

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS ONE OF THE RESOURCES FOR DOING THEOLOGY IN ASIA

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Belief in the centrality of biblical revelation for our task of doing theology is imperative.¹ There are some misconceptions with regard to certain understandings of some concepts and themes of the Bible.² On account of many interpretations coming from Western scholars, some tend to look at the Bible from the Western perspective. This leads to some uneasiness on the part of Asian scholars when using certain biblical data. They appropriate instead their own cultural, social, and personal resources in "doing theology." I think this kind of attitude overlooks the fact that the Scripture has its original setting,³ which is an Oriental setting—an Asian setting.

¹This point is stressed by Masao Takenaka: "We want to make it openly clear that we continuously maintain the centrality of the Biblical revelation in our common endeavour." Masao Takenaka, foreword to *Doing Theology with Asian Resources: Ten Years in the Formation of Living Theology in Asia*, ed. John C. England and Archie C. C. Lee (Auckland, New Zealand: Programme for Theology & Cultures in Asia, 1993), 3.

²Kim Soon Young notes that "a number of parts of the Bible discriminate against women" and "the sexually discriminatory texts of the Bible had women subordinated or dependent to men in ordinary life and the life of faith as well." Thus, she proposes "that we have to re-interpret our Bible from the feminist critical perspective." Kim Soon Young, "Harmony Against Harmony: Korean Women's Story Theology," in *Doing Theology with Asian Resources: Ten Years in the Formation of Living Theology in Asia*, ed. John C. England and Archie C. C. Lee (Auckland, New Zealand: Programme for Theology & Cultures in Asia, 1993), 65-66.

³R. K. Harrison recognizes this fact in the context of some issues in approaching and understanding OT history. He argues, "Since modern occidental methods of historical interpretation may present decided problems when imposed upon oriental cultures, particularly those of antiquity, it is probably wise to consider the historical outlook and methods of compilation of the Near Eastern cultures on their own terms also, lest the historiographical attempts of antiquity unwittingly be assessed in terms of the scientific methods of more recent times, with equally unfortunate results." R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 295.

In saying that the original setting of the Bible is oriental, the predominant thought is that it is Hebraic in nature. Hebrew thoughts, concepts, and cultures are apparent in the Bible, especially in the OT. This we are forced to recognize.

There is much that can be learned from the OT in our task of doing theology in Asia, for the OT is visibly an Asian book.¹ The cultural setting of the OT is very familiar to those of us who live in Asia because of its resemblance to Asian culture in general.

The OT has been overlooked at times in regard to the application of its themes to some social issues. This is evident in the study of William King that held that the majority of the social gospel apologists, especially in America during the first half of the twentieth century, based their social theology on the teachings of Jesus, "especially those teachings that dealt with the kingdom of God."² Although "they did not ignore the rest of the Bible, they did not devote as much attention to it as they did to the Gospel materials."³

In this paper we shall attempt to see how the OT can contribute to the discussions on doing theology in the Asian context. The subjects we shall study focus on the Hebrew words 'ābōdā and 'ādām and their implications for social issues like relieving the poor and the employer-employee relationship. I have chosen these two Hebrew terms because they are the best representatives of the holistic thought of the Jews, which is very close to the holistic thinking of Filipinos in general, as well as of their Oriental neighbors.

The Meaning of the Hebrew Word 'ābōdā

One of the examples of the Asian worldview in the Hebrew Bible, as just mentioned, is their holistic view of life. The Hebrew people considered themselves, their community, and their world as a complete, united whole.⁴ From this worldview, we can draw implications and lessons in confronting some social issues in Asia, particularly in the Philippines, like labor questions and the relief of the poor.

The meaning of the Hebrew word 'ābōdā supports the idea that the Hebrew people view their life as a dynamic unity. It is very significant that the word 'ābōdā

¹Zdravko Stefanovic, "For the Asian First and Then for the Westerner," *Asia Journal of Theology* 4 (1990): 412-13, enumerated some of the examples in the OT and NT which are Eastern or Asian in concepts and practices.

²William McGuire King, "The Biblical Base of the Social Gospel," in *The Bible and Social Reform*, ed. Ernest R. Sandeen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 62.

³Ibid.

