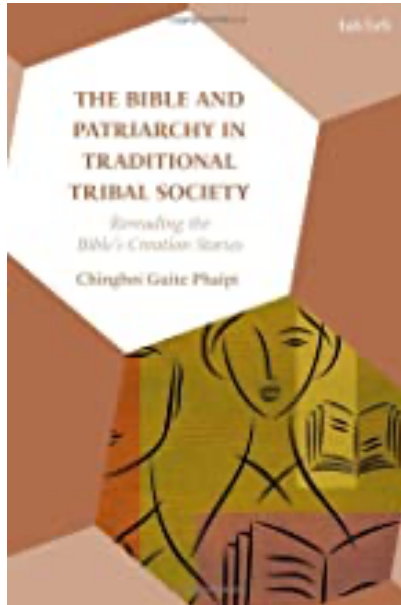


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**Chingboi Guite Phaipi**

***The Bible and Patriarchy in Traditional Tribal Society:  
Re-reading the Bible's Creation Stories***

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In this book, Chingboi Guite Phaipi examines how the Bible has been used wrongly to justify and reinforce patriarchal practices and female subjugation in northeast Indian tribal societies, particularly the Paite (Zomi) tribe. The book is divided into five chapters. The first two chapters examine the status of tribal women in northeast India before the arrival of Christianity and its impact on them thereafter from a historical perspective. Utilizing literary criticism, the following three chapters examine how the creation stories in Gen 1–3 have been used by Paite Christians to promulgate women's subjugation and gender-based hierarchical systems as God-willed or biblical. A close literary analysis of texts and phrases in these creation narratives reveals sameness and togetherness between the male and the female rather than differentiation or hierarchical distinction. Finally, chapter 6 stresses the need for tribal hermeneutics and the importance of understanding biblical contexts and being sensitive to diverse, alternative interpretations. The study aims to inspire a more careful and faithful reading of biblical narratives before applying them to our contexts (4–5).

Phaipi studies the subordinating status of tribal women of northeast India, particularly the Paite tribe, before the arrival of Christianity. Her analysis in chapter 1 indicates that tribal women in pre-Christian times were not “totally subjugated” (10). They had some degree of power and agency. In highlighting the subordination of women in traditional tribal communities, Phaipi examines the customary laws and traditional practices in tribal societies that are gender-based,

regarding and valuing women as subordinate. Customary laws and practices highlighting women's subordination status and male hegemony include funeral, marriage, succession, and inheritance. The rest of the chapter provides an overview of the historical, sociopolitical, and religious-cultural background of tribal societies, including Paites. Phaipi notes that these tribes are diverse, each with a rich history and culture.

The impact of the arrival of Christianity and British colonialism on northeast Indian tribal societies is discussed in chapter 2. Contrary to the claims that Christianity elevated women, Phaipi argues that women's subjugation was sustained and reinforced by Christian missionary movements through the form of Christianity and patriarchal ideologies, for example, systems and behaviors that the missionaries embraced and transmitted. They played a role in colonialism, which caused significant changes to tribal ways of life, including loss of autonomy, the introduction of the money-based economy, education, change of lifestyle at the individual and communal levels (e.g., peaceful relationships among different tribes), and the creation of literature to preserve native tribal languages and history. These changes have perpetuated gender inequality.

Phaipi deconstructs the notion of male primacy and female subjugation that people read into Gen 1. In chapter 3, she demonstrates that there is no language or evidence of gender hierarchy in the biblical text. The term *'ādām* refers to male and female and is a generic term for humankind. Man/male and woman/female were created by God as equals. Both were created in God's own image with the same purpose and responsibility of propagating the human species and safeguarding the earth. The plural pronouns and plural verb endings used in assigning their purpose and responsibility imply mutuality and inclusiveness. There is no differentiation of superiority or inferiority between them in the text. Neither holds power over the other. Any implication of male primacy or female subordination is the result of eisegesis or external preconceived patriarchal cultures and ideologies being read into the text (74–77).

