Theology of the Crown of Thorns for the Outcast and Paul’s Thorn in the Flesh in Second Corinthians 12:7

HIRAMATSU Kei
Central Bible College, Tokyo

Abstract
Do liberation hermeneutics and traditional historical-grammatical hermeneutics intersect in their reading of the text? In this article, I have chosen Paul’s thorn in the flesh in 2 Cor 12:7-10 as a test case to examine how a particular reading of liberation theology from Asian liberation theologian Teruo Kuribayashi intersects with the traditional exegesis. Thus, I will first describe Kuribayashi’s theology of the crown of thorns and then I will evaluate his interpretation in light of a careful exegesis of Paul’s symbolic use of the thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians. The purpose of the article is to appreciate the hermeneutical heritages of both the Western and the non-Western traditions and to call for a holistic interpretation of the biblical text. Incidentally, this article asks whether the source of our interpretation comes from the biblical text, the reality of interpreters, or both.

Keywords
liberation theology, Asian theology, Japan, hermeneutics, 2 Corinthians, Paul, thorn in the flesh

INTRODUCTION

Since Gustavo Gutierrez’s A Theology of Liberation, various attempts have been made to advocate interpretations of the biblical texts from

---

1 This article was originally presented at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting (2018) as well as at the 48th Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (2019).
2 Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation (Maryknoll,
the perspective of the poor and oppressed, an approach often called liberation theology. While liberation theology offers helpful insights into Christian theology and praxis, its hermeneutics—that is, an application of a hermeneutical principle of reader-response theory to their biblical interpretation—has also invited a number of criticisms. For instance, critics recognize liberation theologians’ repeated and selective use of certain passages (such as Luke 4:18-19) to support their theology. However, few scholars have attempted to make a bridge between the traditional grammatical-historical approach to the biblical text and liberation hermeneutics for the pursuit of a holistic exegesis. In other words, while Western traditional exegesis has focused on the biblical text and incorporated insights from grammatical, literary, socio-historical, and theological findings, the present article is interested in how such exegesis can learn, affirm, and provide correctives to the interpretation from the perspective of liberation theology.

Thus, in this article, I have chosen Paul’s thorn in the flesh in 2 Cor 12:7-10 as a test case to examine the ways in which a particular reading of liberation theology from an Asian liberation theologian, Teruo Kuribayashi, intersects with the traditional exegesis. Then, I evaluate what we can learn from both for a better holistic approach to the biblical text. The purpose of the present article is to appreciate the hermeneutical heritage of both Western and non-Western traditions. Incidentally, this article asks whether
the source of our interpretation comes from the biblical text, the reality of interpreters, or both.

Therefore, in the present work, I will first describe Kuribayashi’s theology of the crown of thorns and its symbolic use of thorns, and then I will evaluate Kuribayashi’s interpretation in light of careful exegesis of Paul’s symbolic use of thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians by making use of grammatical, literary, socio-historical, and theological insights. However, due to time and space limitations, I try to limit my primary literary context of the exegesis within the Corinthian correspondence, assuming 2 Corinthians to be a unified letter. Then, I will conclude this article with

7 However, since some arguments require making use of insights from other NT writings including Acts, I will do so. See my footnotes in the Conclusion regarding the relationship between Paul’s life and theology and Acts. Also, the unity of the letter is one of the most controversial issues in the study of 2 Corinthians, though a growing number of scholars espouse the unity of the letter. See overviews of the debate in Hans Dieter Betz, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9: A Commentary on Two Administrative Letters of the Apostle Paul, ed. George W. MacRae, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 2:36; Margaret E. Thrall, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of the Corinthians, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 1:3-49.

final remarks on whether these readings from different methodological approaches can illumine one another for a better holistic interpretation of the biblical text.

**A Theology of the Crown of Thorns**

If one assumes that people and their reality should serve as the source of an interpretation, one needs to know who they really are before discovering their theology. So, Kuribayashi begins with descriptions of some of the Asian outcasts and then describes their symbolic use of the crown of thorns.