⁴This is also true with the way the Filipino thinks. His way of thinking is holistic, not compartmentalized. See Leonardo N. Mercado, *Applied Filipino Philosophy* (Tacloban City, Philippines: Divine Word University Publications, 1977), 61; idem, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy* (Tacloban City, Philippines: Divine Word University Publications, 1974), 53-67.

is translated as both work¹ and worship.² Apparently, it signifies that service rendered to God is viewed as a form of worship. Work, in some contexts, can be considered as worship to God. So the saying that “worship is a way of life” or “worship is a lifestyle” was indeed true for the Jews.

There are many examples in the OT where ‘*ābōdā*’ is used in the context of worship.³ One example is when Moses went to Mount Horeb to feed the flock and the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. God called Moses to liberate the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, but Moses was hesitant to go and appear before Pharaoh, to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. So God gave assurance to Moses that it was Yahweh who called him and that He would be with him:

And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship (*ta ābdūn*) God on this mountain.” (Exod 3:12)⁴

The form *ta ābdūn* in this particular context is from the same root as ‘*ābōdā*’. The former is in its verbal form, while the latter is in its nominal form. But the important point here is that the Hebrew word for “work” may also be translated as “worship” in some contexts. This idea suggests that “the Hebrew saw his God-given vocation—whether it be that of farmer, herdsman, fisherman, tax collector, teacher or scribe—as a means of bringing glory to God by the very privilege of the work itself.”⁵ Again, one can see the holistic view of life of the Hebrew people even in the workplace. “There were no secular occupations and there were no sacred ones. Every domain of life belongs to God.”⁶

If that same attitude would be manifested towards one’s work or vocation now, that person would become efficient in a given task. The same person would look at that particular job as a means to glorify God. Any form of selfishness in the workplace would be abandoned. Concern for fellow workers would be evident.

In the book of Ruth, the concepts of work and worship are very well exemplified. In one particular scene, while Ruth the Moabitess was picking up the leftover grain in the fields owned by Boaz, it happened that he visited the place. And when Boaz arrived in the field he greeted the harvesters, “The LORD be with

¹There are many instances where ‘*ābōdā*’ is translated as “work.” See, e.g., Gen 29:27; Exod 1:14; Lev 23:7-8; Num 28:18,25-26; Ps 104:23; 1 Chron 27:26.

²The translation “worship” is also reflected in its Arabic root meaning. See Walter C. Kaiser, “*ābad*,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:639.

³See, e.g., Exod 4:23; 7:16; 8:1; Josh 22:27.

⁴All Bible quotations in this paper are from the New International Version, unless otherwise indicated.

⁵Marvin R. Wilson, “Hebrew Thought in the Life of the Church,” in *The Living and Active Word of God: Studies in Honor of Samuel J. Schultz*, ed. Morris Inch and Ronald Youngblood (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 131.

⁶Ibid.

you!” And the harvesters replied in return, “The LORD bless you!” (Ruth 2:4) These were his own harvesters, so he must have been their boss. In our modern setting today, we have here an employer/employee relationship. Boaz must have been a good employer or manager, for he was greeting them in the name of God. At the same time, his workers had a good attitude toward their master, for they asked God’s blessings to be upon Boaz. However, the significant aspect of this scenario was the inclusion of God even in the ordinary greeting in the workplace.

This greeting of Boaz and the reply of his harvesters is a manifestation of Hebrew thinking. For them there was no distinction between work life and spiritual life. Spirituality or piety cannot be put aside in the workplace—work and worship should go hand in hand. This is illustrated in Paul’s familiar Hebraic idiom, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). There is no partition between secular and sacred areas of life.¹ All is viewed in terms of its totality.

How should one apply the concept of worship in the workplace in a practical way? Does it mean that one should always hold a religious convocation at the beginning and at the end of the day’s work? We give only a partially affirmative answer here.

