Book Reviews


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Contextualization in Western missiology tends to be unaware of its intrinsic cultural bias and to overlook the OT as a source of instruction for contextualization, Jerry Hwang observes. In response, Hwang proposes that the OT’s situatedness in the Near Eastern world and how it engages that world make the OT uniquely suited for instructing contemporary contextualization. In his book Hwang demonstrates this thesis in seven case studies, in each case bringing OT theology into dialogue with Western and Asian theological categories.

In the first study (chap. 2), Hwang shows that because Bible translation is an act of contextual theology, interpreters need to be cognizant that a translation is the product of a particular cultural, linguistic milieu and theological understanding. The Chinese Union Version (CUV), for instance, inherits some Western language and theology, but it remains invaluable for developing a Chinese OT theology. For example, OT Hebrew depicts sin more communally and relationally than individually and juridically. By accurately rendering such concreteness, the CUV provides the raw material for a biblically faithful theology of sin.

When two communities of faith use the same term for “deity,” are they worshipping the same deity? Eschewing a simplistic answer, Hwang examines how the OT contextualizes the Hebrew lexeme 'ēl (chap. 3). Using 'ēl in three ways, the OT calls Yahweh “El,” a Semitic deity’s name, yet asserts Yahweh’s uniqueness as “god” (category) and “God” (title) by contrasting him with El and Baal. Comparing divine epithets in Ugaritic,
Hebrew, and Arabic yields a similar conclusion. The same epithets attributed to El, Yahweh, and Allah depict El and Allah very differently from Yahweh. Following the OT’s adaptation of the term for deity, Hwang contends that it is for each faith community to establish how a term for deity functions for them.

Yahweh’s uniqueness is expressed not only in how he appropriates the names of ancient Near Eastern deities, but how he also takes over and supersedes their functions as personal, national, and nature deities (chap. 4). Unlike typical Western formulation, monotheism in the OT is thus contextualized against the OT’s pluralistic and syncretistic context. Hwang goes on to show that how this monotheism addresses fatalism, pragmatism, and suffering in the book of Jeremiah provides a model for engaging Islam, folk religion, and Buddhism today.

Turning to the study of covenant, law, and kinship (chap. 5), Hwang’s assessment is that Western cultural biases and overgeneralizations have reduced covenantal relationships to legal or kinship demands. But that is not the OT’s portrayal. Deuteronomy contextualizes covenant and law by both engaging and critiquing culture, while highlighting Yahweh’s distinctiveness as Israel’s patron and kin. Drawing examples from the Chinese and Filipino cultures, Hwang concludes that the OT’s balance between objectivity and relationality can direct contextual theology today.

In the fifth study (chap. 6), Hwang suggests that, contrary to popular notion, shame is not necessarily negative. The study of honor, shame, and guilt has suffered from generalizations. Western OT scholarship and missiology typically associate honor and shame with collectivist cultures, guilt and innocence with individualist cultures, and pit the two against each other. Such dichotomies, however, cannot satisfactorily explain the Bible or culture. Favoring a more nuanced analysis, Hwang applies anthropological insights to examining the Japanese and Mediterranean cultures. He then employs these cultural lenses in reading texts in Isaiah, 2 Kings, and Proverbs. In each case, Hwang shows how the culturally bound OT nonetheless subverts and challenges culture. In this way, the OT calls ancient Israelites and today’s Christians to countercultural living within their respective contexts.

Addressing iconography next (chap. 7), Hwang asserts that aniconism in Western Protestant theology is shaped by the material-immaterial
dichotomy found in Greek philosophy. Such dichotomy, however, is not self-evident in the OT. Instead, the OT holds in tension the concrete and the abstract, the physical and the spiritual. In Exodus 33, for example, the anthropomorphism pānim joins Yahweh’s immanent “face” with his transcendent “presence.” Again, Ezekiel contextualizes divine presence in a concrete manner by taking over Mesopotamian iconography for its polemic purposes. Because they are contextually closer to the OT, non-Western interpretive lenses help to bring into focus the OT emphasis on Yahweh’s function rather than his existence. This offers a corrective to the West’s perennial failure to realize that the people of God then and now, not pagans, are the object of critique in the OT idol parodies.

