

# The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Korea

Won W. Lee, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Korea*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. xiii + 409 pp. \$150.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780190916916.

Marveling at the ability of Korean/Korean American biblical scholars to serve in teaching and leadership positions,<sup>1</sup> a colleague once asked: “What’s the secret?” I smiled and answered, “Koreans love the Bible”—naturally an insufficient answer. *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Korea* could be a long answer to this and similar questions. It is an excellent starting point for scholars and students to engage the fascinating “tapestry” (a metaphor from this edited volume) of Korean biblical interpretation in the academy and faith communities, on the Korean peninsula and in diasporic contexts.

The introduction by Won W. Lee (“Tapestry of Korean Biblical Interpretations in the Making”) provides an overview of each chapter and explains the volume’s overarching goals. The book is divided into four parts: “Part I: Methodological Inquiry,” “Part II: Intercultural/Religious Engagements,” “Part III: Self-Theologizing,” and “Part IV: Diaspora Contexts.” This four-fold scheme is said to reflect church historian Lamin Sanneh’s theory of “the centrality of translation in Christianity” (2), seeking to demonstrate the reciprocal and creative encounters between the Bible and Korea. A concluding chapter is absent.

Part I consists of four chapters with wide-ranging explorations of history and method. Min Suc Kee, in “Translation of the Bible in *Hangul*,” traces the emergence of Korean Bible translations, analyzing major versions and social, cultural, political factors that affected them. Yoon Kyung Lee explores how the Christian Bible gained authority in a Korean society that already had traditional scriptures and practices in “The Authority of the Bible in the Multiscriptural Context of Korean Christianity.” Tai-il Wang’s “Scripture-logy and Scriptural Performance in Canonical Criticism and the Theistic Confucian Thought” pairs canonical criticism with Dasan Jeong Yak-Yong (1762–1836)’s approaches to Confucian classics. Finally, in “Mapping Korean Biblical Interpretation in the Shadow of Powers: Anticolonial, Liberationist, and Postcolonial Reading Strategies Revisited,” Sung Uk Lim articulates three modes of Korean biblical interpretation as social resistance in modern history.

Consisting of five chapters, Part II compares the Bible/Christianity with religious-philosophical traditions in Korea to reveal their creative interactions. In “Shamanistic Influence on Biblical Interpretation,” Soo Kim Sweeney examines the ambivalent relationship between Korean Christianity and Shamanism. This is followed by Myung Soo Suh’s “Confucian Readings on Abraham” and Eun Kyu Micah Kim’s “Daoist, Buddhist, and Christian Readings on Creation,” both of which offer new hermeneutical proposals from interreligious perspectives. Geun Seok Yang’s “Eighteenth-Century Joseon Confucian Readings on Jesus” focuses on the biblical interpretations of eighteenth-century Confucian scholars. Lastly, Heup Young Kim’s “Biblical Readings on a Theology of *Dao*” proposes the comprehensive concept of *dao* as a hermeneutic for overcoming the Western dichotomy of theology and practice.

Focusing on the diverse aspects of “self-theologizing,” Part III is the longest section in the collection. The first three of this part’s ten chapters—In Hee Park’s “Reception of the Bible during the Eighteenth Century”; Jungsik Cha’s “During Japanese Colonization (1910–1945)”; and Samuel Cheon’s “Post-Korean War Era (1945–1970)” —chronicle the history of self-theologizing. Park’s article illustrates the birth of Korean Christianity through Confucian scholars’ academic explorations

and laypeople's communal formation before Western missionaries (see also Geun Seok Yang's discussion in Part II). Cha's and Cheon's chapters examine tensions surrounding biblical interpretation within the larger social/political contexts of Korean society and church. These are followed by two thematic chapters—Jayhoon Yang's "Self-Theologizing in Hymnology" and Sunggu A. Yang's "Self-Theologizing in Preaching"—that ask how this autochthonous hermeneutical process forms in faith communities using hymns and preaching. Jayhoon Yang's article uniquely examines biblical reception with a focus on artistic expressions (an area that should be explored further).

The subsequent three chapters in Part III revolve around minjung theology, arguably the most well-known Korean theology to non-Koreans. In "*Minjung* Biblical Hermeneutics: Jesus and the *Ochlos*," Jae Won Lee discusses the biblical hermeneutics of Ahn Byung-Mu, a founding figure of minjung theology, focusing on his three key themes. Yoon Jong Yoo's "*Minjung* and *Han*" demonstrates that the concept of *han* can have implications for biblical studies by applying it to exilic prophetic literature. In "*Minjung* in Global Context," JiSeong J. Kwon examines how Job's character change illuminates the changing notions of minjung in Korean society, especially paying attention to migrant workers. Then the final two chapters—Kyung-Taek Ha's "Reunification of South and North Korea: From Division to Reunification" and Koog P. Hong's "United yet Divided: Reading Judah and Israel in the Context of Two Koreaes"—tackle the issues of division and reunification of the Koreaes with biblical examples.