**The Burakumin**

While Kuribayashi discusses different kinds of outcasts in Asia, he particularly focuses on the Japanese outcasts called the *Burakumin*. Discrimination against the *Burakumin* can be traced back to the first century BCE, when Japanese society began the class system. In the late third century CE, five quasi-caste classes existed: “the upper aristocracy, the lesser aristocracy, farmers, artisans, and slaves.” The institution of slavery was legally abolished in 645 CE; however, “the serfdom system continued to exist.” Moreover, the religious substructure, particularly

---


9 This includes outcasts from India, Myanmar, Nepal, Korea, and Japan.
from Shintoism and Buddhism, reinforced such discrimination. First, the idea of pollution called *kegare* in Shintoism played a significant role in bolstering up the discrimination against the *Burakumin*. Shintoism, an animistic faith of indigenous religion in Japan, is concerned with religious pollution and impurity. So, Shintoism regards “blood, wounds, disease, and death to have a polluting effect on human beings and requires that anyone who came into contact with them must purify oneself through the ritual of cleansing, exorcism or abstention.”\textsuperscript{12} The *Burakumin* were thus considered defiling because they were tanners, leatherworkers, and butchers. Second, Buddhism, which was introduced into Japan in the middle of the sixth century CE, taught reverence for the natural cycle of life; thus, Buddhists were forbidden to kill animals and eat their meat.\textsuperscript{13} In the early ninth century CE, such understanding came to connect with Shinto’s teaching to avoid pollution and impurity caused by *kegare*. As a result, Buddhists banned the people who were forced to handle the deceased and dead animals from participating in religious activities.\textsuperscript{14} The stratification of the outcast status was firmly established later in the seventeenth century CE during the Tokugawa military government (1600–1868 CE) with four-tier classes: warrior administrators called *samurai*; *bushi* who governed a large agricultural population; artisans; and merchants. Underneath the four-tier castes were two types of despised people/outcasts called *senmin*: “much filth” called *Eta*, and “non-people” in the lowest in status called *Hinin*. *Hinin* consists of “beggars, prostitutes, itinerant entertainers, mediums, diviners, religious wanderers and fugitives from justice.”\textsuperscript{15} *Eta* engaged in occupations that involved religious pollution, such as “animal slaughter and disposal of the dead.”\textsuperscript{16} They were forced to obey certain regulations. For instance, *Eta* were required to put a patch of leather on their sleeves, tie straw ropes around their waists, or wear straw sandals in order to visibly identify themselves with the outcast status. Also, they were forced to live in designated ghettos in order to prevent pollution to commoners or

\textsuperscript{12} Kuribayashi, “A Theology of the Crown of Thorns,” 22-23.
\textsuperscript{13} Kuribayashi, “A Theology of the Crown of Thorns,” 23.
\textsuperscript{14} Kuribayashi, “A Theology of the Crown of Thorns,” 23-34.
\textsuperscript{15} Kuribayashi, “A Theology of the Crown of Thorns,” 25.
acceptable citizens. Moreover, one court case of a commoner murdering an *Eta* in 1859 indicated that the commoner did not have to face the death penalty because one commoner’s life was worth seven *Eta* lives.\(^\text{17}\) These outcast groups, *Eta* and *Hinin*, had eventually come to be called the *Burakumin*. Therefore, the outcasts were understood to be impure and defiling to others by their presence, and they were visibly distinguished by special garb until their official emancipation in 1871. Their membership was determined by birth and occupation, and the discrimination against them involved not only economic, political, and historical elements but also religious and cultural forces. The *Burakumin* were called “despised people” and “non-people.” Even after their official emancipation and gaining their citizenship, more than three million people still suffer different forms of discrimination.\(^\text{18}\)

While I agree in general with Kuribayashi’s description of the *Burakumin*, a couple of important comments need to be added to his elucidation. First, since fifty years have passed since Kuribayashi’s writing in 1971, I must note that the discrimination against the *Burakumin* has taken different forms in the past fifty years. Some view the change as an improvement, but others think the discrimination and the struggle of people still impact their lives.\(^\text{19}\)

Second, the complexity of the discrimination against the *Buraku* should also


\(^{18}\) Some Christians in Japan were deeply involved in ministry to the outcasts. For instance, several denominations in Japan including Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican, Japan Assemblies of God, and others founded a joint conference that addresses issues related to the *Burakumin* (部落問題に取り組むキリスト教連帯会議) in 1983. See, “部キ連の紹介,” http://www.geocities.jp/bukiren/shoukai.html. Also, some missionaries were involved in ministry to the outcasts in Japan. For instance, in the early pentecostal movement in Japan, missionaries such as Robert Atchison from Canada and William and Mary Taylor from England were involved with the ministry to the outcasts. See Masakazu Suzuki, “The Origins and the Development of the Japan Assemblies of God: The Foreign and Japanese Workers and Their Ministries (1907 to 1975),” (PhD diss., Bangor University, 2011), 96-103, 121-136.

