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Liew/What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?

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Preface

As it is often the case in my experience, this research project on Asian American biblical hermeneutics has led me into seemingly endless searches. Searching and re-searching on this academic *and* social project for the last ten years have been rewarding for me. I can only hope that my readers will also find my end product at this point in time helpful and constructive.

Generally speaking, this book has three foci. The question of “methodology”—or more precisely, what constitutes the distinguishing characteristics or sensibilities of Asian American biblical hermeneutics—preoccupies the first two chapters. The next three chapters of the book focus on the issue of community, or the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Finally, the last three chapters will center on exploring agency. Since (1) the entire book is concerned with demonstrating what Asian American biblical hermeneutics will look like in practice, and (2) considerations of both community and agency are intricately intertwined with questions of identity, it should come as no surprise that these three foci of the book are, in a sense, present in every single chapter. Put differently, the way I have specified the divisions above functions more like a heuristic guide or orientation. As we all know, orientation, like generalization, is always helpful, but it is seldom accurate in every single detail. I myself tend to see Chapter 5 as a pivotal chapter; a shift is detectable in that chapter, not only from the issue of community to that of agency, but also from a discussion of ethnicity to one of racial relations in the Greco-Roman world.

This book on Asian American biblical hermeneutics has two more general characteristics. First, it covers all of the major genres found within the New Testament. While Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the Gospels of Mark and of John respectively, Chapter 4 has to do with Acts; after giving attention to Paul’s (first) letter to the Corinthians in both Chapters 5 and 6, I will

move onto Revelation, or the mode of apocalyptic writing and thinking, in Chapter 8. I should also point out that while Chapters 2 through 6 contain my own reading of specific biblical texts, Chapter 7 concerns my reading of another Asian American writer's reading of the Bible (mainly Matthew and John), and Chapter 8 broadens biblical hermeneutics to cover not only literary texts (biblical or otherwise), but also films and events like genome research and September 11.

Second, this book is intentional in affirming Asian America as a pan-ethnic coalition and acknowledging the differences within that very same coalition. As a result, five of the chapters (Chapters 1, 3, 5, 6, and 8) talk about the broader Asian America in general (and in ways that go beyond East Asian America), but two (Chapters 2 and 4) discuss Chinese America and one (Chapter 7) deals with Korean America in particular. I do so not only because the dominant culture continues to dismiss the heterogeneity of Asian America, but also because I want to be sensitive to the charge of "ethnic monopolizing" that other Asian Americans have levelled against Chinese Americans (Ono 1995: 71). This question of Asian American pan-ethnicity *and* heterogeneity—or that of balancing identity politics and coalition building—is very important; readers who are interested in reading more might find a more positive prognosis in Espiritu 1992, a more negative evaluation in Ono 1995, and a challenge to balance the two in Koshy 2000.

Since my book will focus on the "whats" and the "hows" of Asian American biblical hermeneutics, let me address here the important question of "why." This question becomes even more pertinent since a recent and lengthy review by three scholars of Uriah Y. Kim's Asian American reading of the Deuteronomistic History within the Hebrew Bible (2005) has questioned several times why one should put the Bible and its interpretation alongside Asia America in the first place (Lipschits, Shavit, and Sergey 2006). In Chapter 2, I will talk about how, despite the disciplinary habit to ignore or dismiss religion within Asian American studies, religion in general and the Bible in particular have been used to racialize and colonize Chinese (as well as other Asians) as a race of "heathens," and are thus important to investigate. Since Uriah Kim's reviewers acknowledge that he has provided a related reason (the place and role of the Bible in the United States) but obviously consider it to be inadequate given their persistence in posing the question, I will provide some additional responses here to why the Bible and Asian America might or even should come together.