Chapter 4 analyzes and deconstructs the argument supporting women's subordination and men's primacy in the creation narrative of Gen 2, with attention to details such as woman as *'ezer* or "helper" for the first man, the creation of the woman *after* and *from* the man, and woman being named by man. For Phaipi, the term *helper* must be considered within the broader textual context. On its own terms, the word does not connote subordination, inferiority, or hierarchical differentiation but close similarity, mutual relationship, and communion between the first two humans (84). Similarly, the creation of woman after and from man reflects kinship and sameness. They are made from the same material and therefore are co-related. As for naming, in the Old Testament naming does not indicate superiority or supremacy but instead a particular bond or deep connection between the "namer" and the named.

Phaipi continues with the theme of sameness and togetherness of the man and woman in Gen 3. In chapter 5, she reexamines certain aspects of Gen 3 that Paite Christians have used to justify the

subjugation of women as biblical. These include statements about man ruling over woman, woman giving the forbidden fruit to the man, and the pain and toil for the woman associated with childbirth. She argues that the verb *māšal*, “to rule,” is ambiguous and has two possible meanings: “to rule” and “to resemble.” A close rereading of the text reveals no hierarchical order. After man joins his wife in eating the fruit, both mutually violate God’s command and share the same divine judgment.

In the concluding chapter, Phaipi advocates for a more faithful and responsible reading of the Bible with attentiveness to the following dimensions: contextual biblical hermeneutics, tribal women’s voices, lived experiences of tribal members, a kinship system within tribal communities, and tribal values and beliefs. She then proposes three guidelines to help tribal Christians to have a “faithful and fruitful” reading of the Bible: broadening our perspective regarding the Bible (i.e., not to see the Bible as a book of commands but rather as a living agent; 119), reexamining our methods of application (i.e., a deep understanding of biblical texts and contexts before applying them to our own lived contexts), and considering differing or opposing perspectives within the Bible (i.e., in interpreting the Bible, we need to be in conversation with other interpretations as a passage could be understood and interpreted differently by cultures or people, depending on lived experiences; 128).

Phaipi’s book provides a basic framework for scholars and readers to reexamine critically the intersection and contextualization of the Bible/Christianity, culture, and gender. Phaipi is to be commended for bringing tribal spirituality and culture into meaningful dialogue with biblical narratives and other interpretations. How has the Bible been embraced and used to justify certain cultural behaviors and practices? In which way has Christianity empowered or marginalized gender roles? The book reveals that gender stereotyping carries broader implications for religion, culture, and society. Scholars have the ethical responsibility to point out misconstrued perceptions of social norms. That is certainly the case with this book. In her gentle way, Phaipi challenges readers to think critically and to question seriously issues regarding gender inequality and exclusion originating from biblical interpretation.

For readers new to Paite Christian tribal studies, the first two chapters offer valuable sociopolitical and religio-cultural background about the tribes of northeast India during the pre-Christian era. It particularly focuses on women’s societal roles and agency, as well as the impacts of Christianity and British colonialism. Although her reexamination of the terms and phrases in Gen 1–3 used to support women’s subjugation is not new, her meticulous literary analyses and comments on the creation stories are methodical and insightful. In her gentle way, she challenges readers to be self-conscious of preconceived hierarchical ideologies and approach the Bible with open, clear minds (127). Still, Phaipi’s statement about how most women in traditional tribal societies uphold patriarchy requires further explanation (13). What motivates their support for patriarchy?

In a survey conducted by Phaipi, she notes that tribal members who have been exposed to diverse (Christian) cultures tend to be more sensitive to diverse perspectives and are more aware of their limitations when interpreting and applying the Bible. On the other hand, those who live within their own culture, including tribe and church, tend to hold a more rigid position on what the Bible is and says (58). Phaipi's experiences of living abroad as an immigrant encountering North American cultures and values have led her to question her tribal patriarchal culture and embrace a heightened sensitivity to different interpretations. It took Phaipi a lengthy journey—from India to Japan to the United States—to wrestle with the deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes and practices in her tribal society. One wonders how long it would take for women and others in Paite and other tribes of northeast India who have not had the cross-cultural experiences as Phaipi to recognize the impact of Christianity and colonialism on their culture and find their voices within their community and church.