\(^{19}\) For instance, Nataša Visočnik states, “Today even the most radical of the burakumin activists would accept that the situation has improved over the last forty years” (“Living on the Edge: Buraku in Kyoto, Japan,” *Anthropological Notebooks* 20 [2014]: 127-143 at 141; see also Suehiro Kitaguchi, *An Introduction to the Buraku Issue: Questions and Answers*, trans. Alastair McLauchlan (Richmond, Surrey: Japan Library, 1999), 1-51.
be noted. Although this discrimination originated in the class system of ancient Japanese society, it has become more complex in the contemporary world. For instance, the *Burakumin* and *zainichi* Koreans (that is, Korean-Japanese who live in Japan) share a lot of experiences of marginalization and discrimination in common.²⁰ Moreover, many *zainichi* Koreans live in the *Buraku* areas. In fact, I was raised in one of the *Buraku* areas, and my church was established on a border of the area with the desire to bring reconciliation through the gospel. I have learned and heard of firsthand experiences of discrimination, especially from the older generation. Also, I grew up with many friends in the area who are *zainichi* Koreans. On the one hand, the discrimination against the *Burakumin* is not as severe as it used to be, as my experience reflects it. On the other hand, I grew up hearing about the pains, prejudices, and struggles from my friends among the *zainichi* Koreans. Thus, discrimination against the *Buraku* takes different forms today, as Kuribayashi himself admits. However, this does not mean to degrade the struggles of the marginalized. Rather, I concur with Kuribayashi that a number of people still suffer from different forms of discrimination, and my experience can testify to it.

### The Symbolic Use of the Crown of Thorns

In response to the oppression of outcasts, Kuribayashi insists, "The oppression of outcasts is a form of sinful idolatry in which the dominant classes have arrogated to themselves a status higher than the marginalized and the oppressed."²¹ Kuribayashi attempts to provide the Asian outcasts with an understanding that their striving for liberation coheres not only with a natural impulse as human beings but also with the core message of the Christian faith.²² Therefore, he advocates a theology of the crown of thorns because it is the symbol that not only represents faith and praxis

---

²⁰ *Zainichi* Koreans resulted from the Japanese colonization of Korea (as well as other Asian countries) from 1910 to 1945. See the description of *zainichi* Koreans and their similar experiences of discrimination with those of *Burakumin* in Visočnik, "Living on the Edge," 127-143 at 127-137.

²¹ Visočnik, "Living on the Edge": 32.

²² Visočnik, "Living on the Edge": 35.
in a particular historical context but also articulates the essential truths of Christianity.\textsuperscript{23}

However, Kuribayashi’s theology was not generated by his intellectual ability but was indeed informed and inspired by the interpretation of the Burakumin who discovered the symbolic connection between Jesus’s crown of thorns and their suffering.\textsuperscript{24} In the midst of their discrimination and oppression, the Burakumin have found union with Jesus. Kuribayashi states:

The crown of thorns has become a symbol of solidarity of God with the marginalized, the oppressed and exploited in Asia. It has come to signify the person of Jesus, who makes the groaning of the Asian outcasts his own cry to God for liberation. The symbol reveals that God is also suffering with the outcasts, promising at the same time their liberation from that oppression. The suffering becomes a sign of the divine purpose that redeems history from effects of human evil.\textsuperscript{25}

Furthermore, in 1922 the National Leveler’s Association, called Zenkoku Suiheisha, the first militant organization for Buraku liberation, proclaimed a declaration at their first meeting before some two thousand people from almost all the outcast communities in Japan by using the term “crown of thorns.” They also adopted a crown of thorns as the official flag of the Suiheisha, which intentionally symbolizes the person of Jesus.\textsuperscript{26} The Suiheisha repeatedly highlights “the crown of thorns in a messianic manner as the symbol of the association’s militancy,”\textsuperscript{27} and the Japanese outcasts understood the Christian terms “martyrdom” and “suffering” as symbols of their pain, groaning, and oppression. Moreover, they expressed their hope for liberation as their “eschatological expectation,” although most of the founders of the Suiheisha were not Christians.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{23} Visočnik, ”Living on the Edge”: 35.
\textsuperscript{24} Visočnik, ”Living on the Edge”: 41.
\textsuperscript{25} Visočnik, ”Living on the Edge”: 40-41.
\textsuperscript{26} Visočnik, ”Living on the Edge”: 41-42.
\textsuperscript{27} Visočnik, ”Living on the Edge”: 42.
\textsuperscript{28} Visočnik, ”Living on the Edge”: 42-43.
While these outcasts have found many stories in the Bible in which God liberates the marginalized, the most important symbol is Jesus’s passion. Kuribayashi explains:

More than anything else, however, the outcasts came to relate their experience to the biblical symbol of Jesus’ passion. For these people, the crown of thorns is not a symbol of militancy in the sense of conquest over others, or of triumph in society; nor does it function to adorn in the manner of the Japanese imperial family crest of the “thorn of chrysanthemums.” It is a symbol that has led the oppressed Burakumin to experience fellowship with one another, and to extend solidarity to other exploited and marginalized people. It is a symbol, then, that calls all people under oppression into solidarity with one another.²⁹

In other words, their use of a crown of suffering indicates a horizontal fellowship: their suffering and oppression unite those who are marginalized and oppressed under the symbol of “the crown of thorns.” For the Burakumin, “The ‘crown’ implies victory and triumph through Jesus Christ, and the ‘thorns,’ the pain and groaning of the outcasts.”³⁰

In order to support the Burakumin’s interpretation, Kuribayashi studies the sociocultural circumstances of Israel at the time of Jesus and argues the affinity in Hinduism, Shintoism, and other religions in Asia with regard to their strong “pollution-conscious.”³¹ Then, he characterizes his theology as symbolic, critical, and praxis language.³² Drawing from the historical experiences of the Asian outcasts, Scripture, and Christian traditions in Asia, he studies Jesus and God from the perspective of the outcasts.³³

Therefore, the symbolic use of the “crown of thorns” among the outcasts in Japan can be summarized as follows. First, it is a vertical relationship with God: the identification of their suffering with Jesus’s suffering. Second, it is a horizontal relationship with others: it signifies the fellowship of the marginalized and oppressed. Third, their experience of suffering, discrimination, oppression, and marginalization played an

²⁹ Viskočnik, “Living on the Edge”: 44.
³⁰ Viskočnik, “Living on the Edge”: 71.
important role in shaping their interpretation as reflected in their symbolic link with Jesus’s suffering.

**Paul’s Experience of the Thorn in the Flesh in 2 Cor 12:7-10**

Having described Kuribayashi’s theology of the crown of thorns, I now argue that a careful exegesis of Paul’s symbolic identification with Jesus in the narrative of his thorn in the flesh in 2 Cor 12:7-10 can provide both affirmation of and correctives to the theology of the crown of thorns. In other words, the Asian outcasts were not the first ones who made a symbolic connection with Jesus’s suffering, and one can learn from a biblical precedent of a symbolic identification with Jesus’s suffering in Paul’s text, particularly from 2 Corinthians.

In an attempt to assess the theology of the crown of thorns in light of the OT, NT, and the history of the church, Kuribayashi briefly states, “In Paul’s faith, Jesus’ crown of thorns is the symbol of solidarity of God with Jesus in passion and resurrection, inviting the rejected and despised of the world into the fellowship with the Son of God.” However, he neither expounds on his statement nor provides further exegetical analysis. Therefore, this study attempts to evaluate Kuribayashi’s theology in light of the careful exegesis of 2 Cor 12:7-10. Incidentally, this study explores what the traditional exegesis can affirm and learn from a theology of the crown of thorns as well as what such exegesis can contribute toward a holistic interpretation of the biblical text. Therefore, I shall now proceed to ask some important and relevant questions to compare and contrast Paul’s symbolic use of a thorn with the theology of the crown of thorns.