A simple but significant reason is that Asian American communities and Bible-reading communities, despite the "race-of-heathens" construction, are not only *not* mutually exclusive but also actively overlapping. To put it a lit-

tle more aggressively, while those whose communities and/or contexts have been institutionally and/or socio-culturally legitimated to read the Bible might feel the “right” to patrol the boundaries and demand from others an explanation of their use of the Bible, there is no racial/ethnic and/or disciplinary monopoly over the Bible and its interpretation. In fact, the burden of the “why-the-Bible” question seems to deny the fact that persons may have multiple identities and belong to multiple communities. Instead of living in a hermetically sealed and sealed-off community (in racial/ethnic and/or disciplinary terms), Asian Americans and Asian Americanists may also be Christians and/or critics who read the Bible for faith and/or professional reasons. Despite the discomfort and/or disorientation on the part of those who have been “legitimated” to read the Bible, biblical interpretation does come from multiple, internally diverse, and externally traversing communities. Putting the Bible and Asian America together only becomes suspect if one erases or suppresses (1) how the two have been mixed in the past and in the present, and (2) how many recent monographs and anthologies have appeared to point, respond, and contribute to that long-standing and on-going liaison (see, for example, Yang 1999; Liew and Yee 2002; Matsuoka and Fernandez 2003; Jeung 2005; Foskett and Kuan 2006). Since the focus of my own constructive project within this book is less genealogical, I will suggest that as long as Asian Americans are reading the Bible—despite for how long and for what reasons—Asian American biblical hermeneutics becomes not only legitimate but also compelling. This is so because as soon as one is able to see that Asian American communities and Bible-reading communities are not mutually exclusive, one will need to deal with the mutually constitutive relations between reading and identity. As David L. Eng argues, questions of canon are important because what one reads help construct who one is (1998: 13–17). Of course, the relations between reading and being go both ways—so, to borrow from the title of a recent anthology on Asian American biblical interpretation (Foskett and Kuan 2006), different ways of being may lead to alternative ways of reading, and readers are never passive reflections of what they read—but the point here is that reading matters. One should, as Eng implores, never underestimate the interpellative or performative force that the subject matters of one’s reading might have on the development of a reader’s subjectivity and identity. If Asian Americans are reading the Bible, then we must talk about not only the implications of what they read, but also how they read.

There is a sense, therefore, in which Asian American biblical hermeneutics is but a symptom of the globalized world. At the same time, putting together the Bible and Asian America should also be understood as a

deliberate move. At the end of Chapter 2, I will suggest that Asian American biblical hermeneutics is—again, in light of the “race-of-heathens” construction—a form of “talking back.” Just as Asian American biblical hermeneutics should not be viewed as a mere symptom, this form of “talking back” is also not only reactive. Precisely by putting together what many might see as “disparate” elements, Asian American biblical hermeneutics has the positive potential and purpose to interrogate many assumed understandings and practices, whether they concern biblical hermeneutics or Asian America. Assembling the Bible and Asian America, in other words, is an intentional attempt to appropriate a cultural canon in order to re-create and transform multiple cultures through a form of multicultural critique. (In addition to understanding culture here as internally diverse and externally traversing, it should also be understood in ways that are other or more than racial/ethnic.) The Bible is particularly good for this purpose not only because of its canonical status but also because it is a collection of texts that was first written by the colonized but then has become instrumental for colonization. Put differently, the Bible is—as I hope the pages of this book will help make evident—a fascinating library of texts that pose issues and raise questions concerning multiple and interlocking differential relations of power. Given its status and history, the Bible is therefore particularly good to “think with.” “Thinking with” the Bible means not only that the Bible in no way determines or dictates one’s thought, but also that the Bible itself remains open because of the points of departure that it provides for its readers. If I may adopt what Stuart Hall says about another text, the Bible in this sense becomes “an *open text*, and hence a text we are obliged to go on working on, working *with*” (1996: 34; emphasis in original).

Just as “Asian American” threatens the apparent divide between “Asia” and “America,” Asian American biblical hermeneutics might put into crises more binary assumptions, purity obsessions, and unity illusions. I have in mind here not only questions surrounding the ownership of the Bible, but also those about origins. While it is standard to situate the Bible in Palestinian soil and within the Jewish heritage, the very word “Asian” uncannily brings back echoes that the so-called biblical land was often referred to—for instance, by Greeks and Romans between fifth century B.C.E. and fifth century C.E.—as “Asia” or “Asian” (Okiihiro 1994: 7–12). Just as Egypt is often separated from its North African location, so “Asia” is now generally considered to be apart from rather than a part of the “biblical” landscape. Perhaps herein lies the heart or the threat of Asian America in general and Asian American biblical hermeneutics in particular: both gesture towards an “other” who might also be part of the self. It challenges “closure” by stir-

ring up forgotten histories or stories, and/or by shaking up what has long been accepted as “self-evident.” It is my hope, as I will further elaborate in Chapter 1, that the intellectual work of theorization or defamiliarization through one’s reading of the New Testament *might* usher in a new political will, or perhaps even a different political vision and program.

