THE CROSS-TEXTUAL METHOD AND THE J STORIES IN GENESIS IN THE LIGHT OF A CHINESE PHILOSOPHICAL TEXT

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This article consists of three parts: first, a critical reflection on Archie Lee’s proposal of a “cross-textual” hermeneutics; second, a review of his cross-textual reading of Genesis 1–3; and third, a new reading of some of the J stories in Genesis 2–38 in the light of the teaching of the Chinese philosopher Kâo Tsze is presented. Against Mencius’ view that virtues are innate, Kâo Tsze believes that human nature is neither good nor bad and argues that the two basic instincts “to eat and to mate” are the common nature that humans share with other animals.

1. Archie Lee’s cross-textual approach: an evaluation

In a short but important paper,1 Lee critically discusses and compares three approaches to the Bible. Lee does not hide his dissatisfaction with what he takes to be a kind of methodological chauvinism among European and American scholars who assume that their (Western) approaches to the Bible have universal validity. This assumption goes hand in hand with the idea of an absolute Bible preached to the Asians by missionaries. Understandably, exponents of various non-Western approaches to the Bible would sometimes include in their proposals similar reactions against the status quo of biblical scholarship which is perceived to be dominated by Western scholars; Lee’s reaction is not uncommon among those who wish to engage in non-Western modes of biblical interpretation.2 Yet some of these protests look quite a bit

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2 I need only to cite one more example, Chinese feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan,
like attempts “to identify an interpreter’s cultural background in order to debunk his or her interpretation.” A better service may be done to biblical scholarship if we instead focus our energy on interesting biblical problems, i.e. either proposing new solutions or criticizing existing ones, along the lines of Lee’s own work.

Lee rejects both an absolute Bible and the tacit claim of universal validity of different types in biblical interpretation as practiced by Western biblical scholars. He calls theirs “the Text-Alone” approach. The justification for this rejection is that the Bible was formed by, and addressed to, the problems of its writers and audience, i.e. the “Judeo-Christian communities of faith,” and by definition the “socio-political experiences of injustice, suffering, exploitation and poverty in Asia were left outside.” In the form of a complaint, Lee asks: “How could the Asian realities of plurality and diversity in races, peoples, cultures, social institutions, religions, ideologies, etc. not have any bearing on the way the text is to be read?” Simply put, a Bible that is produced by a foreign culture is incapable of addressing the needs of Asian peoples if we just read and interpret the Bible alone without taking into consideration Asian experiences.

The second approach that Lee also rejects is what he calls the “Text-Context Interpretive Mode” of interpretation on the grounds that it is just a one-way application of the exegetical result of “the Text Alone” method to the living context of the modern reader, albeit with some correlation between the historical context of the biblical author and that of the readers. Its inadequacy lies in the assumed passiveness of the context of the modern reader. In a series of rhetorical questions put forward by D. Preman Niles, which Lee quotes, “Is theology always a matter of relating Text to Context? Is it not also a matter of relating Context to Text so that the Context may speak to the Text? Is Asia there to receive? Has it nothing to contribute?” I reproduce this quote

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Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World (Maryknoll, New York, 1995), p. 26, where she protests against a kind of “white male” biblical interpretation “dominated by European and American scholars” which is “influenced by their social and cultural background, their feminist reading is also colored by their construction of female identity, which should not be taken as representative of all women.”

