
Review of Tat-siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics? Reading the New Testament. Intersections: Asian and Pacific American Transcultural Studies*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008.

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In *What is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*, Tat-siong Benny Liew sets out to explore from a post-colonial perspective how the New Testament and Asian American interpreters can interact. "Explore" is key here; Liew is not setting out a theory to be followed so much as a practice to be considered and interacted with. He does so as one who inhabits the dual worlds of Asian American and biblical scholar: two worlds with which he interacts in this book with astonishing depth and subtlety. Liew has read and pondered widely, and this shows throughout the eight chapters of the book.

Liew begins by considering "why" Asian Americans need their own hermeneutic when encountering the Bible: for him the Bible has been used too often and for too long as a tool to legitimise the colonizing and racializing of Asian Americans. While one response might be to set the Bible aside entirely, that is not his preference. In the first place, the texts were originally written "by the colonized" (p. xii), and this interplay between colonized and colonizer is fertile ground for raising questions around the (mis/ab)use of power. In the second place, by "thinking with" the Bible, Liew seeks to remove from the texts any sense of authority. It is an open text from which to springboard where one chooses to go, not a closed text that must be followed "authoritatively". Liew is not looking to see what meaning(s) can be found in the text, but using the Bible to "understand the very making of meaning" (p. 10). Thus Liew wishes to interact with the Bible in new ways to find what may be of value as Asian Americans struggle to find their own voice(s) within the wider American culture.

For Liew this is a descriptive, not prescriptive, process. The same is also true for who he believes is able to do Asian American hermeneutics. Liew wants this hermeneutic to be diverse and original, eschewing arguments over origins. "The Asian American biblical hermeneutics that I envision has no individual center; instead, the sub-discipline is built upon the interaction, or the in-between-ness of multiple and mutual references or engagements" (p. 8). Thus Liew calls people to set aside questions of who is qualified by background to undertake such a task. As with the Bible, Liew seeks to "think (and speak) *with*" Asian Americans - whoever they may be - not to "speak *for*" them. This is a di(vers)alogue, not a monologue.

In Chapter Two (Reading With Yin Yang Eyes) Liew considers the way in which two "seemingly contradictory strategies" (p. 19) have been used by the dominant (white) American culture in regard to Chinese Americans. The first strategy calls on Chinese Americans to "melt" into the wider culture. The second identifies them as permanently different, and best kept "frozen" on display. The two work together to marginalise and isolate Chinese Americans in all areas of life – including Biblical Hermeneutics. Of interest to Liew is the way that Chinese Americans re-duplicate these forms of oppression among themselves. Moving to the Bible, Liew argues that we see similar traits in the Gospel of Mark: here the colonized Mark writes of his(?) experience of oppression, envisioning a future time of release from Roman rule, only to promote a replacement of Roman oppression of Judea by a Christian/Jewish rule over others. Liew sees this as a cautionary tale, urging Chinese Americans to avoid falling into the same trap as Mark. Since the Bible is not authoritative, we can

hear from the voice of the colonized in Mark, but find an alternative, more inclusive response to imperial power than Mark proposes.

In Chapter Three (Ambiguous Admittance), Liew considers the way in which the Gospel of John constructs a community. The text is not a description of a community, but a struggle to create one, by means of consent, descent, and ascent. By use of naming and name calling, a community is constructed by its contrast with others and its sense of siege from the outside. The purpose of irony and ambiguity within the gospel, as noted by R. Alan Culpepper and other narrative critics, is to provide an inside/outside construction where those in the know can laugh at others who lack the correct information. The focus on Jesus as the provider of knowledge and sustenance is a call to confess him: by implication, the community puts aside its other relationships to confess with each other regardless of biological/ racial background. However the positive in this is set against the sense of authority, in that true love in the community is shown by obedience – to Jesus and to those who lead them in his name. A tradition is invented, to which those who would join the community must assent. Contradictions begin to abound, and for Liew there is an ambivalence about the community created by this Gospel. He finds in it, as he finds for Asian Americans in the United States, a degree of choice of entrance juxtaposed with a hierarchy that consumes each person's unique cultural background. The combined politics of inclusion/ exclusions come to the fore in each setting – Biblical and modern.

Chapter Four reads Acts in light of the struggles of Asian Americans to (re)create kinship in the United States despite regular and persistent discrimination. Jesus is identified as the origin(al), of which Peter and Paul become faithful copies. For Liew, Luke seems to aim at conversation and conversion with those outside the new community: the former when the community is under threat, the latter when that threat recedes. Too often the call to be community seems to involve the eradication of what makes each group unique. Yet equally there is a persistent, if less heard voice, to allow people to remain as they are – witness Paul's relations with those in the same boat with him in Acts 27. Liew draws out this contradiction, arguing that Acts – like John – shows the Bible to contain narratives that exemplify tolerance and encourage imperialism. It is not enough to argue misuse of the text: at times Luke promotes a conversion process that *is* imperialistic. Like Asian Americans living in the United States, Acts makes for complex reading, defying the reader's desire for simplistic categories.

