

Johnson Thomaskutty, ed. *An Asian Introduction to the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022. 584 pages. \$39.99. ISBN: 9781506462691

I was very glad that Fortress decided to send me a review copy of this book because when I heard about it, I thought, “If there is one book Asian American Theological Forum (AATF) has to review for its Bible & Theory section in 2022, this is *it*.” When it arrived in my mailbox, however, I was more doubtful than hopeful. “What makes it worthwhile to write or read or review such a book? Do we really need an ‘Asian’ introduction to the New Testament? Does that mean we need ‘African,’ ‘Latin American,’ and ‘Oceanian’ introductions as well?” I grappled with these questions, but I had no answer to them. The most pressing issue was, “Can Asian readings do justice to the texts of the New Testament? Doesn’t this actually narrow our vision and thus limit our understanding and interpretation?”

My uncertainty, if not anxiety, turned into a sigh of relief as I began to read this book. A short answer to the questions above is, “The Bible cannot be read in a vacuum” (p. xvii) and “There is no meaning without the reader” (p. 31). Yet, if you would like to have an in-depth and more thorough answer, read this book. Like other introductions to the New Testament, this book provides basic information about each book of the New Testament, such as its authorship, audience, date and location, and structure and outline. Then, it switches gears and presents an Asian reading—which makes this introduction truly *the first book of its kind*.

There are three benefits and/or contributions this book makes in the field of New Testament studies. First, the author explores how Asian culture can shed light on the New Testament texts and broaden readers’ understanding of the texts. For example, in Matthew’s Gospel, “Jesus’ command to honor our parents” is not foreign to “many Asians in the Confucian culture” where filial piety for one’s parents is the basis of all ethics (p. 70). From an Indonesian point of view, Luke’s Jesus is “an *orang sakti* (a powerful person)” who is filled with power (Luke 4:14) and able to transfer his power to his disciples as well (e.g., Luke 9:1; p. 117). Just as “Rama and Krishna are considered *avatars* of Vishnu (see Gita 4.7.8.),” in John’s Gospel, Jesus is both God (John 1:1) and the incarnated word of God (John 1:14) at the same time (p. 142).

Second, this book makes New Testament texts relevant to readers. For example, Paul’s Letter to the Philippians is not merely an ancient text written on a piece of papyrus and sent out to Philippian Christians two thousand years ago. Rather, it is God’s living word speaking to the people of Myanmar who are now downtrodden by the military government but still remain joyful and hopeful (pp. 302, 308). In some parts of Asia, discipleship is still a serious decision that comes at a great cost, just as Jesus said in Matthew 10:34–39: “They encounter suffering, persecution, and ostracization from the community” (p. 11). For them, following Jesus is not a simple cultural phenomenon but a life-giving commitment and practice of devotion.

Third, this book opens up new avenues of biblical interpretation. After reading this book, readers may ask themselves, “What cultural background can I bring to enlarge and enlighten my reading of the biblical texts?” This endeavor, if not enterprise, is not limited to Asian readers but is open to all readers because, as Ekaputra Tupamahu puts it, “Every interpretation of biblical text has to be rooted in a particular social location” (p. 124).

In spite of the invaluable assets mentioned above, sometimes the book’s interpretation of specific texts seems far-fetched. For example, the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in Matthew can indeed be seen as Jesus’ imperative of “economic just for all” (p. 41). Yet, such an interpretation misses the important theme in its immediate literary context of entering into “the Kingdom (of heaven)” (e.g., Matthew 19:12, 13, 24; 20:21). The “others standing around” who

were brought into the vineyard at 5 o'clock are social outcasts—tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes (e.g., Matthew 9:10, 11, 13; 11:19; 21:31, 32). Furthermore, Matthew's acceptance of Jewish law and Jewish culture cannot be the text that Western missionaries should have followed that would have kept them from destroying "Korean traditional shrines and the totem pole (*Janseng*)" (p. 63). My point is not that destroying these was good—by no means. The totem poles are trees, aren't they? But, comparing Jesus and Jewish religion to Western missionaries and Korean religion is simply an improper comparison that misses the mark. Jesus was a Jewish rabbi whose belief was deeply rooted in Jewish law and monotheism. He was not introducing a new religion to his audience but was reviving the soul of the Jewish religion and tradition.

The stakes, however, are too high to decide not to read this important book because of the peripheral and somewhat minor issues just mentioned above. This book definitely answered my deep-seated skepticism reflected in the question, "Can Asian readings do justice to the texts of the New Testament?" Yes, they *can*. When we read in this way, hidden voices from Asia and anywhere else can emerge. New insights and interpretations inspire new ways of reading. Asian readings, therefore, can only broaden our understanding and interpretation of the New Testament texts rather than narrow them. I appreciate how this book ends, in the last sentence of its commentary on the Book of Revelation. Biju Chacko describes the scene where every tribe, tongue, and nation is singing praises to the Lamb who was slain, writing "This community looks like an Asian community with its multicultural varieties" (p. 572).

I recommend this excellent book not only to Asian readers but also to non-Asian readers—scholars, seminarians, students of religion, and general readers. This may be like dynamite—it may shock you or even blow your mind and at the same time will dismantle your conventional reading of the Bible. Once you read this book, you will never read the Bible the same again.

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