
What would happen if Luke’s passion narrative were read as the response of a colonized subject negotiating a space of resistance in the face of the formidable presence of the Roman Empire? What if Luke’s passion narrative were also read as a response to the collaboration of the colonized Jewish provincial leadership with Rome’s imperial forces? These are the key questions that Yong-Sung Ahn sets out to answer in his provocative study of Luke’s construction of space in Luke 19:45-23:16. As this review will reveal, moreover, Ahn answers these questions by deploying a theoretically sophisticated approach, one that is as analytically persuasive as it is ethically engaging.

The first chapter introduces Ahn’s analytical reading strategy, a strategy hermeneutically premised on the latest “turn” in biblical studies and theoretically informed by a richly complex set of critical theories. Hermeneutically embracing the “spatial” turn, Ahn presupposes that social location (that is, a concrete set of material conditions or structures of power) affects both the text and the flesh and blood reader (7). To give greater clarity to his own appropriation of the “spatial” turn, moreover, Ahn adumbrates the richly complex set of theorists by which his reading will be informed, namely, cultural geographers (who view “space” as an indicator of social relations of power), diaspora critics (who raise questions about the “structure and attitude of reference” from which cultural space is understood) and coalitional solidarity theorists (who view cultural space both in terms of a cultural group’s need for solidarity and its need to form coalitions that honor transformations outside of its own cultural group, 26-49).

Ahn seeks, therefore, an honest appraisal of the materiality of Luke-Acts. For Ahn, then, persuasive analysis of Luke-Acts must not only include traditional close reading (textual and thematic analysis), but also “spatial” reading or a reading of the “cultural spaces” with which Luke was entangled. At the same time, Ahn seeks an honest appraisal of his own materiality, that is, of his own East Asian space as a South Korean. For Ahn, reflections on that cultural space—one that has been colonized in the past (by the Chinese and the Japanese) and yet remains colonized (through the so-called “liberation/occupation of the United States and through a continuing hegemonic pro-Western, pro-Christian, and pro-capitalist civic formation)—could provide counter-hegemonic insight on how one reads Luke-Acts as a product of an ancient colonized culture (11-37).

Both honest appraisals—of the materiality of Luke-Acts and of the materiality of Ahn himself—then also become the basis for an ethical act of engagement, that is, for Ahn’s theological evaluation of both the content and the interpretation of Luke-Acts. For Ahn, who seeks to avoid the traps of either a rigid politics of identity (that is, an essentialist notion of identity) or a postmodern notion of identity (that is, an anti-essentialist and yet largely non-activist notion of identity), the ultimate criterion of evaluation for any text or interpretation is whether the biblical text or interpretations of it are life-giving and transformational within and beyond the boundaries of one’s own primary culture(s) of identification (44-45).
With Chapter 2, Ahn’s survey of Lukan scholarship’s blindspots, Ahn lays the foundation for his own East Asian global reading, that is, his own careful reading analyses in the two subsequent chapters. Thus, after acknowledging how critical Lukan scholarship has rightly critiqued Hans Conzelmann for misreading Luke’s eschatology (that is, for wrongheadedly thinking that “Luke discarded the immediacy of the apocalyptic hope” in favor of a delayed parousia [53]), Ahn avers that critical Lukan scholarship still has not parted company with Conzelmann’s misguided view of a dichotomy between religion and politics, a view that led Conzelmann to conclude that Luke accommodated the Roman Empire. For Ahn, this type of reading separates the Roman Empire from the Jewish leadership as if Luke responded to politics only in what Luke says directly about Rome and responded to religion only in what Luke says directly about the Jewish religious authorities. In truth, however, the dichotomy is anachronistic; the religious authorities were politically aligned with Rome; and Luke’s critique of the authorities must also be read as an indictment of Rome, not simplistically as an intra-religious struggle. Still, Ahn avers that some of Conzelmann’s critics, even if they have avoided the religion-politics divide, have gone too far in assuming that Luke is totally against Rome. That is, Luke is neither fully pro-Roman nor fully anti-Roman but operates from a “third” position, an ambivalent position. To clarify this “third space,” this interstitial space, Luke’s in-between space, then, Ahn offers his own reading analyses in Chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 3, the first of two textual study chapters, is as much an analysis of the power dimensions of Luke 19:45-21:38 altogether as it is a close reading of the pastoral function of the end-time discourse (21:5-36). That is, on the one hand, Ahn’s close reading analysis nicely depicts how the end-time discourse, as a part of a larger Temple setting and discourse (19:45-21:38), likely consoled Luke’s early audiences by reminding them that the present period of instability and suffering for the believers was a penultimate set of realities occurring shortly before the final end (107-139). On the other hand, with his “spatial” reading model, Ahn also analyzes how the temple space indicates relations of power. That is, Luke 19:45-21:38 depicts a stark contrast between two sources of power (one from heaven vs. one from humanity), each with its respective religio-political system (the religio-political system of Israel’s deity vs. Rome’s imperial religio-political system), agents (Jesus vs. the Jewish leadership and Roman officials), and narrative space-time for displaying power (with Jesus exhibiting power in the Temple in a typological “daytime” period vs. the Jewish leadership and the Romans exhibiting power in the city of Jerusalem in a typological time of “darkness,” 99-106).

With Chapter 4, the second of the textual study chapters, Ahn’s close reading analysis shifts to the narrative setting of the larger city of Jerusalem. His “spatial” reading analysis, moreover, examines the power dimensions that the narrative evokes in this setting. One of these power dimensions, for example, is the difference in the way the two aforementioned religio-political systems manage authority. In Jerusalem, Jesus’ statement about the Greco-Roman patron-client system of benefaction (which Ahn reads as Jesus’ critique of the system and not as a prescription for Jesus’ own