

**Review of Johnson Thomaskutty, ed. *An Asian Introduction to the New Testament*
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Jin Young Choi, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School

Reviewing an introductory book of about 600 pages written by 23 authors is challenging, especially when it is an “Asian” introduction to the New Testament. This volume demonstrates Asia’s remarkable diversity in ethnicity, culture, language, religion, and history, through its authors, readers, and contexts, as well as themes and interpretive approaches.

The editor, Johnson Thomaskutty, who studied in the Netherlands for his Ph.D., is a professor of New Testament at United Theological College, India, and has authored numerous books with publishers in India and England. As Thomaskutty indicates, this collection is the “first book of its kind with a focus on the NT writings in relation to the wider Asian realities” (1). He does an extraordinary job as an editor in bringing such manifold interpretations of the New Testament into the introduction genre. The contributors include nine Indians; eight from Southeast Asian backgrounds (Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Myanmar, Singapore); five of East Asian descent (Chinese, Korean); and one European. However, this simplified ethnic profile does not take into account multi-ethnic, tribal, or diasporic identities. About fourteen authors studied not only in Europe and America but also other Asian countries. More than five contributors left their countries of origin to teach elsewhere. Only four contributors are women, reflecting the reality of sexism in Asian biblical scholarship and academic institutions, instead of the editor’s lack of awareness.

All the authors explore how Asians read the New Testament, relating its texts and contexts to contemporary Asian realities. After the preliminaries and a brief introduction, the first two chapters introduce Asian contexts and hermeneutics. In chapter one, Kar Yong Lim posits that cultural paradigms affect understanding of the Bible, and that the honor-shame perspective is most useful for interpreting the New Testament in Asian contexts. Asia is religiously plural, and its sociocultural realities are marked by collectivism, honor-shame, patronage, ritual purity, suffering, and reconciliation—themes taken up by each contributor. In chapter two, Yung Suk Kim formulates three Asian hermeneutical frameworks with case studies. First, intertextual hermeneutics reads the New Testament with Asian classic texts. Second, intercultural reading imports Asian readers’ cultural values or perspectives to the text. Last, intercontextual reading brings Asian contexts to bear on the text.

The book’s structure (from chapter three) follows the canonical order. Each chapter consists of two parts: historical and literary features of each book and Asian contexts and themes. The preliminary information includes authorship, audience, date, place, purpose, and literary structure and outline. For this first part, most chapters depend heavily on Western historical scholarship (predominantly Anglo-American, German, and Evangelical males).

How can Asian readers ask historical questions differently from Western interpreters? A few authors straightforwardly bring Asian history and knowledge to the discussion of the historical backgrounds of New Testament writings. Xiaoli

Yang compares Titus's genre and date with Confucian writings. Similarly, Esa Autero relates Acts's genre and sources to Indian and Qur'anic epics. He points out that for many Asian Christians, experiencing the text's message is more important than knowing the historical or textual details. Gilbert Soo Hoo scarcely cites Western scholarship in his brief introduction to Hebrews and focuses instead on points of contact with Asian realities. Ekaputra Tupamahu is unique in his critical assessment of Western scholarship's obsession with the authorial identity and intention. He uses the Asian/Indonesian practice of storytelling and lived experience of migration in interpreting Luke.

The second part of each chapter explores the affinities of biblical cultures, contexts, or themes to Asian realities. Most prevalent are intertextual or cross-textual readings of the New Testament with Asian religious and philosophical texts. For example, Arren Bennet Lawrence examines the Hindu concept of *moksha* to illuminate the meaning of salvation in Romans, and Indian Christian theology, drawn from the Hindu Brahmanical tradition, informs interpretations of John (Thomaskutty) and Acts. However, Roji Thomas George, in his Galatians chapter, reminds us that the dominant textual tradition was made with a missionary purpose to justify Christianity as equal to or nobler than Hinduism. Considering gender oppression in Letters to Timothy and in South Asia, Asish Thomas Koshy suggests the goddess tradition as an alternative to the male-priest-dominated Brahmanical tradition. Layang Seng Ja also uses a Kachin myth to understand the concept of atonement in Letters of Peter, in which the crucified Jesus becomes a role model for suffering Asian Christians. For J. Stanly Jones, intertextual reading is not just an Asian hermeneutical strategy, but is also employed by the author of Jude.

