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Hwang, Jerry, and Angukali Rotokha, eds. *Exploring the Old Testament in Asia: Evangelical Perspectives*. Foundations in Asian Christian Thought. Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham, 2022. Pp. xxii + 276. Paperback £18.99.

The question of a culturally sensitive biblical hermeneutics is an increasingly important topic in the globalized multicultural world. The Christian majority has moved from Western countries to the Global South. Many have pitched the Bible against culture, thinking that attention to culture per definition implies relativism. On the other hand, professing to read the Bible "as it is," without cultural sensitivity, has frequently led to Western theologians and missionaries naively and unknowingly exporting Western cultural norms and values as if it was Bible teaching pure and simple. This again has resulted in syncretisms, where converts in the Global South and East did not find their cultural issues adequately answered by a Westernized form of Christianity and reverted to traditional religions when they felt answers were imperative.

In this light, the increased focus among some to read the Bible in ways that speak to deeper cultural issues is long overdue and highly welcome. These two volumes, one written as a monograph by Jerry Hwang and the other as co-edited by Jerry Hwang and Angukali Rotokha, make a helpful contribution to rethinking the Bible, and the Old Testament more specifically, in an Asian context. Hwang is a Chinese-American with a PhD from Wheaton College. Since 2010 he has taught at the Singapore Bible College with a combined interest in the Old Testament and Asian Studies. Rotokha holds her PhD in Old Testament Studies from the South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, India. I combine a review of both books here, as they were published in the same year and Hwang has a central role in both. Being a Westerner myself working in an Asian context, I readily admit that I am more of an observer and learner. It is a need that locals work through the issues themselves and develop biblically faithful models speaking to deeper issues in their respective cultures.

I begin with Hwang's monograph. He takes inspiration from Dean Flemming's *Contextualization in the New Testament* (2005), but changes the presupposition "in" to the conjunction "and" to signal that his project is both about how biblical authors engaged culture and how we today need to do cultural contextualization of the Old Testament (pp. 7 and 21). While the

New Testament traditionally has taken a preeminent role in Christian missionary work, Hwang wants to advocate the importance of the Old Testament in addressing people in Asia (pp. 5, 7–9). Hwang asks: "What hath contextualization to do with the OT? *Nearly everything*, since it was the OT's sustained cultural engagement, through and beyond the cognitive categories available in the ancient Near East, which enabled Israel to make a distinctive confession of faith in its time, place, and culture" (p. 196).

He begins his discussion in *Contexutalization and the Old Testament* with how some see contextualization as unavoidably leading to syncretism while others see contextualization as unavoidable in the Christian mission. Christian Westerners and missionaries often came with the idea that they had the truth, and that their task was simply to translate the message in meaningful and relevant ways to new peoples in order to convert them to their true Christianity. Hwang identifies two problems in this conception: "The first was that the 'contextualization debate' assumed that the pole of 'eternal/unchanging word' was already securely in Western hands, leaving only the 'changing world' to study…. Second, the 'contextualization debate' tended to overlook the diverse processes of theologizing the gospel within cultures that are found in the Bible itself" (pp. 6–7). The discoveries of texts from the ANE world, like the *Enuma Elish* (1849), the Gilgamesh Epic (mid-19th century), the Eridu Genesis (1893), the Hammurabi's Laws (1901), the 1929 discoveries at Ras Shamra of Ugaritic texts like the Baal Cycle, combined with the publication of books like Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and Julius Wellhausen's *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (1874), seriously challenged the "cultural purity" concept held by many Westerners as well as the reliability of the Bible itself. The earlier countercultural reading of the Old Testament, pitching the Bible against contemporary culture, was replaced by a "parellelomania" feasting on all the parallels that were discovered between the Bible and the surrounding cultures, often seeing biblical authors as the borrowers. More recently, a more cautious approach to comparative studies has emerged, stressing caution in making grand theories about influence and acknowledging how biblical authors both adopted, adapted, and challenged elements from the nations surrounding them (pp. 12–15).

