

BOOK REVIEWS

Contextualization and the Old Testament: Between Asian and Western Perspectives, by Jerry Hwang. Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2022. 264 pp. \$24.00.

At a recent academic conference, a seasoned Old Testament scholar opined that most of the future advances in Old Testament scholarship will be driven by majority world scholars whose culturally attuned sensitivity to the text will allow them to see features missed by Western scholars. Jerry Hwang's collection of essays appears to give hands and feet to this observation, providing a series of thought-provoking and insightful essays arising from a careful study of the Old Testament. Hwang is an Old Testament professor at Singapore Bible College, where he has taught since 2010. He completed his doctoral work in the U.S. at Wheaton College, so he is uniquely qualified to speak to Western and Eastern perspectives. This book contains mostly original material, along with a few essays that Hwang has reworked from other publications for the present volume.

The book comprises nine chapters, two of which serve as the introduction and conclusion. These frame seven chapters that explore divergent themes such as Bible translation, terminology questions, covenant and kinship, honor/shame concepts, aniconism, and creation/pantheism. The introduction surveys questions relating to how Western missionaries and scholars have approached the biblical text vis-à-vis how Eastern Christians have done so. The tension is illustrated in a half-joke Hwang relates whereby missionaries have drily observed that when Westerners apply the text it is contextualization but when native Christians do it is syncretism. This Western-centric mindset has created an unwelcome tethering of Christianity and imperialism that has led in many quarters to a presentation of the gospel laden with Western cultural assumptions. Hwang seeks to untangle some of these ligatures by approaching the text afresh through an Eastern lens that is at once closer to the culture of the ancient world and at the same time capable of elaborating on themes latent in the text but often overlooked by Western scholarship and church practice. His thesis is that the Old Testament itself constitutes an act of contextualization in the ancient world, providing a precedent and paradigm for training modern Christians to faithfully understand and live out the Scriptures in their own Far Eastern contexts (15).

Following the introductory chapter, chapter 2 looks at issues related to Bible translation and linguistics. He notes that Bible translation is the first act of contextual theology. Due to the heritage of missionary translations, many cultures in the majority world possess hastily produced

translations, often of poor quality, that have attained sacrosanct status as *the Bible* in much the same way American churches might elevate the KJV as the (only) authorized version. This dispute brings to the surface deeper theological issues in the Asian context. For example, Hwang addresses how the Mandarin Chinese Union Version's rendering of metaphors and idioms for sin has skewed the cultural understanding. The Mandarin CUV uses a word for "sin" or "sinner" that means "criminal" or "convict," thus reducing notions of sin to an exclusively judicial purview. This ignores other metaphors for sin that arise from the OT and actually work better in the Chinese context, such as sin as "burden," "accounting," "stain," "pathway," or "breach of trust."

The third chapter focuses on contextualization as it relates to the term for God. Central to this issue is a hotly contested debate in Muslim-majority cultures whether *Allah* is an appropriate epithet for the Christian God. To this question Hwang answers a qualified "yes." He argues this by pointing to the ways in which Yahweh adapted generic terms for deity in the ancient Near East and reappropriated them through polemical means to undermine the identity and power of false gods. Hwang concludes: "The uniqueness of Yahweh comes more in taking over the terms and functions of ancient Near Eastern deities than in denying their existence (although the OT does opt for the latter at times). Parallel to this, the fact that Allah is an Arabic derivative of Semitic *'ēl* and its related terms suggests that Yahweh is big enough to encompass Allah and his epithets without compromising monotheism" (69–70).

Chapter 4 looks at the themes of official religion and popular religion through Jeremiah's critique of the pseudo-religiosity of his contemporaries. Here he mixes in themes about the prosperity gospel and cosmic justice in light of suffering. The fifth chapter surveys the motifs of covenant, law, and kinship, examining in particular rules and protocols dealing with interpersonal hierarchies and obligations from a Filipino perspective. The chapter is helpful in offering a window into how authority structures color interpersonal relationships in a way that is often unperceived by the democratizing, individualistic focus of the West, especially America.

Chapter 6 was particularly insightful for this reviewer. Many Westerners wrongly make assumptions about honor/shame cultures that stem from post-World War 2 sociology studies that have since been demonstrated to be rather simplistic and one-sided. For example, Western scholars might say that ancient Israel was an honor/shame culture and that it needs to be understood in this light. While this is true to a degree, what is missed in this assessment, as Hwang demonstrates from more recent studies on grid-group theory, is that all cultures essentially have an honor/shame paradigm that is exerted on a continuum, from low group, low grid (individualism) to high group, high grid (hierarchy). This provides a more nuanced perspective for comparing and contrasting ways that ancient and Eastern cultures express social approval and disapproval.

Chapter 7 is also quite helpful. Here Hwang demonstrates that many Western studies of aniconism in the Old Testament miss subtle nuances that arise when viewing the same material from the perspective of an Asian culture that is steeped in idolatry. For example, Hwang argues that Westerners often understand prophetic critiques of idolatry, such as those by Isaiah and Jeremiah, as rising from the prophets' efforts to show that idols are non-entities, just pieces of wood and stone. What this misses, however, is that this position essentially derives from a secular, scientific perspective predominant in the West. Eastern cultures, on the other hand, typically carry a more sophisticated view of relics, one that is likely more resonant with ancient cultures. By this understanding one recognizes instead that the prophets seek polemically to demonstrate that idols represent (false) deities that are impotent in the face of Yahweh's sovereign power. In other words, it is pointless to worship the idol not simply because the idol is a rock but because it represents a god who cannot save. This provides a more nuanced perspective to capture how the OT confronts idolatry and prevails over it.

The next chapter looks at creation and pantheism from an Eastern perspective. Here he notes that creation should be understood not merely as a divine act *ex nihilo* but also as a polemic against religious dualisms that predominate in the many non-Western, including ancient, cultures. The concluding chapter ties together the themes to suggest a path forward. Hwang concludes that "a thoroughly Asian contextual theology of the OT may also prove useful to Western Christianity at a time when it is still compromised frequently by the syncretism of imagining itself to be the center and the non-West to be the periphery" (199). Hwang looks rather to a day when Christians of every tribe, tongue, and nation, can together make meaningful contributions to a theology of Scripture that better mirrors the sovereign God who reigns over all the cosmos. This reviewer joins him in this hope.

Kyle C. Dunham

Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, Allen Park, MI

Biblical Aramaic for Biblical Interpreters: A Parallel Hebrew-Aramaic Handbook, by Scott N. Callaham. Wilmore, KY: GlossaHouse, 2021. xv + 249 pp. \$35.99.

Through extending certain learning patterns that have already been well-established via a student's study of biblical Hebrew, one can cut a much more efficient path toward the effective interpretation of so-called "biblical Aramaic" (Gen 31:47; Jer 10:11; Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Dan 2:4b–7:28). For this reason, Scott N. Callaham is to be commended for his fine work: *Biblical Aramaic for Biblical Interpreters: A Parallel Hebrew-Aramaic Handbook*.

To be clear, within *Biblical Aramaic for Biblical Interpreters*