First, did Paul make a symbolic connection between the suffering of Jesus and himself similar to the way the Asian outcasts did? And did Paul’s suffering signify his solidarity with God? Yes, Paul identifies his suffering with Jesus’s suffering in his symbolic use of “thorn in the flesh” in 2 Cor 12:7-10. While the Burakumin adopted the term “the crown of thorns” as a symbol to identify their suffering with Jesus’s suffering, Paul also identifies his hardship with Jesus’s suffering in the story by connecting his experience of the “thorn in the flesh” with Jesus’s passion. Indeed, one observes

---

34 Visočnik, “Living on the Edge”: 47.
remarkable parallels between Jesus and Paul in the story of the thorn in the flesh. First, Jesus faces a crown of thorns and Paul faces the thorn in the flesh, both of which tormented and humbled them (Mt 26:67 // Mk 14:65; 2 Cor 12:7). Second, both Paul and Jesus suffered for their identity: Jesus as Christ and Paul as a minister of Christ. Third, Paul’s threefold prayer may be patterned after Jesus’s threefold prayer in Gethsemane (Mt 26:36-46 // Mk 14:32-42 // Lk 22:40-46). Paul’s thorn refers to some form

---

35 In describing the torment inflicted upon him by his thorn, Paul employs the verb κολαφίζῃ. The word κολαφίζω is attested only five times in the NT (Mt 26:67 // Mk 14:65; 1 Cor 4:11; 2 Cor 12:7; 1 Pt 2:20) and it is used precisely in the passion narrative (Mt 26:27 // Mk 14:65), which describes Jesus’s maltreatment at the hand of Jewish religious leaders due to an accusation of blasphemy. In this context, Jesus’s accusers physically tormented (ἐκολάφισαν) him. As Craig S. Keener describes, this kind of mistreatment of prisoners was illegal in the ancient world and humiliating to the prisoners (A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 652). So, Jesus was not only physically tormented by the religious leaders but also spiritually and emotionally humiliated because in martyrdom the physical pain was also regarded as spiritual pain (Karl L. Schmidt, "κολαφίζω," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, eds., Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976], 3:819-821). Thus, the humiliation Jesus experienced was not only external pain but also internal. Likewise, in 2 Cor 12:7-10, Paul is tormented and humiliated by his thorn. Although one cannot know the exact nature of Paul’s σκόλοψ and ἄγγελος Σατανᾶ, whether it was psychological/emotional, physical, or spiritual pain, he was indeed tormented and humbled by the thorn. On this point, there seems to be significant correspondence between Jesus’s experiences on the road to the cross and Paul’s understanding of the dual purposes of his thorn. The apostle was tormented and humbled just as Jesus was beaten and humbled before the Sanhedrin. Regarding the description of Jesus’s passion and crucifixion in 2 Corinthians, Jerry W. McCant observes several correlative experiences between Paul and Jesus as follows:

1. Jesus faces σταυρός, an instrument of death. Paul faces a σκόλοψ, possibly an instrument of death (2 Cor 12. 7). 2. Three times Jesus prays ‘Let this cup pass’ (Mk 14. 35 f.). Three times Paul prays for removal of the thorn (2 Cor [12.] 8). 3. Jesus prays ‘Not my will but thine...’ (Lk 22. 42). Paul receives an oracle, ‘For you my grace is sufficient’ (2 Cor 12. 9). 4. Jesus is crucified (Mk 15. 24). Paul receives ‘no healing’ (2 Cor 12. 9). 5. Jesus was rejected by ‘his own’ (John 1. 11). Paul’s ‘own’ church rejected him (2 Cor 10. 14; 12. 7-10). 6. Jesus was raised from the dead ‘by the power of God’ (Mk 16.1). Paul will live with Christ ‘by the power of God’ (2 Cor 13. 4). 7. Jesus was rejected as Messiah. Paul was rejected as Apostle. 8. Jesus was a Suffering Servant Messiah. Paul is a Suffering Servant Apostle (“Paul’s Thorn of Rejected Apostleship,” New Testament Studies 34 no. 4 [1988]: 550-572 at 571).
of suffering he has experienced, and Jesus’s cup likewise refers to his suffering of the passion. Moreover, while both Jesus and Paul made a plea to have their suffering removed, their entreaties were not granted; yet, both accepted their suffering as an answer to their prayer. Fourth, one observes the prominent resonance between Jesus and Paul in light of the antithesis of power and weakness in 2 Cor 12:9-10 and 13:4. Paul identifies himself with Christ in power and weakness. For Paul, Christ’s crucifixion and his own identity are inseparable as he proclaims in 2 Cor 4:10, “Always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” Thus, Paul’s identification with Jesus in suffering may be a legitimate biblical example to affirm the interpretation of Asian outcasts.

Second, did Paul’s suffering signify solidarity with people in a way similar to that emphasized by Asian outcasts? The answer is both yes and no. While Paul’s defense of apostolic status climaxes in 2 Cor 12:7-10 and the story of the thorn in the flesh represents the pinnacle of his suffering, Paul insists from the very beginning of the letter that his suffering is a basis for his apostolic calling.