Hwang formulates the thesis in his book as follows: "The thesis of this book is that the OT's acts of contextualization within its ancient Near Eastern context train modern Christians to live faithfully in their various Far Eastern contexts" (p. 15). But how do we define Asia as a region? "Asia" was originally used by the Greeks to refer to the area east of the Aegean Sea, with Europe to the north and west of it, and Libya to the south. The Romans

called the western part of Anatolia (the modern Türkiye) "Asia" (p. 16). When Hwang speaks of "Asia" in the book he basically means what we today call South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia (p. 17). Hwang stresses the need to do local theology by locals from the inside, instead of trying to impose a pan-Asian perspective upon the region (p. 18). Hwang attempts "an iterative and dialogical method [between Asian and Western lenses]…. The mutual understanding that results from this process of oscillating between cultures, with the Bible remaining the linchpin in the center, will provide a series of case studies in *intercultural theology*" (pp. 20–21).

Hwang then proceeds with a series of case studies on the contextual nature of Bible translation (ch. 2), how to designate God in various cultural settings (ch. 3), religious pluralism and polytheism (ch. 4), the idea of patronage and client (ch. 5), the concepts of honor, shame, and guilt (ch. 6), the understanding of icons in the West and Asia (ch. 7), and creation and pantheism (ch. 8). Finally, he summarizes his conclusions about contextualization and syncretism (ch. 9). Let me summarize a few points from these chapters. In chapter 2, Hwang discussed the KJV and the translation of the Hebrew concept of sin into the Chinese Union Version (CUV). Even if the forms "thee," "thou," "thy," and "thine" were archaic in the days of King James, the king instructed the translators to follow the practice of earlier translations. Further, the desire to be literal meant that Hebrew nominal construct chains were rendered by the English equivalent "of," for example in Ps 23 with the now famous "paths of righteousness" and "valley of the shadow of death." Even if this was awkward English then, they have become sacralized now (pp. 25–26). He writes: "Hebrew and Mandarin Chinese are both *high-context* languages in which much communication lies 'below the surface,' in contrast to languages like English and Greek which tend to be *low-context* in relying on explicit statements" (p. 40. See also p. 46). He claims that this led to distortions in the translation of CUV and that there is a need to rethink how Christians in China speak about sin, especially with the contrast between the Western individualistic concepts of sin versus the more communal concepts in biblical and Chinese thinking.

In chapter 3, dealing with the "Same God Question" (SGQ), Hwang illustrates his approach by both exploring more deeply both the concepts in the biblical text and also in the respective cultures. He discusses how names and appellations of God are used in the OT, pointing out the oddity in translations and Christians staying clear of God's name YHWH and insisting on the term "God" capitalized, even with its pagan roots. He then moves to the question of whether the names of the divine in Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and

Malay/Indonesian can be said to refer to the same God. He writes: "To answer the SGQ meaningfully, it is imperative to compare divine names and attributes with respect to how each predication about deity functions within its own theological system" (p. 60). Thus, he ends by answering the question with an "it depends" (p. 65). In chapter 4, he discusses patron-cultures and summarizes: "The case of Chinese *guanxi* and Filipino *utang na loob* will illustrate how these cultural norms are useful for contextual theology only if we follow the OT's lead in offering a *critical* contextualization of patronage and kinship" (p. 108). In chapter 6, he challenges the simplistic conceptions of honor, shame, and guilt, as well as stereotypes of individualism and collectivism often reflected by both biblical scholars and missiologists. And in chapter 8, he concludes that "the OT offers a surprising perspective that is neither Western dualism nor Eastern monism with respect to space and time" (p. 165), contrary to popular beliefs among Christian apologetes and missionaries.