Many chapters (on Romans, Letters to the Corinthians, Titus, Hebrews, James, Jude, and Thawng Ceu Hnin's chapter on Philemon) acknowledge honor-shame culture as an Asian reality that also characterizes the New Testament world. As Kim observes that this culture is "found everywhere throughout history and is not unique to Asia" (37), some readers may ask about the implications of portraying the Asian culture as similar to the honor-shame cultures of ancient societies. While social-scientific criticism often "objectively" depicts Asian society and culture as remaining stagnant, many Asian countries have also been modernized and westernized through (neo)colonialism and globalization.

As liberation theologies such as Minjung and Dalit hermeneutics were produced in Asian sociopolitical contexts (cf. Letters of John by Sookgoo Shin), suffering is a primary factor in Asian intercontextual readings. Interpretations of Mark (Edwin Jebaraj and Thomaskutty), Letters to the Corinthians (Rolex M. Cailing), Colossians (Finny Philip), Letters to the Thessalonians (Andrew B. Spurgeon), James (Daniel K. Eng), and Revelation (Biju Chacko) emphasize the suffering of Christian minorities caused by religious persecutions in Asian countries by Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist majorities. In addition to religious persecution, Naw Eh Tar Gay interprets suffering in Philippians amidst political struggles in postcolonial and patriarchal Myanmar. Although almost all Asian countries were formally colonized by Western powers or imperial Japan and continue to endure new forms of colonialism, only a few other authors, including Tupamahu, Jae Hyng Cho (Matthew), and Jayachitra Lalitha (Ephesians), specifically discuss the postcolonial contexts of Asia.

Each hermeneutical approach has strengths and weaknesses. Intertextual hermeneutics, which has flourished in Buddhist, Confucian, and Hindu cultures,

needs to be mindful of their patriarchal and elitist tendencies. In this regard, Autero's suggestion for further research of ordinary Bible readers' perspectives is noteworthy. It is vital for Asian readers to interpret "without sacrificing the content of the book" (184) or to "engage culture intelligently without compromising the gospel message" (401). However, intercultural interpretation could consider further implications of cultural hybridization in pluralistic Asian contexts beyond juxtaposing cultures of antiquity and Asia. Additionally, intercontextual hermeneutics should benefit from deliberate analyses of sociopolitical and economic contexts of Asian countries tainted by colonialism, wars, neoliberal capitalism, as well as oppressions against gender, sexual, religious, and economic minorities.

Due to the histories of colonization, influences of Western missionary and biblical scholarship, and continuing neocolonial forces in knowledge production systems, I believe the politics of citation in this *Asian Introduction* are complicated. Only seven or eight contributors put more than half of readings published by Asian scholars or in Asia in their Further Reading lists, with the rest all giving primacy to non-Asian sources. Still, this reality can point readers to what this *Introduction* does or performs. While historical data, exegesis/exposition, and references seem to give credit to dominant Western scholarship, all the authors immediately turn to engage their own cultural texts and contexts and thereby challenge the objectivity of inquiry and purity of biblical interpretation.

This cursory book review does not do justice to the richness of Asian interpretation that each author provides using multifaceted methodologies in highly complex Asian contexts. This collective work of Asian biblical scholars expands New Testament studies with wide-ranging cultural and biblical knowledge and meaning surplus produced by translating and traversing between two worlds—Asia and the New Testament. Asian and non-Asian readers will taste the diversity and richness of Asian cultures, religions, and social contexts, as well as an indication of the resourcefulness and creativity possible, but only partly presented by the contributors.



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