36 See summaries of the proposed identifications of the thorn in Murray J. Harris, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 858; Thrall, the Second Epistle of the Corinthians, 2:809-818.

37 2 Cor 13:4 says, “For indeed, He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God.”

38 David Alan Black, Paul, Apostle of Weakness: Astheneia and Its Cognates in the Pauline Literature, rev. ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), who argues that Paul is not only the apostle of weakness but also the creator of the doctrine of weakness.


for a relationship with the Corinthians. In 2 Cor 1:6, he explains that he and the Corinthians share the same suffering. Indeed, just as Asian outcasts emphasize solidarity with both God and people, Paul also characterizes his ministry with both a vertical and horizontal relationship, particularly in 2 Cor 1:3-7. Paul shares in Christ’s suffering and comfort (1:5); thus, Paul also shares suffering, comfort, and salvation with the Corinthians (1:6-7). However, his understanding of such a relationship differs from that of the Asian outcasts in some respects. In Paul’s understanding, what signifies fellowship with God and people is not suffering for liberation but God’s comfort in suffering. He proclaims that God comforts him in all of his affliction (2 Cor 1:4a) and that God’s comfort enables him to comfort those in every affliction (2 Cor 1:4b) because Christ suffered for people and his suffering becomes the source of their comfort (2 Cor 1:5). Therefore, while Asian outcasts see the suffering for liberation to be solidarity with God and the oppressed, Paul emphasizes God’s comfort in suffering. Moreover, instead of identifying their suffering with Jesus’s cry to God for liberation, Paul understands Christ’s suffering as a basis and reason for God’s comfort in his suffering (2 Cor 1:5), and God’s comfort flows out of the relationship with God to those who are also experiencing suffering and hardship. Therefore, the Asian outcasts and Paul envision different outcomes of suffering: the Asian outcasts envision liberation and Paul envisions divine comfort. Nonetheless, both consider suffering to be an important element for solidarity with God and fellowship with people.

Third, while the Asian outcasts’ experience of suffering shaped their construal of God, did Paul’s experience of suffering also shape his understanding of God? Yes. From the beginning of the letter, Paul emphasizes his experience of affliction in Asia (2 Cor 1:8-11) in which he was excessively burdened beyond his strength and despaired even of his life (1:8). Indeed, one finds no better letters than 2 Corinthians in which Paul expounds on the meaning of suffering, including the catalogs of suffering (2 Cor 4:8-9; 6:3-10; 11:23-28; cf. Rom 8:35–39; 1 Cor 4:9-13; Phil 4:11–12; 2 Tm 3:11).42 While our knowledge of the historical Paul is limited, one should not

---

42 See the potential background and functions of the catalogues of suffering in the Corinthian correspondence in John T. Fitzgerald, _Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence_, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 99 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), who examines Paul’s _peristasis_ catalogue in 1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 4:8-9; 6:4-10 by comparing
dismiss an important connection between Paul’s biography and theology when interpreting the text. Indeed, the experience of suffering of both the Asian outcasts and Paul has led them to the same truth: God delivers them from suffering (2 Cor 1:8-11). The suffering of the Asian outcasts caused them to think that God redeems them from suffering through human evil; Paul’s experience of severe afflictions in Asia caused him to think that God delivers him (2 Cor 1:8-11). However, Paul’s experience of suffering taught him not only the hope for God’s deliverance but also the power and grace of God in his suffering (2 Cor 12:7-10). A. E. Harvey aptly explains that Paul’s near-death experience in Asia (2 Cor 1:8-11) allowed him to form an unprecedented idea about suffering in history: he regards suffering to be something of positive value. Paul understands suffering as a place where God’s power is perfected and his grace is manifested (2 Cor 12:9). So, while the Asian outcasts and Paul understand God as the One who delivers his people, Paul also came to another conclusion in which God is the One who manifests himself in suffering and even uses our suffering as a means to bring about his purpose.