While Western Christians often have thought that we bring the Bible to Asia, we need to begin with an acknowledgement that the Bible originally came from Asia. As Jesus famously said, "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22, NASB). In the Seminary, students are typically first taught to read the Bible with Western cultural lenses and conceptual frameworks, and then afterwards shown how to translate and contextualize the theology they have learned to the Majority World. Often neither teacher or students are aware of the Western framework, independent of what country they come from. It is simply taken as a given how we should talk about the Bible and Christianity. The question is whether this really is the best way to train our students and pastors? Cultural studies often reveal a closer affinity between cultures in Africa, Asia, and the Bible, than between Western cultures and the Bible. Students coming from African and Asian cultures should be taught to use their cultures as resources to better understand the Bible, and share their insights with believers coming from cultures struggling to understand certain aspects of the Bible. At the same time, it is important that we do not trap the Bible in another cultural hegemony, simply replacing the Western culture with Asian or other cultures as the normative lens by which to read it. We all need to read the Bible acknowledging that there is no innocent reading of it. We are all influenced by the cultural background and life history we come to it with. Trying to explicate cultural bias as well as exploring how biblical authors adopted, adapted, and challenged their contemporary culture, can help us to a more mature relationship between the Bible and culture. This is not something that can be accomplished by one or a few persons only.

While many missiologists are not adequately grounded in the biblical text, and many biblical scholars do not sufficiently engage cultural questions, these volumes invite to a more interdisciplinary approach. With Jesus's imperative to go into all the world, we need interdisciplinary studies that bridge a close reading of the Bible with an understanding of the cultural issues involved both for the biblical authors and contemporary missiologists. Hwang sees his book as only taking "modest steps" in the direction of Asian Christians producing "a deeply biblical, fully evangelical, and authentically Asian theology which overcomes the popular conception of Christianity as a Western religion of power and upward mobility" (p. 198). I want to commend Hwang for acknowledging that these are only initial steps, as this is also where I find the volumes wanting as I read them. Generally, I find that they take a comparative approach, identifying ideological similarities and differences between the Bible and a given culture, to then privilege the biblical view. I do not see a clear approach to how to read the Bible and work with contemporary cultures, except readings of sources relevant for both areas. I do believe the comparative approach should be at the basis, but it needs to be done thoroughly. I will illustrate this with some examples from the edited volume *Exploring the Old Testament in Asia: Evangelical Perspectives*. Shirley S. Ho speaks of her task as to "offer a corrective" (p. 123) to the studied cultures based on the Bible. While this may serve as a confirmation to the Christian and missionary that we have a work to do, I see little in these volumes that can help non-Christians in the respective cultures see that the biblical model actually offers something better than what they already have. It is thus an apologetic tone throughout both volumes that primarily speaks to a Christian audience. Why the Bible should be privileged may be clear to the so-called preached to "choir," but I do not see that these volumes provide an actual missiological model on the grounds. They do share valuable insights from a comparative approach, but they suffer from an incomplete missiological model in how to reach out to persons in the various Asian cultures.

Further, I find many of the biblical and cultural discussions cursory and scratching the surface, without giving either the Bible or the respective culture a "thick description," to use Clifford Geertz' phrase. In the biblical analysis of *Exploring the Old Testament in Asia* the approach is rather dogmatic, speaking of issues like what words to translate the Bible with (ch. 1), how to relate to the different concepts of the divine (ch. 2), how to understand the relationships between the genders (ch. 3), the reliability of the Bible and other cultural narratives as history (ch. 9), and between kinship groups (ch.

11). There are also chapters venturing into ethical discussions, like the understanding of Israel as both called to bless the nations and to destroy some nations (ch. 4), power and authority in leadership (ch. 5), the relevance of biblical law (ch. 6), embodied liturgies (ch. 7), wisdom as a source for the ethical life (ch. 8), the use of Israel as model for contemporary liberation struggles (ch. 10), and questions of how to relate to poverty, wealth, and prosperity (chs. 11–12). As said, when discussing biblical perspectives on dogma and ethics a contrastive approach is often taken that privileges the biblical stance. As an Adventist reader, I find the dogmatically dismissive discussion about the weekly Sabbath shallow (p. 17). Having visited a Buddhist temple in Bangkok, where they have turned the entire neighbourhood into a garden, I wonder if a better approach might not be to create gardens like these in the middle of urban centers where visitors can experience Sabbath rest and reconnect to creation? The dogmatic and ethical approach seems helpful only to a certain extent. Christianity in Asia needs to be communicated more holistically, where God, human relationships, and nature are integrated in a total life. It is rather simple to identify similarities and contrasts between the Bible and contemporary cultures. But reading the volumes I wonder if we do not need to move beyond an approach like this. It may be a first step, but the walk cannot end there. It seems that comparing and contrasting the Bible with the host culture, to correct the latter in light of the former, has been the basic approach of missionaries from the early days. This is not new. What these volumes offer are "moderate steps" in rethinking Asian cultures in light of the Bible, or as is stated in the introduction to *Exploring the Old Testament in Asia*, "steps towards providing Asian biblical reflections as the backbone of our theology and ministry" (p. 2). In an Asian context there is not too much of this type of literature. And in this regard the two volumes are a welcome contribution. But there is still a need for deeper discussion of both the Bible and contemporary cultures in Asia.