Admittedly, the answer to this question rests on the definition of worship. The modern English word “worship” is derived from the Anglo-Saxon “weorthscipe”—“worth” and “ship”—meaning worthy of reverence and honor.² In Christianity the only One who is worthy of our reverence and honor is God, because we derive everything from Him, whether it is spiritual blessings or material blessings. Now, in the context of our own occupation we can worship God by gratefully acknowledging that all of our material benefits come from God. Simply put, we are to acknowledge all blessings as God’s gifts. Likewise, the view that all aspects of life have no distinction between the sacred and the secular and all of life is considered as God’s domain, is best illustrated in the Hebrew farmer’s special prayer found in Deut 26:5-10a. This special prayer is recited “to remind him that the occupation of tilling the soil is sacred.”³

¹“Judaism is not a faith system serving as one compartment of life, separate and apart from all others. It is a way of life that embraces the totality of existence and forms the root of all the Jews, commitments. For this reason blessings are recited over some of the most mundane items, such as upon seeing lightning, hearing thunder, and even after using the washroom. For it is man’s daily routine—eating, sleeping, working, and so on—that is most in need of sanctification.” Yechiel Eckstein, *What Christians Should Know About Jews and Judaism* (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 70-71.

²Ralph P. Martin, “Worship,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, completely rev. and reset ed. (1979-88), 4:1117.

³Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 157. See also Walther Zimmerli, *The Old Testament and the World*, trans. John J. Scullon (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976), 10.

Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil, and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey: and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, O Lord, have given me.

The Significant Meaning of the Word *'ādām*

Another holistic worldview of the Jews that contributes to our task of doing theology in Asia is the concept of organic solidarity.¹ This concept of organic solidarity is demonstrated in the usage of the Hebrew word *'ādām*. This generic word is translated both collectively, as mankind or people, and individually, as a single man or person.²

In Gen 1:27 it is recorded that "God created man [*hā- 'ādām*] in His own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." This text expresses that "man and woman together make *'ādām* (man)."³ As these two parts of *'ādām* are joined together, they "together form a whole human being."⁴ "Likewise, in Gen 1 man is presented as male and female (Gen 1:27); not that the text suggests that the original man was androgynous, but on account of this total view of man."⁵ The aforementioned concepts maintain the idea of social unity and brotherhood among the Hebrew people. The true meaning of life can only be found by the members of the community in their relationship to each other.

¹Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 70.

²William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1971), s.v. "*'ādām*"; Leonard J. Coppes, "*'dm*," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:10-11.

³Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 1-2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1926; Copenhagen: Branner og Korch, 1926), 61. This points to the equality of man and woman. It is appropriate here to quote the striking words of Victor P. Hamilton: "Both man and woman are made in the image of God. Sexual identification is irrelevant, certainly not a qualifying factor. Thus the command to rule and have dominion is directed to both male and female." Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 28.

⁴Pedersen, 61.

⁵Jacques B. Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians: A Textbook for the Study of Biblical Hebrew in Relation to Hebrew Thinking* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), 211.

Hence, we notice the idea of corporate personality or the “corporate life of the community of faith.”¹ This suggests that every person is “mutually accountable for one another and [should] mutually participate in the life of one another.”²

This communal accountability is best demonstrated in the OT teaching that everyone is his brother’s keeper (Gen 4:9). Also, in one of the commandments of the Decalogue, God said that He was going to extend the consequences of the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Him, but He would show mercy to thousands of those who love Him and keep His commandments (Exod 20:5b-6). Nahum Sarna poignantly explains this commandment:

Society is collectively responsible for its action, and the individual too is accountable for behavior that affects the life of the community. There is thus forged a mutuality of responsibility and consequences. It is further recognized that contemporary conduct inevitably has an impact upon succeeding generations.³

One can observe that, because of this organic unity between the group and its members, “the slightest mistake of a member will affect the totality of the group, the present and the future (Gen 3:19; 9:25-27; Josh 7).”⁴ Thus each member of the community must show a sense of responsibility “for his neighbor’s shortcomings and needs.”⁵ There is no display of Western individualism here.

This idea of shared accountability and social responsibility as explained in the profound meaning of *’ādām* can be applied to the issue of helping the poor. According to a striking passage in Deut 15:11a: “There will always be poor in the land.” This text suggests that poor people are ubiquitous members of the community.⁶ In other words, they are part of the totality of the society. We cannot ignore them or eradicate them. So if they are part of our social structure, we have a sacred responsibility to them. That is the reason why Deut 15:11 enjoins us, “There will always be poor in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.”

