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A Critical Analysis of the Relationship Between Salvation and Social Justice in the Minjung Theology

Ilmok Kim

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Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
SALVATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE
IN MINJUNG THEOLOGY

A Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Ilmok Kim
January 2008
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ABSTRACT

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SALVATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN MINJUNG THEOLOGY

by

Ilmok Kim

Adviser: Denis Fortin
ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH
Dissertation

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SALVATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN MINJUNG THEOLOGY

Name of researcher: Ilmok Kim
Name and degree of faculty adviser: Denis Fortin, Ph.D.
Date of completed: January 2008

The intent of this study is to investigate the relationship between salvation and social justice in minjung theology. Minjung theology grew out of social awareness in the 1970s that created a desire to fight oppression and misery in Korea.

The introductory chapter defines the problem, which is to critically evaluate minjung theology's attempts to reconstruct the traditional Korean Christian notions of salvation. This study is primarily limited to the works of two representative minjung theologians: Nam Dong Suh and Byung Mu Ahn.

Chapter 2 traces the historical context of Korea from which minjung theology emerged. The chapter particularly notes the religious traditions and the socio-political milieu of Korea that shaped the theology. Deriving from the theologians' socio-political experiences and their Christian faith in the 1970s, minjung theology is a reflection of the past minjung movements in Korean history.
Chapter 3 investigates the three foundations of minjung theology: the minjung's perspective on life, the han of the minjung, and the hermeneutics of liberation praxis. These ideas have made minjung theology attractive in a world where the evils of oppression, exploitation, injustice, and alienation are widespread.

Chapter 4 critiques minjung theology's hermeneutics and soteriology from the Christian evangelical perspective. In its particular hermeneutical approach, Scripture plays a secondary role in minjung theology. In their reaction against too exclusive an emphasis on the otherworldly in traditional theology, minjung theologians radically reformulate the Christian doctrine of salvation from the perspective of the minjung. They equate salvation with the struggle for socio-political liberation of the minjung.

Minjung theology, however, fails to recognize that the source of social evils lies in the human heart and, thus, to grasp the "wholeness" of salvation. Salvation in the biblical witness is all-embracing and comprehensive—individual and social, eschatological and historical, and spiritual and temporal. The exclusive, one-sided emphasis minjung theology places on this world is a clear departure from the biblical understanding of salvation. In fact, the theology falls into the same trap as traditional theology in its one-sided understanding of sin and salvation. Such unbalanced views of sin and salvation in both minjung and traditional theology need to be brought in line with the understanding of sin and salvation in Scripture.

The final chapter concludes by affirming the validity of minjung theology's concern for the plight of the minjung and by reiterating Korean theology's urgent need to develop a wholistic biblical soteriology capable of integrating personal salvation and Christian social responsibility into harmonious belief and praxis.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

In Christian theological studies, few issues cover the whole of theology and "strike at the core of one's faith like the question of salvation."¹ The theme of salvation is frequently chosen as the summary of the Bible's teaching as a whole and as such is related to every other biblical theme.² An understanding of salvation is related to every theological issue. Millard Erickson states, "The doctrine of salvation encompasses a large and complex area of biblical teaching and human experience."³ Thus, to construct a biblical, comprehensive view of salvation is "a never-ending task."⁴

¹Kristin Johnston Largen, "Liberation, Salvation, Enlightenment: An Exercise in Comparative Soteriology," Dialog 45, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 263. Carl Braaten comments, "The whole of theology is inherently developed from a soteriological point of view. Salvation is not one of the many topics, along with the doctrine of God, Christ, church, sacraments, eschatology, and the like. It is rather the perspective from which all these subjects are interpreted" ("The Christian Doctrine of Salvation," Interpretation 35, no. 2 [April 1981]: 117).


Although Korean Protestantism is over one hundred years old, Korean Christianity is still divided on the understanding of salvation. Extreme positions have been taken on this issue in Korean Christianity. Traditional theology has emphasized the spiritual truth of the Bible and neglected the material dimensions of its message. This has led to a strong tendency to adopt an individualistic and other-worldly understanding of salvation, neglecting its socio-political and economic dimensions.

One response to this traditional theology has been the development of minjung theology, which evolved in the 1970s as a challenge to the existing traditional theology that has tended to overlook the biblical themes of social justice and concern for the poor and the oppressed. Minjung is a Korean word whose root is derived from two Chinese

5Recently there was an important meeting in Seoul, Korea. On April 8, 2005, the Korean Evangelical Council held a Confessional Prayer Meeting. During the meeting, two representative leaders of the Korean Protestant Church, Won Yong Kang, one of the most influential ministers in the social action group, and David Yonggi Cho, a conservative group leader and senior pastor of the Yoido Full Gospel Church (the largest Protestant church in the world), publicly confessed their past sins as leaders. In this meeting, Kang confessed his failures to act proactively and prevent the Korean Protestant churches from entering into conflict and splitting. Cho, quoting Bonhoeffer’s statement on “cheap grace,” confessed that he had been living a life of “cheap grace.” He acknowledged his indifference to the poor and the oppressed and that he had kept silent to social injustices. He promised that he would dedicate the rest of his life to the practice of social justice. Cha Soo Kim, “Du Kaesingyo Jidojaui Kido [Prayers of Confession of the Two Prominent Protestant Church Leaders],” http://www.donga.com/fbin/output?sfrm=l&n=200504080262 [accessed 8 April 2005]. See also Won Kyu Lee, “Yanggukhwa Gukbokul Wihan Sinhakjok Jopkun [A Theological Approach about Religious Polarization in Korean Society],” Kidokgyo Sasang [Christian Thought] 367 (July 1989): 68-81.