Part IV turns to biblical interpretation in the Korean diaspora. Wongi Park's "Korean American Biblical Interpretation" offers a historical overview and methodological inquiry (see 329 for a useful diagram). Hyun Chul Paul Kim's "Forever Strangers at the Margin' in the Context of the United States" weaves biblical narrative with stories of Korean immigrants in America. Similarly, the article by Honam Kim ("Double Marginality in the Context of the Southern Hemisphere") combines Korean immigrant experience in Australia and postcolonial theory while interpreting the Jacob narrative. Jin Young Choi's "Korean American Feminist Interpretation: A Diasporic Journey across Boundaries" correlates women in the Markan Gospel and Korean American women suffering from "double marginality." This pairs with Boyung Lee's "Diversity within the Korean Diaspora: Toward Solidarity," which calls for readings from an "interstitial space," where Korean American women and non-Korean American women work together in solidarity.

The handbook is laudable, and it will enrich theological libraries in North America and beyond. Above all, the book is the first of its kind—a comprehensive and methodical handbook focused on the Bible in Korea and the Korean diaspora. This book works in dialogue with other volumes that have slightly different goals and objectives, such as Uriah Y. Kim and Seung A. Yang (eds.), *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), John Ahn (ed.), *Landscapes of Korean and Korean American Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), and Rachael Miyung Joo and Shelley Sang-Hee Lee (eds.), *A Companion to Korean American Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). Another strength of the book is its interdisciplinary approach, making it appealing to readers from diverse disciplines. Noticeable is the book's contribution to the study of modern Korean history and its relationship to Christianity. Also, essays that engage religious/philosophical traditions in Korea (e.g., Confucianism, Daoism, Shamanism) provide a resource for comparative literature/religion.

Despite these strengths, I offer a few critical remarks. First, the organizing principle of Parts I and II is not transparent. Despite the title, "Methodological Inquiry," Part I does not provide various methods for Korean/Korean American biblical interpretation. Rather, as the editor explains (using Sanneh's thesis), this part addresses "the hermeneutical challenge to translate the Bible into the Korean language and then interpret its worldview and concerns" (2). Even so, it is not clear how

the four chapters in Part I (each contains valuable discussions) relate to one another, achieving the overarching goal. Similarly, the title of Part II (“Intercultural/Religious Engagements”) and its description (“This part . . . investigates interreligious encounters in Korea that have shaped biblical interpretations with implications far beyond the church,” [5]) may lead readers to expect more about how interreligious encounters impacted biblical interpretation in Korea, but in fact, some essays in this part present the author’s comparative methodology or hermeneutics with examples (the essays fit better with Part I, while Yoon Kyung Lee’s chapter in Part I would be more at home in Part II).

Second, the book overall (except a few chapters) focuses on Korea’s past, rather than reflecting present realities. Koreans in the 21st century have a different social construction than previous generations of Koreans, which may limit the usefulness of the book for addressing today’s theological concerns. For example, one might ask, in what ways will Confucian concepts (discussed in several chapters) contribute to biblical interpretation for contemporary Koreans who are less influenced by Confucianism? What recent advances have been made in Korean Bible translations and what issues are currently at stake (especially, considering NKT [the New Korean Translation] which was published in 2021 after ten years of preparation)? How will the history of “intercultural engagements” and “self-theologizing” help create space for more responsible readings for Koreans in all diversity and all those who live/interact with Koreans (cf. Kwon’s chapter that moves toward similar questions)? Additionally, the centrality of North America with regard to the Korean diaspora (four out of five chapters) indicates that more work on the diversity of the diaspora is necessary.

In summary, this volume is beneficial for Koreans or members of the Korean diaspora who are interested in biblical interpretation, but it will also enrich readers of diverse backgrounds because the discussions reveal universal concerns that appear whenever the Bible is translated and transmitted, read and heard, negotiated and transformed. Due to its translatability and valuable insights, this book is recommended for every theological library.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Korean and Korean American biblical scholars/students are still a minority, but they are a *significant* minority. The 2019 SBL Membership Data (<https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/sblMemberProfile2019.pdf>; see p. 9) includes the question, “What is your country of birth and country of citizenship?” Among 8,519 members who answered the birth-place question, those who were born in Republic of Korea (South Korea) are 209, only preceded by the United States (5,261), Canada (369), United Kingdom (317), and Germany (240), followed closely by Australia (200). The citizenship question yields similar results. This simple statistic does not address complicated issues of identity, but it demonstrates the active participation of Koreans/Korean Americans in the field of biblical studies in North America.