

Hanna In and Wongi Park, trans and ed. *Stories of Minjung Theology: The Theological Journey of Ahn Byung-Mu in His Own Words*, International Voices in Biblical Studies. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2019. 279 Pages. \$ 45.37. ISBN 9780884144090.

“*Minjung* theology is” what a renowned German theologian Jürgen Moltmann (1926-), a cordial friend of some *Minjung* theologians, including Ahn Byung-Mu (1922-1996) called “the first liberation theology to come from Asia, with critical questions put to the First World.” By now, *Minjung* theology has gained its international stature, representing a paradigm of Asian political theology of liberation. Some Western universities, especially in Germany are offering some seminars on *minjung* theology. Some Ph.D dissertations have been written on *minjung* theology. The authors of these dissertations include Korean and non-Korean theologians from the West and Asia (xix). Why is *minjung* theology so significant? Who does play a key role in developing *minjung* theology? Ahn is the answer for both questions. Ahn was not only one of the fathers of *Minjung* theology, but he was also one of the first proper professional New Testament scholars in Asia. After completing his doctorate in 1965 at Heidelberg University in Germany under the supervision of Günter Bornkamm, a former student of the famed German New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann, Ahn returned to South Korea to lead the *minjung* theology movement together with Suh Nam-dong and other pioneer *minjung* theologians since 1975 (ix). This was the golden age of contextual liberation theologies in the Third World in general and Asia in particular. Ahn developed a liberative reading of the New Testament, especially the Gospel of Mark in the suffering context of *minjung* (suffering masses). Ahn was a professor of Hanshin University, scholar, a pastor, and an activist. Due to his prophetic resistance against the dictatorship of President Park Chung-hee, Ahn was imprisoned twice and expelled from his university position.

This volume is a fine autobiography that combines the story of Ahn and the birth of the *minjung* movement that Ahn helped to develop hermeneutically. This is the first English translation of Ahn’s autobiography, considered one of the best works in *minjung* theology and contextual biblical interpretation. This volume is based on Ahn’s conversations with his students when his health became poor (ix). It begins with a short profile of Ahn written by Rev. Jin-ho Kim and an introduction penned by today’s best known New Testament trained Asian postcolonial scholar R.S. Sugirtharajah of Sri Lanka followed by a preface by Ahn himself written on May 5, 1987 before his death. The book has three parts.

Part one begins by describing Ahn’s early life and his awakening discovery of *minjung* theology as a movement of the *minjung* (people praxis) and as a theological reflection on that movement (reflection). Using sociopolitical suffering of the *minjung* as a theme, Jesus’s solidarity with the *ochlos* in the Gospel of Mark (Mk. 2:15-17) as a source, Ahn made an important interpretation of *minjung* contextual political theology of liberation (32). His proposal for the tasks of Korean Christians is to rethink theology that is liberated from the Western doctrinal captivity and is relevant for the suffering masses. Having said this, Ahn expressed a story of how he debated with a Western theologian Moltmann over the relationship between Jesus and *minjung*. While Ahn believed that Jesus is *minjung* and *minjung* is Jesus based on their common identity of suffering, Moltmann accepted that Jesus is *minjung*, but rejects the fact that *minjung* is Jesus based on regarding *minjung* as the object of salvation by Jesus (24).

Part two discusses some major contents and contextual forms of *minjung* theology. While some major contents tend to focus on describing some major themes of *minjung* theology, some contextual forms tend to focus on prescribing how *minjung* theology should be developed as a

contextually relevant theology. Ahn is faithful to both the descriptive and prescriptive hermeneutics of *minjung* theology. The major themes and contextual forms include reading the Bible as the public book of *minjung*, Jesus as *minjung*, God as the liberating God of *minjung*, sin as structural system that causes *han* or suffering of *minjung*, the church as the community of *minjung*, *minjung* liberation movement as the event of the Holy Spirit, and the prophetic role of the church in witnessing the kingdom of God as the kingdom of *minjung* (35-197).