I wonder if the issue is that the two volumes do not seem to move beyond a comparative-apologetic approach. To me it seems that it is not enough to identify analogies between biblical themes and ideas in a respective culture. We need a more systematic approach that goes deeper. First of all, much of our reading of the biblical texts suffers from dogmatic readings, to the point we no longer see anything beyond texts supporting our denominational stance. We need approaches that intentionally tear us out of our dogmatic complacency toward the text, to help us read the Bible afresh. How can we read the Bible in ways that clarify more how the biblical authors themselves engaged in the cultures of their world? Fortunetely, in the last century or so we now have available a lot of resources for this type of

study. There is some interaction with this literature, but more depth is needed. Closer attention to the early reception history of biblical text, in the Second Temple period including the NT—something I did not register in either volume—can also help us become more aware of how ancient readers would read biblical texts. We often find ourselves surprised by how these ancient readers read the texts different from ourselves. Further, we need "thick descriptions" of contemporary cultures. Simple analogies between the Bible and a given culture are not sufficient to adequately address missiological issues. Again, we have anthrological and sociological studies already available for many cultures. The challenge for an interdisciplinary biblical-missiological approach appears to be to put these two together in a solid manner. A thick biblical-missiological approach should incorporate (1) close reading of the text that is (2) culturally sensitive to how biblical authors adopted, adapted, and challenged their contemporary cultures (3) as well as be sensitive to how ancient authors would have read these texts to break open our accustomed readings of the texts, and it should use (4) the comparative approach to identify similarities and differences between the Bible and a modern culture (5) but also move to missiological models that create meaningful dialogue and interaction with persons living today in the modern host cultures. Some of the chapters in these volumes are good with points 1, 2, and 4, but I find them to be generally lacking in points 3 and 5.

This said, let me also point out some highlights that I found in *Exploring the Old Testament in Asia*. The editors open with a call for a theological education that has grown Asian roots, "asking questions relevant to Asians, and offering biblical perspectives on issues of concern to Asian communities" (p. 1). And there is a good smorgasbord of cultures and topics represented in the book: The Mongolian Standard Version Bible translation (ch. 1 by Bayarjargal Garamtseren), the relationship between God and humans in Korea and China (ch. 2 by Koowon Kim), the relationship between man and woman in Hinduism (ch. 3 by Havilah Dharamraj), Israel and the *Missio Dei* in light of colonialism in Asia (ch. 4 by Jerry Hwang), two chapters in a Filipino context on leadership, power, and authority (ch. 5 by Annelle Sabanal) and biblical law in light of tribal cultures in northern Luzon (ch. 6 by Mona P. Bias), two chapters in a Confucian context regarding embodied worship in a Taiwanese context (ch. 7 by Shirley S. Ho) and education and wisdom (ch. 8 by Elaine Wei-Fun Goh), biblical historiography in light of the Indian text *Mahbharata* and nationalism in Nagaland in India/Myanmar (both chs. 9 and 10 by Angukali Rotokha), reflections around gift-giving, reciprocity, and bribery in Asian collectivist-dominant cultures (ch. 11 by Peter H. W. Lau), and finally, a reflection on the so-called prosperity gospel in Vietnam

and beyond (ch. 12 by Huu-Thien Tran N. and Daniel C. Owens). The breadth of relevant topics in an Asian context takes the reader on a stimulating journey.