Hwang’s final study probes the relationship between creation and pantheism (chap. 8). Western OT scholarship’s dualistic and demythologized view of creation contrasts sharply with Hinduism’s pantheistic worldview. But neither reflects the OT view, Hwang argues. The OT’s personification of creation is not merely metaphorical. It reflects vitalism, the view that all of creation, animate and inanimate, is alive and personal, yet distinct from and subject to the Creator. Psalm 104, for example, contextualizes The Great Hymn to Aten in a way that distinguishes it from both Egyptian monism and Western dualism. Turning to another aspect of creation, Hwang explains from Ecclesiastes that the OT view of time, unlike Hinduism, encompasses both linear (Western) and cyclical (non-Western) understandings. Like other OT writings, Ecclesiastes attests to a vital view of creation that demarcates creation from Creator but does so without subscribing to dualism.

In his conclusion, Hwang reiterates the OT contextual and contextualizing posture and its implications. The OT does not categorically reject the culture in which it is situated. Instead, it engages with culture and appropriates cultural and religious forms to communicate a countercultural theology. This process defies any easy distinction between modern notions of syncretism and contextualization. In fact, OT contextualization is of such a dynamic nature that it even presses syncretism into its service. Its posture toward culture provides a model for rigorously engaging culture to do contextual theology today. To that end, critical evaluation of and building upon both Western and Asian perspectives are necessary.

Biblical scholars and missiologists alike acknowledge the need for contextual theology, but it is not always clear just what that means or how
it can be accomplished. From the summary of Hwang’s work, it is evident that he offers cogent and substantive proposals to both questions.

To the “what” question, Hwang ably demonstrates that the OT itself does contextual theology. The mainstay of each case study is Hwang’s robust and nuanced interpretation of OT texts that is attentive to diachronic-synchronic, descriptive-prescriptive, and emic-etic variations. In the process, Hwang shows that behind-the-text questions of history, culture, literature, and archaeology not only provide context but shed light on how the OT contextualizes theology. Moreover, Hwang shows that before-the-text questions are not limited to the readers’ response variety but can comprise pertinent questions about Asian theological concerns and cultural mindsets.

But does it follow, then, that the OT contextualizing posture is to be emulated today? Not necessarily. However, Hwang has put forth a convincing case for doing so, first through his interdisciplinary and integrative approach. Hwang skilfully and fruitfully brings his knowledge in biblical studies and languages, missiology, theology, history, philosophy, linguistics, social science, anthropology, and modern languages into conversation with one another to offer constructive proposals for doing contextual theology today.

Hwang also persuades by offering well-informed and judicious critique of cherished Western OT and missiological understandings, especially the underlying cultural assumptions, and by giving voice to non-Western categories. In so doing, Hwang does not privilege East over West or pit one against the other. Instead, his arguments consistently reflect the awareness that no theology is free from cultural conditioning, hence the need to both learn from and critique the attendant presuppositions.

The seven case studies offer stimulating proposals and rich bibliographies that can and should elicit critique, conversation, and further research. Hwang’s Asian formulations of monotheism, covenant, and divine presence deserve careful study and engagement. His conclusions about contextualization and syncretism are especially provocative. At times, Hwang seems to suggest that the OT incorporates syncretism into its theological method. If this reader has understood correctly, what Hwang means is, rather, that the way in which the OT contextualizes may be labelled syncretism today. The crux appears to be how syncretism is
defined. If so, more may need to be said about this complexity, to which Hwang also alludes, so that his position on syncretism might be accurately understood and evaluated.

For both academics and practitioners, Hwang’s study highlights the need to exegete both Scripture and culture as well as the need for dialogue and collaboration among experts in the relevant fields. Written in English, this study beckons further emic engagement in the task of Asian contextual theology. Indigenous communities of faith and cultural insiders should rigorously interact with Hwang’s proposals. As Hwang acknowledges, “Asian” categories and interests are far more diverse than can be addressed in the book. Moreover, as scholarship and cultures develop, so theologies must be contextualized by every generation of cultural insiders.

About Reviewer
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