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## **Asian Biblical Studies, Wandering in the Wilderness: Exploring the Concept of Vicarious Suffering in Isaiah 53<sup>1</sup>**

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### **I. Introduction**

Some of you may think that the title “Wandering in the Wilderness” sounds too negative. However, my “wilderness” has both negative and positive connotations. “Wilderness” seems to imply a difficult journey but may also be a place for conceiving one’s hope of entering the Promised Land.<sup>2</sup> Much like Israelites freed from Egyptians, we Asian biblical scholars have been released from Western biblical exegesis to the freedom of interpreting the Bible from Asian perspectives. How and when will we enter the land of milk and honey? What should we do?

By and large, there are historical, cultural, socio-political approaches in biblical studies, but in Asia, there is a greater need for socio-political interpretation to move margins<sup>3</sup> because there is now

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is revised from the keynote address to the 5th Biennial Conference of SABS (Society of Asian Biblical Studies), Seoul, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> The Promised Land motive is disturbing for some people, who identify themselves with the Canaanites, not the conqueror Israelites. However, it is important that the Israelites in this narrative were not the colonising invaders, but the poor slaves, homeless, and refugees. See Eleazar S. Fernandez, “Exodus-Toward-Egypt: Filipino-Americans Struggle to Realize the Promised Land in America,” in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Cornwall: Blackwell, 2006), 291–304.

<sup>3</sup> “Moving Margins” was the main theme of the 5th Conference of SABS.

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more radical economic polarisation and less concern for the margins of society. In Asia, there are nations where oppression and inequality remain everyday realities. Because of this fact, we Asian biblical scholars need to continue to work towards a better framework of empowerment and resistance for those at the margins of society. It also means that Asian biblical scholars have a long way to go wandering in the wilderness. We have yet to reach the Promised Land.

What does it mean to study the Bible in Asia where Christians are the minority (only 2–3%)? In recent times, we have seen on the one hand that artificial intelligence (AI) AlphaGo beat renowned player Lee Sedol at the game “Go” (Baduk) and heard on the other that female Yazidis have been kidnapped and sold as sex slaves by Islamic State soldiers. In this age of AI, we should ask whether we human beings would soon be substitutes for God. Where can we find God’s place in the world? On hearing the outcry of Yazidis, as a Korean woman, I could not help thinking about the yet unsolved issue of the “comfort women” in the era of Japanese colonisation. Amid such a terrible world, what is the purpose of biblical studies? How can we contribute to the eradication of these sufferings through our biblical interpretation? This paper attempts to assess our situation in Asian biblical studies and search for some signposts that will lead us all to the Promised Land of milk and honey. To do this, I will first explore the present situation of Asian biblical studies and then study the concept of “vicarious suffering” (代苦) in Isa 53:3–6 as a way of moving the margins in Asia.

## II. Asian Biblical Studies

### 1. The Present State of Asian Biblical Studies

The number of students in biblical studies has decreased rapidly in Europe and America, and the situation is similar in South Korea. Pastoral counselling is a more popular study than theology. Such trends correlate with the decline of Western Christianity and the complexity of living conditions in this postmodern world. One fundamental cause of the weakening of biblical studies is polarised perspectives on the Bible: some scholars believe everything in the Bible literally, while others criticise its every sentence or word. These attitudes have turned the Bible into either simply outdated nonsense or an ancient document with no meaning in modern times.

Many have considered the decline or end of Western Christianity to be a consequence of eradicating poverty; however, human spiritual needs cannot be resolved through physical satisfaction. Recently, there has been a steady increase in the number of people converting to Buddhism or becoming Zen practitioners in Western societies. This trend reflects the human need for spirituality that perhaps could not be met by Western Christianity. A similar future awaits Asian biblical studies if we cannot breathe new life and hope into our interpretation of the Bible.

One main issue faced by Asians is poverty and economic colonisation, along with discrimination experienced in everyday life. Therefore, in Asia, all cultural analyses that ignore economic exploitation cannot help Asians and fall easily into the pitfall of culturalism.<sup>4</sup> It is common for Asian Christians to quickly realise that

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<sup>4</sup> Yoon Jae Chang, “‘Third World’ vs. ‘Post-Colonial’: Is ‘Decolonization’ possible in ‘Post-Colonial’ Space?” *Madang, International Journal of Contextual Theology in East Asia* 20 (2013): 45–72.

there are two conflicting cultures within themselves: traditional Asian cultures and Western Christian culture. Any Asian Christian cannot help finding himself or herself caught in a conflict between these two different cultures. New converts are inclined to prefer Christian culture and erase their traditional Asian ones. Thus, they tend to hold extremely conservative beliefs and actively reject any other view that do not belong to the Christian tradition. Soon, however, they will realise and be surprised by their inherent traditional traits passed down to them through generations. Even though Asian Christians may not have a thorough knowledge of their own religions,<sup>5</sup> the multiple layers of cultural-religious embodiment subconsciously affect their Christian beliefs in and interpretation of the Bible.

The theology of inculturalisation began in Asia in the 1960s, focusing on the religious and cultural contexts of the biblical interpreters.<sup>6</sup> In the 1970s, Asian biblical interpretation turned up to focus on the economic and socio-political context of the interpreters. Under the Korean military dictatorship, Minjung Theology emerged and argued that interpretation of biblical texts had to be grounded in a concrete context, namely the real experience of the Minjung—the people who had suffered injustice and deprivation. In the same period, Dalit Theology of India, Burakumin (people of the community) Theology of Japan, Bamboo Theology, and Rice Theology also appeared in other parts of Asia.

These theologies were a kind of exodus from Western biblical studies, implying that the so-called “objective” Western biblical analysis was just for Westerners, not for Asians. These theologies tried

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<sup>5</sup> There are not many opportunities for Asians to learn the established religions in the schools since they are taught in a Western style.

<sup>6</sup> The issue of inculturalisation or naturalisation was first discussed by a group of systematic theologians; since the 1970s, the biblical scholars have taken the lead.

to find a new way of interpreting the Bible for Asians according to their lived experiences and situations. They spoke with no unanimous voice but shared the common perspective that the discipline of Western biblical studies is actually white male dominant, one-sided, and even imperialistic.<sup>7</sup> Thus the established modern methodology of biblical exegesis, the historical-critical method, was partly refuted and replaced with contextual and experiential methodologies, being coupled with Asian religious and spiritual traditions. It is not only Feminist, Liberation, and Cultural Theologies that have been adopted and adapted, but also postmodern/postcolonial perspectives, all coexist with cross-cultural, cross-textual, cross-scriptural approaches. Fortunately, we Asian biblical scholars have utilised all of them, an approach which has worked harmoniously in our studies.

Asian biblical studies have gained worldwide recognition despite their short history, and some scholars have been internationally acclaimed as distinguished academics. Nevertheless, in reality, Asian churches and Asian theology still have a long road to travel through this wilderness. In Asia, Christians are still largely disregarded, and the number of churchgoers has been diminishing. Additionally, there is a widening chasm between the seminary and the church. We have only reached the wilderness, not yet the Promised Land. How and when will we enter the blessed land and receive the milk and honey?

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<sup>7</sup> Some of them regard the Bible itself as a work tainted by imperialism. See R. S. Sugirtharajah, "From Orientalism to Postcolonialism," in *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 19–20.