This concept of family-community and brotherhood is reflected in another Hebrew word, *mishpāhā* (clan or family). The term *mishpāhā*

¹Wilson, “Hebrew Thought,” 132.

²Ibid., 134.

³Nahum N. Sarna, *Exodus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 110.

⁴Doukhan, 212.

⁵Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, 188.

⁶For another view of this text, see R. S. Sugirtharajah, “‘For You Always Have the Poor with You:’ An Example of Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 4 (1990): 102-7.

refers not only to parents and children; it is a whole social unit that includes uncles, aunts, and even remote cousins. Furthermore, each *mishpāhā* sees itself as part of a single worldwide Jewish family.¹

To stress the idea that whoever belongs to our community is our “brother,” Johannes Pedersen notes that “the city-community is a *mishpāhā*, and consequently the fellow-citizen becomes a brother.”² So the question being asked of Jesus, Who is my neighbor? was “not so easy to answer in ancient Israel. Because the neighbor, the fellow citizen, is the one with whom one lives in community.”³

This is not only true with fellow-citizens. Even foreigners (*gērīm*), particularly poor aliens, were considered as fellow Israelites. Pedersen observes concerning the poor alien, “The Israelite is not allowed to oppress him, but is pledged to love him and treat him as an Israelite, not forgetting that Israel is itself a plebeian nation which has been *gēr* in Egypt (Exod. 22,20; 23,9; Lev. 19,33f.; Deut. 10,19; 24,17f.; Ez. 22,29, etc.).”⁴

The Mosaic code had a variety of regulations designed to protect the poor.⁵

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be open-handed and freely lend him whatever he needs. (Deut 15:7-8)

If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you. (Lev 25:35)

If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, his nearest relative is to come and redeem what his countryman has sold. If, however, a man has no one to redeem it for him but he himself prospers and acquires sufficient means to redeem it, he is to determine the value for the years since he sold it and refund the balance to the man to whom he sold it; he can then go back to his own property. But if he does not acquire the means to repay him, what he sold will remain in the possession of the buyer until the Year of Jubilee. It will be returned in the Jubilee, and he can then go back to his property. (Lev 25:25-28)

In this latter passage one can observe the important role played by the kinsman-redeemer in protecting the poor. This kinsman-redeemer is a member of

¹Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, 188.

²Pedersen, 59.

³Ibid., 60.

⁴Ibid., 41.

⁵See also Paul Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. William G. Heidt (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1955), 187-90.

the extended family.¹ The idea of kinsman-redeemer emphasizes the accountability and responsibility of each member of the society and, at the same time, the idea of family. The Year of Jubilee is also mentioned as one of the institutions established to safeguard the poor. If these principles were applied today, we could avoid the oppression and abuse of poor people.

The community-family notion from the OT can be applied also in the subject of employer-employee relationships. If the concept of family were implemented in any organization, many conflicts and misunderstandings between the employer and the employee could be lessened. The concept of family in any business establishment would lead to interpersonal relationships among the workers and a family orientation between the employer and the employee. I am not talking about a patronage system, but the positive qualities of the concept of family. The best example of this thought may be found in the interesting description by Leonardo Mercado of the Filipino model of personnel management. He cites the study of James Anderson² about the relationship of the landlords and tenants of Pangasinan, which is an example of "mutual understanding as equal partners".³

A 'good' landowner does not treat his tenants as social inferiors, does not remind the tenants of his debt or gratitude, does not supervise too much [but] demonstrates his trust in his partner, assumes his part of the mutual obligations by using his influence on his tenant's behalf and giving them help during emergencies and contributions for the celebrations of life crisis events. On the other hand, the good tenant should be loyal to his landowner and should assist the owner by giving services to him when the opportunity presents itself. It is a relationship based on mutual dependence which is adaptive as it functions in the larger system. This does not make the traditional agricultural tenancy system "good," but it makes it more difficult to replace without considerable dislocation in the entire social system.⁴

Then Mercado adds, regarding the idea of the hierarchic nature of interpersonalism, which is very close to the idea of family in the Hebrew Bible,

What was said of the landlord-tenant relationship is also true in small-scale industries, such as furniture factories and machine shops. The mutual relationship often leads to the *compadrazco* system wherein the owner/manager becomes the godfather in his employees' weddings and baptisms. The close bond between the

¹See an example of this kind of treatment in Steven Hick, *Land Our Life* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian, 1987), 111-21. I will not discuss about the Year of Jubilee in this paper. There is a need of another paper on this topic to identify some implications for the social issues or the subject of land ownership.