(This critique of “closure” or intellectual defamiliarization is also particularly important in light of the context of Uriah Kim’s three reviewers: they are all situated in Tel Aviv, Israel. The late Edward W. Said has suggested, through a reading of Sigmund Freud’s reading of Moses as an *Egyptian* founder of the Jews, that troubling identity and purity might be key not only to diasporic existence but also to a future when Jews and Palestinians might peacefully co-exist [2003: 50–55; see also Bailey 1995]. Once again, I hope one can see how questions about the “whys” of Asian American biblical hermeneutics are—like its “whats” and “hows”—also inseparable from issues of identity, community, and agency. More immediately, I hope one can see that race/ethnicity is a significant factor in one’s reading of the Bible, and what seems to be an illegitimate, impure, or improper mixing might actually herald and help bring about the coming of the imponderable or impossible.)

Are there other texts that Asian Americans and/or Asian Americanists can “work *on*” and “work *with*” to critique the unequal power dynamics of race/ethnicity and other interlocking power differentials and/or help construct a different vision? Of course there are; a quick glimpse of the numerous books that have been published under the rubric of “Asian American studies” will confirm that. In addition to the happenstance that I am a biblical critic by profession, I have suggested that the Bible’s canonical status and contents in general, and its history within and crossings into Asian America in particular, make it one potentially provocative and productive site of intervention. There is, however, also an undeniable link between hermeneutics—ancient as well as contemporary—and the Bible (Bruns 1992; Jasper 2004). Reading and identity are, as I have pointed out, mutually constitutive, but the theory and practice of reading are also themselves deeply rooted in the reading of the Bible. Just as the Bible and Asian Americans are not necessarily strangers to each other, so the four words that make up “Asian American biblical hermeneutics” also belong together, even if the term—like Asian America—may look jarring at first glance.

Parts of this book have appeared elsewhere, although these “original” publications have all been revised, expanded, and/or adapted. Chapter 2 was first published in Brill’s *Biblical Interpretation* 9 (2001): 309–335; Chapter

3, as “Ambiguous Admittance: Consent and Descent in John’s Community of ‘Upward Mobility,’” in *Postcolonialism and the Gospel of John: Travel, Space and Power*, ed. Musa W. Dube and Jeffrey L. Staley (New York: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 193–224; and Chapter 4, as “Acts” in *Global Bible Commentary*, ed. Daniel Patte, J. Severino Croatto, Nicole Wilkinson Duran, Teresa Okure, and Archie Chi Chung Lee (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004), 419–28. A section of Chapter 7 has come from “Margins and (Cutting-)Edges: On the (Il)Legitimacy and Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, and (Post)Colonialism,” in *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia (New York: Continuum, 2005), 114–65. I am grateful to these publishers for kindly granting me the permission to reprint.

Since a major portion of my writing and rewriting for this book was done when I spent my sabbatical as a Visiting Scholar at the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies and the Divinity School of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, I want and need to thank the administrators and trustees of Chicago Theological Seminary for that sabbatical leave, as well as many old and new friends in Hong Kong, especially Lung Kwong Lo and Archie Lee of CUHK. It so happened that a month before I assumed my role as a Visiting Scholar there, my mother passed away in Hong Kong. My semester-long return to Hong Kong after moving to the United States two decades ago thus turned out to be both nostalgic and melancholic. (It is perhaps little wonder that I ended up writing about Paul’s melancholia over Jesus’ death in Chapter 6.) In any case, I know full well that this new time that I spent in an old place has been invaluable not only to my grieving, but also to my belief that separation in time and space—because of life and/or death—does not necessarily sever relations. (I should have known this, given my continual interest and investment in an ancient book written in Koine Greek, which is a “dead” language for many who nevertheless keep on viewing this same book as “sacred” and “life-giving.”) For this reason, I am dedicating this book to my extended family that has remained in Hong Kong *and* with me in spite of my relocation across the Pacific. I am blessed to be a part of such an international family.

As always, I owe almost everything to Pam and Aaron. Pam, I think or I hope, knows why; I trust that Aaron will also learn to know the reasons in due time . . . wherever he may be.