Havilah Dharmraj's essay arguing for a kinship reading of Gen 2 was fresh and insightful. She writes: "It was a bone and flesh bond, the convoluted subtleties of which we Asians so well understand, one that renders irrelevant questions of equality and mutuality and complementarity" (p. 55). Her argument is that blood relations are often deeper and more binding that marriage bonds in many cultures. This is why the man is surprisingly instructed to leave his mother and father—instead of the custom of the wife leaving her matriarchal home—because the two have become one flesh and bone and this relationship should now take priority over other blood relations. It is a novel reading I have not seen before, and one that is worth pondering further.

I also appreciated Jerry Hwang's chapter 4, which tackles the tricky question of how God could both ordain Abraham's family as a blessing to the nations and, at the same time, command them to annihilate some of them. This theme resonated with me because it is a typical challenge many Christians in the Western hemisphere are also struggling with. He recasts the question in the words of David Lamb: "How does one reconcile the loving God of the OT with the harsh God of the New Testament? … I then observe that God in the OT is consistently described as slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, but Jesus speaks about hell more than anyone else in Scripture" (p. 68). It is a nice twist on a familiar theme. Hwang tackles the question by using Abraham Heschel's chapter "The Meaning and Mystery of Wrath" in his book *The Prophets*, where he states among other thing: "The secret of anger is God's care." Heschel famously taught us to read the prophetic literature in light of God's *pathos*, as "an alternative to Western understandings of God that draw on Greek Stoicism's idea of *apatheia*—a freedom from passions which views aloofness and rationality as the height of virtue" (p. 69). Hwang writes: "Divine anger, in other words, is essential to pathos. To encounter apathy when jealousy is demanded would show that God has no real commitment to his people. Indifference toward oppression when righteous indignation is necessary would likewise prove that God is unjust" (p. 71). He quotes Heschel again, saying that "anger and mercy are not opposites but correlatives."

The discussion on similarities and differences between historiography and historicity in the Bible and the Indian text *Mahabharata*, by Angukali Rotokha, was also instructive. She argues that the modernist conception of history, couched in the logical positivism of Leopold von Ranke as history

"as it actually happened," ultimately led to postmodernism and deconstructionism when pushed to its limits (p. 172). She shows how neither the *Histories* of Herodotus, often called "the father of history" (pp. 168, 171), nor the Indian *Mahabharata* (pp. 174–78), complies with the standards of modern historiography. We need to understand these accounts not as objective accounts of what "actually happened," but historiographic records that "have theological, ideological, and pedagogical intentions which do not have historical precision as their highest aim or as a goal in itself" (p. 174, see also p. 166).

Too often, missiologists have been absorbed in social sciences without adequately studying the Bible and biblical scholars too absorbed in basic exegesis without engaging the cultural issues both within the Bible and in its application today. Hwang calls for the multiplication of "a theologian who is both a missiologist *and* biblical scholar—if such an animal exists" (p. 188, quoting David Bosch). These two volumes can be a good start for others to engage in this type of study. We should encourage far more study of what it means to faithfully live the Bible in our respective cultures. And just as God speaks to and reaches into individuals differently, we should also allow Him the same freedom when dealing with cultures. This is not relativism. It is about being profoundly faithful to God and the Bible. The Bible should still be the foundation with the same God at the center of our worship. With a message to "very nation, tribe, language, and people" (Rev 14:6) we should not content ourselves with a reductionistic and monolithic concept of how God speaks to this variegated group. It is representative of this same group that will gather around the throne (7:9, see 5:9). They are still identified by their ethnic and language differences, and there is no indication that God intends to establish a monoculture. If God allows the marks of our nations, tribes, languages, and people groups in His kingdom, should we not do the same while still here on earth?

If you are interested in this topic, you should also be aware of the 2024 publication of *Exploring the New Testament in Asia: Evangelical Perspectives*, edited by Samson L. Uytanlet and Bennet Lawrence. It is also in Langham's Foundations in Asian Christian Thought series.

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