Chapters Five and Six examine the relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church, firstly from the perspective of "body". In this context we see Paul's "abject" body, arising from his sense of inferior status both to Empire and to "his" converts at Corinth. They are of a higher cultural status but have given that status away to join with Paul, only to become even more obsessed with status. Paul's very yearning for a "new" resurrected body is evidence of his sense of abjection, and his statement that he is a Jew to Jews and a Gentile to Gentiles is in fact a subversive call to overturn the status of the Corinthian dissidents. Such a reading of Paul's sense of physical/ cultural inferiority and his conflict with Corinth over status inversion allows Liew to argue that Paul is neither simply conservative nor fully radical. He can be both at once – which Liew then argues is replicated in the manner in which Asian Americans can both feel culturally oppressed and then oppress others: the notion of the colonized seeking to be more white than the colonizers. Both Paul and Asian Americans thus can end up becoming the very thing they most dislike.

Chapter Six (Melancholia in Diaspora) continues this argument, focusing now more on Paul's "liminality" (in-between-ness), again finding common ground with Asian Americans who find themselves both inside and outside the dominant culture. Victor Turner's liminality, Nietzsche's *ressentiment* and Freud's melancholia are combined. Liew argues that while Paul's attitude to Jesus' death is melancholia (since Paul refuses to let the dead one go), unlike Freud's thesis that this refusal is a bad thing, there rises from Paul's obsession a creative tension that can lead to social renewal.

Liew argues that this is one aspect of Paul's thinking which can be liberating for Asian Americans, for it rejects the old order of racially driven politics.

Liew's argument takes a dramatic turn when he argues that Paul – notwithstanding all the talk of the resurrection of Jesus – is aware of his melancholia, and this drives him ultimately to need Jesus to be dead, and to remain dead for the foreseeable present. Jesus needs to be dead, and Paul desires to join him in that death, because both have been rejected for their Jewishness by the dominant culture. It seems to me that we see Liew showing how meaning can be made – one of his primary aims in writing this book. Taking an overt hermeneutic of suspicion, Liew engages in a series of “what if” statements that lead him to a conflicted and almost self-loathing (Jewish) Paul, wallowing so deeply in his melancholia that he can say with sincerity he believes the dead (Jewish) Jesus to be resurrected while at the same time needing him still dead. Is this exegesis or self-indulgent eisegesis? To be sure, as Liew has argued correctly, the biblical text has been (mis)used time and again to promote colonizing actions. Perhaps Liew feels justified in (mis)using the text in equally twisting ways, if only to show what can be done with/to the text, and the resultant impact on the marginalised, who too often reap/ are raped with the consequences of such (ab)use.

Chapter Seven considers the interplay between the Bible and Theresa Hak Kyung Hee's novel, *Dictée*. Arguing that the Bible is “one irreducible and inerasable intertext” (p. 115) used by Cha in protesting against all forms of oppression and colonizing, Liew considers the way that Cha combines Biblical, Greek, and Korean mythic images to revisit and empower her mother's challenge to oppression. Liew argues that this textual interweaving is possible when cultures are permitted to retain their identities and the Bible is seen as only one origin(al) among many with which people can engage to seek positive renewal and transformation. Such an approach encourages successive readers to see the canon as open, not closed, rewritten by succeeding generations.

The final chapter (Telling Times) considers the links between “ancient” apocalyptic writings and modern alienated Asian Americans. This does not privilege the former, but rather seeks to widen the subject matter that should be considered in Biblical Studies. The call is not to seek a fixed “apocalyptic” ending – Liew in particular takes to task the approach typified in books such as the *Left Behind* series - but a dreaming of positive possibilities. Liew wants to break the shackles of colonization (super)imposed by the dominant American culture in its (mis)use of “Revelation” as the final word on the future.

As the above clearly shows, Benny Liew is intent on *not* establishing a normative lens through which others can identify how Asian Americans can/do read the biblical text. Perhaps a better name for the book would have been *What is One Asian American's Biblical Hermeneutic?* That is certainly the approach, since not all Asian Americans would or would want to read as he has chosen to. Indeed, taking Liew's words at face value, I assume that he would be disappointed if readers of his book went on to read only through his lens.

This is not to denigrate the book: far from it. Liew has set out to show how Asian Americans might profitably read the New Testament from a post-colonial position, and I believe he has succeeded admirably. The book is innovative, thought-provoking and well argued. For example, as a Conservative Evangelical, I baulk at his suggestion that Paul harbours a deep desire to keep Jesus dead, but Liew's “reasonable” reasonings compel me to re-think and thus to (re)value my own reading – surely the sign of a successful academic venture.

Hermeneutical differences aside, my main quibble with the book is a structural one: I prefer my notations to be at the foot of each page, not the end of the book. The need to turn to a note at the back of the book to determine whether it was crucial to understanding his argument or simply a citation to the works of other authors does, for me at least, interfere with the flow of the argument.