²James Anderson, "Some Aspects of Land Society in a Pangasinan Community," *Philippine Sociological Review* 10 (1962): 51-52.

³Mercado, *Applied Filipino Philosophy*, 46.

⁴Ibid.

manager/owner and the employees increases the morale of the latter since they are treated as persons and not as efficient machines.

The same interpersonal and hierarchic pattern can also be applied to barrio and national phenomena. An association in a Bulacan barrio is described as "closely identified with its president or ruling clique. The success of the organization is viewed as the president or clique's success; its failure, their failure." In a study of the 1961 presidential election, the investigators find in four sampling barrios of Laguna that the people do not think of the presidential candidates in terms of their party platforms but in terms of their images as fathers, and that the government is thought of as a big family. Everyone in the government—even senators or congressmen—"is expected to work as members of a big family in order to attain the objectives of the Philippine people."¹

We notice that the concept of family can be an effective tool to establish a harmonious relationship between employer and employee among Filipinos. So if this family value is applied in any business establishment or other Filipino institution, it will work.² On the other hand, we recognize that extreme concern for one's family can be abused to some extent. That is where nepotism and tribalism come in, wherein the society is sacrificed for the sake of one's family or kinship.³ Today, because of certain factors, many Filipinos as well as other Asians become too individualistic and "seem to be losing their Biblical sense of accountability to each other and think they can, for the most part, operate on their own."⁴ It may be appropriate here to close this section of the paper with the words of Marvin Wilson:

In the Bible, piety is always oriented toward community. God and one's neighbor belong inseparably together. The Church must never become so self-centered and

¹Ibid.

²See Benjamin B. Cruz, "Family, Not Country, Is Where the Heart of the Filipino Lies," in *Who and What Is the Pinoy?* ed. V. P. Gapuz and C. D. Lozada, Jr. (Manila: V. P. Gapuz and C. D. Lozada, Jr., 1990), 33-39, where the family factor can be utilized by the government in promoting a just and social order in the country. This is also true to John Eliot's method of converting the native Americans. "A careful examination of conversion patterns from one generation to the next reveals that Eliot's emphasis on the family as a teaching tool was well justified." James P. Ronda, "The Bible and Early American Indian Missions," in *The Bible and Social Reform*, ed. Ernest R. Sandeen, The Bible in American Culture, Society of Biblical Literature Centennial Publications (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1982), 14.

³According to Bishop Teodoro C. Bacani, this flaw in the Filipino character came from the concept of Filipino tribalism. See Ma. Victoria Gochoco-Perez, "Individualism: Biggest Block to the Pinoy's Progress," in *Who and What Is the Pinoy?* ed. V. P. Gapuz and C. D. Lozada, Jr. (Manila: V. P. Gapuz and C. D. Lozada, Jr., 1990), 18-20. This is also seen in the "tayo-tayo lamang ["only us"] mentality" of the Filipino, which limits concern to the interests of the immediate group. See Tomas D. Andres, *Understanding Filipino Values: A Management Approach* (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day, 1981), 127.

⁴Wilson, "Hebrew Thought," 132.

self-sufficient that it fails to grasp this fact. For the concept of the priesthood of the believer means that each Christian functions as a priest not only unto God but also unto his neighbor.¹

Conclusion

From this short essay, we see how the OT can contribute to our pursuit of doing theology in Asia, particularly in the Philippines. This paper also reveals the need to study afresh the OT to look for some concepts and themes related to social issues and other life-ethical issues. Furthermore, it calls us to understand the OT and the whole Bible in its original Asian setting to see its relevance in this part of the world. Hence, we can continue in our task of doing theology based on biblical revelation.

We also observe in this short study that the holistic worldview of the Hebrew people is similar to the pervasive holistic worldview of the Filipino. This study might be a starting point to look for other correspondences between the Hebrew culture, the Filipino culture, and the Asian culture, as well.

¹Ibid., 135.