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Intertribal Hermeneutics in the Context of Myanmar

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I studied roles and functions of Jeremianic female imagery on the exegetical, hermeneutical, and praxeological levels, hoping to contribute a new way of reading the Bible to the study of contextual and intertribal hermeneutics.

This research was divided into two parts. The first part focused on “the roles and functions of Jeremianic female imagery.” As a result, both passive and active roles and functions of female imagery were discovered. In passive representations of Jeremianic female imagery (Jer 4:29-31 and 13:20-27), the personified wives such as Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem were sexually objectified, abused, raped, tortured, mutilated, and even killed. Amazingly, Yahweh Himself committed this violence. Daughter Zion was also discovered as a dying woman in front of the murderers. The cry of the devastated females was heard like the cry of a woman in childbirth. Likewise, the pain and suffering of the females were depicted as the pain and suffering of a woman in childbirth. Although the pain and suffering expressed in Jeremianic female imagery could be assumed to be metaphorical representations of the pain and suffering of the Israelite people, it also seemed to leave the footprints of misogyny and pornography. At the same time, active female imagery was also discovered within Jeremiah (e.g., Jer 31:15-22). The eponymous mother of Israel, Rachel, who wept for her missing children, was able to move Yahweh to have compassion upon her children. Consequently, Yahweh could then be seen as a compassionate mother. Since Yahweh, a compassionate mother, identified with mother Rachel, Yahweh may be understood as the mother of Rachel’s children. In this positive depiction, virgin Israel was also found as a leading figure in the reconstituted new society. This part of research was done by utilizing synchronic, diachronic, feminist, and ideological criticisms.

In the second part, the research extended from the academic level to the empirical level, at which the Jeremianic texts were re-read from a Myanmar intertribal perspective. The goal was to articulate a more in-depth, insightful, and relevant reading of the text of Jeremiah by means of utilizing a contextual and intertribal hermeneutics. In re-reading the same texts, the personified naked woman Jerusalem in Jer 13:20-27 was discovered, recovered, and theologized. According to their reading attitude, the Myanmar readers refused to see the depiction of the naked woman Jerusalem as prophetic pornography; rather, they interpreted the female imagery as a theological portrait of the relationship between God and the people, in terms of ‘sin and punishment.’ The male God who punished the naked woman was challenged and criticized but was also accepted as a compassionate mother because Myanmar readers connected the text with their lives. Namely, they identified with the biblical characters so that the pain and suffering of the Jeremianic female image became their own pain and suffering; the cry of Rachel became their own crying (cf. Jer 31:15-22). The biblical characters were thus re-contextualized by means of allegory, typology, and parallelism of terms in the contemporary situation of the readers. In addition to the interpretation methods of existential discussion, imaginative ways of reading, and consultation of different translations, the Myanmar intertribal hermeneutics utilized more customary interpretation methods such as the historical critical method, rhetorical criticism, and feminist exegesis. The distinctiveness in this Myanmar intertribal hermeneutics was that their reading practice becomes a place to develop a new praxis that was not discovered at the academic level.

In the concluding section, I showed that the interaction between scholarly exegesis and the approach of ordinary readers, on the one hand, and the exchange between ordinary readers themselves, on the other, can be mutually enriching on hermeneutical, exegetical, and praxeological levels and can contribute to a new contextual and intertribal hermeneutics in the context of Myanmar.