rule. Born in 1921, he became a school teacher, then studied theology at Gurukul, Madras, served as a minister and as a student chaplain and after that fulfilled a wide range of positions in India, at Selly Oak, Birmingham UK and other countries before settling down again in his own country. In the meantime he published his PhD dissertation in Birmingham and was active in the Asian Christian Arts Association. Since a number of years he is the spiritual father of the St. Luke's Lalitkala Ashram in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh.

In the 1950s he discovered his gift as an artist, first specializing in linocut and wood block printing (black and white, later coloured ones as well) and then also in designing batiks, and — though to a lesser extent — acrylic paintings. Serving in the field of modern mass communication as a means of propagating the Gospel, he discovered the possibilities of using visual art in explaining the biblical narratives. Most of the art works which he published in separate booklets and books are accompanied by brief, often surprising, poetical meditations which remind one of the work of Rabindranath Tagore and others.

In an unpublished paper Solomon Raj himself speaks about the prophetic role of the Christian artist. Like prophets, the artist is an instrument of inspiration, a visionary and fore-teller who uses symbolic language. And, 'he is aware of the problems in the society in which he lives, he speaks the vocabulary and the idiom of his time and he wakes up people of his day to some of

¹ P. Solomon Raj, *Biblia Pauperum. The Poor Man's Bible*, Bangalore: ATCbooks 2008, ISBN 81-7086-456-9, US\$ 8,00.

the things that agitate his mind.² Raj himself clearly interprets his art work and theology in this way. In an article, written on the occasion of Raj's 80th birthday, Volker Kuester rightly connected Solomon Raj's art work with the immense problems of the *dalit* in India, and of the poor in general.³ The prophetic dimension of his work is immediately discernible in many of the themes which recur several times and in many forms: the flight into Egypt; aspects of liberation,⁴ Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (in John 4), Jesus as Teacher, the transfiguration of Christ, Golgotha and the cross.

Now, after having published several works of art and meditation already as well as scholarly publications⁵ Solomon Raj returns to a subject which had drawn his attention long ago while studying at Indiana University in 1956-1957, the *Biblia Pauperum*. At that time he did not pursue the idea. However, in 1991 during a communications seminar in Finland which Raj attended, Hans-Ruedi Weber 'commented on my work with woodcuts and said that they reminded one of the *Biblia Pauperum* of the Middle Ages'.⁶ This started a new fire in his heart and eventually led to the publication of his latest book, *Biblia Pauperum. The Poor Man's Bible* (2008).

Several versions and editions exist of the original *Biblia Pauperum*, especially in Germany and the Netherlands. The oldest versions in the late Middle Ages have the form of coloured, hand-painted illuminated manuscripts. In the 15th century printed examples with woodcuts appeared. However, probably these printed block books, too, were too expensive to be bought by the poor and it is assumed that they were used by parish priests as a teaching aid, especially for the illiterate part of the population. The fact that at least some versions use Latin texts, makes it improbable that others than the clergy had a direct access to these 'cartoon' type Bible stories. The brief texts only served to identify the illustrations which formed the heart of these picture Bibles.

² P. Solomon Raj, *The Prophetic Role of a Christian Artist*, unpublished paper, place and date unknown.

³ Volker Kuester, 'Renunciation of Inculturation as Aesthetic Resistance: The Indian Artist Solomon Raj Seen in a New Light', *Exchange* 30/4 (2001), 359-371, also published in: P. Solomon Raj, *Fiery Wheels. Art Works and Meditations*, Vijayawada, India 2003, 100-122.

⁴ See the twelve wood block prints in P. Solomon Raj, *Liberation in Luke's Gospel*, Vijayawada, India [1996].

⁵ Such as *The New Wine-skins. The Story of the Indigenous Missions in Coastal Andhra Pradesh, India*, Delhi: ISPCK 2003.

⁶ In P. Solomon Raj, 'Biblia Pauperum — a hand-printed Bible teaching aid from the Middle Ages', in: P. Solomon Raj, *Biblia Pauperum. The poor Man's Bible*, 29-42. Citation on p. 30.



Figure 1: P. Solomon Raj, *Biblia Pauperum* p. 47 Joseph thrown into the well (Genesis 37:21-28)

In his book, Solomon Raj especially refers to a popular edition, printed in the Netherlands between 1460-1470 which had 40 pages in two sections. Some other editions have 50 pages. Labriola and Smeltz⁷ provide extensive information about the systematic order of each leaf of the *Biblia Pauperum* which always has seven [2 + 3 + 2] pictures. On top and below four Old Testament figures (prophets or patriarchs) are visible; typologically they are connected with the subject of the main, horizontal triptych in the middle part of each page. The central pictures of these triptychs show subsequent episodes from Christ's ministry of redemption and salvation. With a few exceptions, the scenes to the left and right of this central panel, have been taken from the Old Testament as well.

The personages, who become virtual witnesses of the fulfilment of their prophecies or of the episodes in which they participated, thus escape the temporal limitations of their own lives, develop a Christ-centered view of history, and acquire insight in the enigmas of the Old Testament.⁸

The episodes of the New Testament are related to the annunciation, and the birth, youth and early adult life of Christ; twelve deal with his suffering, death and resurrection, and finally Doomsday and the Crowning of the sanctified soul in Heaven are depicted.