This brings me to the fourth question. I have to ask a fundamental question: What is suffering to the Asian outcasts and Paul? While I see some similarities between Paul and the Asian outcasts in the previous three questions, the answer to the fourth question differs from the others. The suffering experienced by the Asian outcasts is forced suffering, whereas the suffering Paul describes in 2 Corinthians is one that he is willing to endure in conformity to that of Christ. On the one hand, Kuribayashi repeatedly insists that the systemic evil of discrimination forced the Asian outcasts to suffer beyond imagination. On the other hand, Paul emphasizes his willingness to suffer (2 Cor 12:9-10). This does not mean that Paul intentionally sought persecution and suffering. However, Paul decided to appropriate his suffering and hardship and bear them as an imitator of

---


Christ (2 Cor 4:10). In fact, the story of Paul’s thorn in the flesh shows that he implored the Lord three times to remove the thorn (2 Cor 12:8), but after having heard from the Lord that his grace is sufficient for him and Christ’s power is perfected in weakness (2 Cor 12:9), Paul concluded that he would be willing to suffer (2 Cor 12:10).

Moreover, there is a fundamental difference between the Asian outcasts and Paul in relation to their sociopolitical status. The Asian outcasts do not have a sociopolitical status; they are poor, uneducated, and marginalized. In a sense Paul could be considered a social elite in the ancient world: he was highly educated (Acts 22:3) and had Roman citizenship (Acts 16:37-39; 22:25-29; 25:7-12; 26:32). Thus, Asian outcasts are weak in their society, but this was not necessarily the case for Paul. However, Paul chose to be

Hiramatsu: Theology of the Crown of Thorns for the Outcast

Now it is time to summarize the findings regarding the Asian outcasts’ symbolic use of “the crown of thorns” in light of Paul’s symbolic use of the thorn in the flesh in 2 Cor 12:7-10. While the Asian outcasts emphasize identification with Christ in their suffering, solidarity with others who are oppressed and exploited, and experience in interpretation, I have found similarities as well as differences. Does Paul identify himself in Christ’s suffering in his thorn symbolism? Yes, he does. Does Paul’s suffering signify solidarity with other people? Yes, it does. Does Paul’s experience of suffering shape his understanding of God? Yes, it does. Although there are some differences between Paul’s thorn symbolism and that of the Asian outcasts, I can generally conclude that Paul’s experience of the thorn in the flesh, and more broadly of his affliction and suffering as a minister of Christ, can be a legitimate biblical example of a “theology of the crown of thorns” among outcasts.

However, I have also noted a critical difference between Paul’s and the Burakumin’s suffering. Paul suffered, was afflicted, marginalized, and oppressed because he was willing to suffer for Christ and his fellow Christians, whereas the suffering of the outcasts was forced by human systemic evil. In other words, the nature of Paul’s suffering and that of the Asian outcasts differ considerably from each other. This brings me to a final thought. On one hand, traditional exegesis that considers the biblical text to be the primary source of interpretation can indeed affirm some aspects of Asian liberation theology, which regards the reality of the people as the source of interpretation. On the other hand, the critical difference between Paul and the Asian outcasts calls for a need for a holistic interpretation to incorporate the insights from both hermeneutics. Asian liberation theology aptly describes the groaning and suffering of the people.

47 See 1 Cor 9:19-23, which is one of the most representative arguments regarding Paul’s willingness to be weak.
48 E.g. Phil 2:6-11; Mt 16:24 // Mk 8:34 // Lk 9:23.
and reminds exegetes of the significance of people’s reality in interpretation (orthodoxy and orthopraxy). However, Asian liberation theology can also benefit from traditional exegesis. Paul teaches us that our hope is not only for deliverance from suffering but also for divine comfort in the midst of suffering. He also reminds us of the purpose and means of liberation: self-sacrifice and willingness to suffer for others in conformity to Christ. Liberation is possible through people who are willing to give themselves up and suffer for others. Its purpose is to liberate people so that the oppressed do not become the oppressor, as one often sees in our history, but that the oppressed would become liberators through their self-sacrifice for others because Christ has already demonstrated such sacrifice and freedom. Perhaps the critical difference between a theology of a crown of thorns and Paul’s thorn in the flesh may pertain to a commitment to exemplify and follow the life of Christ. As Kuribayashi notes, many outcasts and activists who use the symbol of the crown of thorns were influenced by Christianity but not committed Christ-followers.49 Therefore, the purpose of their interpretation differs. While the outcasts identified their suffering with that of Christ as a means of achieving liberation from systemic evil, Paul identified himself with Christ for the purpose of exemplifying the life Christ lived for us.

**About author**

Kei HIRAMATSU (PhD, Asbury Theological Seminary) is lecturer in New Testament at Central Bible College, Tokyo.

---