In order to develop those major themes as the foundations for the contextual forms of *minjung* theology, Ahn criticized both some conservative Korean Christians and some Western theologians whose interpretations are irrelevant for the suffering contexts of *minjung*. Arguing against some conservative Korean Christians who read the Bible for their private affairs of spirituality and Bultmann who treated “the OT merely as a secondary material” (35-69), Ahn proposed to read the whole Bible as the public book for the sociopolitical issues of *minjung*. He drew upon the stories of God’s involvement in the lives of the Israel and of Jesus’s solidarity with the *ochlos* (crowd) in the Gospels, especially in the Gospel of Mark, as the sources for developing *minjung* theology. He paid particular attention to Christology and its cosmic reign of love and justice for the suffering masses as a unified theme of the Bible. He criticized Western Christology for its focus on the person of Christ without focusing on the life of Christ and proposed to reemphasize the actual life and work of Jesus for the liberation of *minjung*.

Part three further develops what has been said in parts one and two. What is fascinating about this part is a particular way Ahn explored the Markan concept of the relationship between Jesus and *ochlos* and its implication for Jesus’s solidarity with *minjung*. This is arguably a distinctive area where Ahn achieved his creative hermeneutics. In order to accomplish his goal, Ahn came up with two questions: who are *minjung*? How is Jesus’s identity related to *minjung*? Ahn defined *minjung* into two ways: one is that *minjung* are the people who are politically oppressed and economically exploited. The other is that *minjung* are the object of everyday exploitation (221). He then related the identity of *minjung* to the Markan’s use of *ochlos* (outcasts). Central to Ahn’s hermeneutics is the relationship between the collective identities of *ochlos* and of *minjung* and Jesus’s collective solidarity with them. Ahn retrieved Jesus from the kerygmatic language and prioritized the messianic event language of Jesus’s actual suffering and resurrection. At a time when New Testament scholars read the Gospels from the perspective of the imminent arrival of or postponement of the kingdom, Ahn argued that the gospels were about the people or *minjung*. For Ahn, one should read the NT from the eyes of the common people.

I have two observations. First, how is Ahn’s proposal for reading the NT from the perspectives of the ordinary people or *minjung* representative for the voices of the grassroots people? It is not clear how he integrated the voices of grassroots *minjung* into his academic reflections on *minjung* theology. Second, how is Ahn’s hermeneutics of Jesus’s relationship with *minjung* normative for the suffering Asian context today? While his exegetical work on *ochlos* and Jesus’s solidarity with them is creative and relevant for *minjung* in the homogeneous Korean context, the implication of *minjung* theology as a model for Asian political theology is questionable in the multi-ethnic context. For instance, in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, the minority ethnic Christians are marginalized by the *ochlos* of the majority elite Buddhist and grassroots Buddhist nationalists. Minority ethnic Christians are *margins* of the political margins who represent religious majority. Focusing on the political oppression of the homogeneous *minjung*, Ahn failed to integrate the concerns of the ethnic margins. In other words, in those two Asian nations, some politically oppressed people are another oppressor of the minority ethnic Christians. In Asia, we need to recognize the plurality of oppression and marginalization.

Despite these two aspects of limitation, this volume is a creative contribution to the body of *minjung* theology. For those who think *minjung* theology is dying today in the context of Korea's socio-economic growth, this book serves as a living source. It helps the readers with a fresh understanding of the relationship between the historical Jesus's relationship with the common people in the first century and Jesus's continued solidarity with the suffering masses in the twenty-first century global contexts. One of Ahn's helpful proposals was not just to particularize *minjung* as Koreans, but to universalize *minjung* as politically oppressed and economically exploited people. Since this volume was rooted in Ahn's personal experiences of sociopolitical oppression and imprisonment and in his verbal expressions, it is an original source for understanding *minjung* theology. No readers will agree with Ahn on every point he argued, but such disagreements should be dialogued, discussed, and debated through the appreciative and critical engagement with this original work of—the father and founder of *minjung* theology.

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