Solomon Raj has limited the number of pictures on each page and the total number of pages. Instead of seven pictures, he only has the main three of the classic triptychs (omitting the Old Testament portraits of the top and the bottom of the original *Biblia Pauperum*), and instead of 40 pages his book only has ten. Also, he omits the words on scrolls which often come out of the mouths of the depicted figures. Thus, he reduces the idea of the *Poor Man's Bible* to its essence: 'the New Testament images in the centre and the two Old Testament types on either side of the central picture.'⁹

More interesting yet are the following three adaptations. First of all, Solomon Raj gives his own interpretation of what is most important in Christ's ministry. No attention is paid to eschatology. Only one leaflet has been dedicated to the empty tomb and the resurrection (Lk 24:1-9), accompanied by the type of Joseph sold and thrown into the well (Gen 37:21-28) and the anti-type of Jonah swallowed by a whale and delivered again to live (Jon 1:1-12).

⁷ Albert C. Labriola and John W. Smeltz, *The Bible of the Poor*, Pittsburg PA: Duquesne University Press 1990.

⁸ Labriola and Smeltz, 7.

⁹ P. Solomon Raj, 'The Sequence', in: *Biblia Pauperum*, 40.



Figure 2: P. Solomon Raj, *Biblia Pauperum* p. 47 Resurrection (St. Luke 24:1-9)

The other themes are the annunciation, flight into Egypt, baptism of Jesus, the calling of the disciples, Jesus' entry in Jerusalem, the Lord's Supper, his prayer at Gethsemane, and the crucifixion. However, these events are not depicted in a classic order, and significantly Raj starts his *Poor Man's Bible* with the well-known scene of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4, which has been portrayed numerous times by him in wood blocks, batik paintings and lino cuts. This scene is also the only one taken from the Gospel of John; we see Jesus sitting at the well and the Samaritan woman standing, whereas a vivid little bird is sitting on the edge of the well, as a symbol of new life and hope. All other woodcuts have been taken from the Synoptic Gospels, with a slight preference for the Gospel of Luke. Looking back to his earlier books such as *Liberation in Luke's Gospel* and *Fiery Wheels*,¹⁰ there too we find a rather loose, thematic order and not a sequence based upon the classic *Heilsgeschichte*. Actually, in his art books and separately produced series of art works Raj always pays much attention to the liberating and communicating aspects of the man Jesus in comparison to what is found in the classic *Biblia Pauperum* (and, for that matter, in the Apostolic Confession of Faith). Apparently in Raj's contextual perception of the gospel, Christ's concerns for the poor, the destitute, the women and the strangers, have priority. By this caring attitude, in his loving acts, in the Holy Communion and in his willingness to die for others, Christ becomes the saviour. The austere way Raj depicts the human figures on the wood cuts, with their often weary and worried faces accentuated by the thick black lines of the drawings, emphasizes this struggle for humanity on earth. Again, here his work seems to differ from the mediaeval example which through its elegant lines and ornamental frames tends towards a heavenly salvation.

A second adaptation is the fact, that Solomon Raj uses typological examples which differ from the original *Biblia Pauperum*. Only incidentally the same Old Testament images accompanying the central New Testament picture are used in the original *Biblia Pauperum* and in Solomon Raj's book. Not always does he use an 'antitype' in the stereotype sense; rather we see aspects from two Old Testament stories which both, each in its own way, have a typological relation with the New Testament scene. The main story of the annunciation (Lk 1:28-38) for instance, is seconded by Gen 3:1-4 on the left hand and by Ruth 2:1-10 on the other side. However, both here and in other places, Eve does not stand for sinfulness, but for a loving wife whose only shortcoming is,

¹⁰ P. Solomon Raj, *Fiery Wheels: Art Works and Meditations*, Vijayawada 2003.

that she ignorantly looks for knowledge in stead of obedience. Raj admits that, 'Sometimes, the rationale behind the pairing is not easy to follow.'¹¹

Finally, Solomon Raj replaces the written *tituli* and *lectiones* of the original example by brief and often moving meditations. Again, this is something he has done in his earlier books as well and both form and content of these meditations are a proof of a contextual reading of Scriptures. Well chosen brief meditations as examples of wisdom and poetry rather than analytically formulated theological statements may be a means which people in India easily recognize with their hearts and minds. Partly the title of these meditations focus at one of the (anti-)type pictures. As an example we take the text belonging to the triptych where the stories of Jacob's ladder (Gen 28:10-14) and Gideon (Judg 6:11-14) surround Mt 4:18-24, the calling of the disciples:

There was a promise —
 a promise like it came
 to the runaway Jacob.
 He saw the rungs of a ladder
 Reaching high into the skies
 on which the holy ones
 went up and came down —
 Not like Jacob asked for
 nor like he ever dreamed.
 So also Gideon the mighty man of valor.
 When he was busy with
 his mundane chores,
 he was given a sign.
 And the fishermen of Galilee —
 Did they know what a
 great mission they were
 being beckoned for?
 God calls and man responds.

Though in most triptychs and meditations Christ is found in the centre (in one case even as the Cosmic Christ), true humanity as something we receive by grace seems to be the main message which Solomon Raj wants to transmit through his art and his theology. Therefore not surprisingly the final central picture shows Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus going to or coming from Egypt. Here Solomon Raj's concern with refugees once again is apparent. God 'called his son from Egypt to bear the cross and save humanity', according to the text

¹¹ Raj, *Biblia Pauperum*, 41.

of the meditation on this wood cut. And he ends with the existential question, 'How can we humans foresee what God has planned?'

Solomon Raj is well aware of the fact, that his *Biblia Pauperum*, in a similar way as its famous predecessor, will most likely be a teacher's aid and not a book which directly comes into the hands of the really poor. His aim has been to add a modern Christian example to the age-old Indian iconography which is so beautifully present in temple carvings telling stories from the Hindu Puranas.¹² Also, he wants to make clear the significant interplay between word and image in our own age.

This book may not be his final statement; despite his age, Solomon Raj continues to work. Therefore we eagerly look forward to forthcoming artistic and theological works by this gifted author-artist.

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¹² Raj, *Biblia Pauperum*, 39.