characters. "Min" means "people" and "jung" means "mass." Thus, "minjung" means "mass of people." However, in minjung theology, the term minjung indicates a common people who act contrary to rulers.7

In the 1960s and 1970s, the primary concern of the South Korean government was economic growth and industrialization. The President in office at that time, Chung Hee Park, had come to power through a military coup in 1961 and continued to hold it until 1979, when he was assassinated by one of his own deputies. He led the economic development of South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s. This was a period of rapid economic growth in Korea. In 30 years, South Korea had achieved a level of modernization that took Europe 200 years to reach.8

This progress, however, was built upon the broken backs of the common laborers; the economic growth was based on low wages, long working hours, and the suppression


of labor unions. In the same period, many workers and students participated in protests against political oppression. Much of the opposition to Park's regime focused on human rights issues.\(^9\)

In the 1960s, a group of Christian ministers in South Korea organized the Urban Industrial Mission (UIM) in an attempt to improve the working conditions of laborers.\(^10\) From the 1970s, the UIM has involved the churches more closely in the problems and sufferings of the workers. The values of minjung theology are expressed in the spirit of the UIM. According to the UIM, preaching about personal salvation without considering the social dimension of salvation makes theology more or less irrelevant for the people.\(^11\)

In 1973, Nam Dong Suh, a systematic theologian and an initiator of minjung theology, led a group of theologians and issued the "Theological Declaration of Korean Christians," which marked a starting point for the theological basis of minjung

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theology. Its statement clearly shows a confession of faith and "the awakening of the Korean Church's socio-political responsibility." Included are the following: (1) to "pray for the freedom of the suffering and oppressed people"; (2) to "live with the oppressed, the poor, and the despised, as our Lord Jesus Christ did in Judea"; and (3) to "believe that we are compelled by the Holy Spirit to participate in his transforming power and movement for the creation of a new society and history."

In October of 1979, the Christian Conference of Asia held a theological consultation on minjung theology in Seoul, and the papers presented there were published in English and German, as well as in Korean. Through these publications, minjung theology came to be widely known. Thus, minjung theology developed in the tumultuous era of the 1970s as an attempt to face this dark reality and to find an answer to the socio-political problems of Korea.


13Kim, "Karl Barth's Reception in Korea," 75.


Although minjung theology was born out of the socio-political human rights movement of the 1970s, it is rooted in the traditions of “minjung” liberation in Korean history.\(^\text{17}\) Looking back on their national history, minjung theologians discovered that the minjung have always been oppressed by one or another power, foreign or indigenous. Thus, the historical experiences of the Korean people during the Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), the post World War II division of the country after liberation (1945), and the Korean War (1950-1953) were crucial formative events in the development of minjung theology.\(^\text{18}\)

In addition, throughout their history of oppression, the minjung have periodically revolted against their oppressors.\(^\text{19}\) The liberative activity of the minjung comes from various religious traditions such as shamanism,\(^\text{20}\) the belief of Buddha Maitreya,\(^\text{21}\) and...

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\(^\text{19}\) Nam Dong Suh chronicled these events. See “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, ed. Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 167-171.

the Donghak movement. Minjung theologians indicate that these religious traditions have contributed to the rise of minjung liberation movements and thus regard them as important sources for their theology.

Minjung theology is formulated on two central intuitions: one is hermeneutical methodology, and the other is soteriology. According to this theology, the experience

in World Perspective: Commentary on Korean Minjung Theology, ed. Jung Young Lee (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988), 126-133. Shamanism will be addressed in the following chapter.

In the early history of Korea, the Buddha Maitreya is seen as a liberative figure. The belief of Maitreya gave rise to many messianic movements, thus contributing to the revolutionary practice and belief of the minjung. See Eun Ko, “Miruk Kwa Minjung: Yoksaek Chuku [A Historical Approach to Maitreya and the Minjung],” in Han’guk Kundae Minjung Jonggyo Sasang [The Recent Religious Thought of the Minjung in Korea], ed. Bo Oh An and others (Seoul: Hakminsa, 1983), 225-270; Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 175-176. Buddhism will be discussed in the following chapter.

The Donghak religion, an indigenous religion of Korea, was founded in 1860 by Je-Woo Choi. Its basic teaching was that humanity is heaven. This belief led the minjung to revolutionary action, playing a powerful role in the Donghak Revolution of 1894. See Sang Jin Ahn, “The Religious Synthesis of Choe Je-U as a Nineteenth Century Theological Paradigm for Korean Minjung Theology” (Th.D. diss., Emmanual College of Victoria University, 1998); Yong-Bock Kim, “Messiah and Minjung,” in Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History, 188-189; Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 170-171. The Donghak will be examined in the following chapter.

of the minjung is the norm and source of theology. Minjung experience is characterized by han. Han is a Korean word which comprises the minjung’s feeling of misery, agony, grudge, resentment, accumulated bitterness, and so forth. Minjung


24Yim, Je lju Jonggyo, 11, 20; Clark, “Growth and Limitations of Minjung Christianity in South Korea,” 91-92.

25Like minjung, han is difficult to define. It is the minjung’s anger and sadness which has turned inward and intensified as injustice has accumulated. Park, “Re-examining A Theology of Minjung,” 284. See also Young Hak Hyun, “Minjung Sinhakkwa Hanui Jonggyo [Minjung Theology and the Religion of Han],” in Chonguhaekpalsipyondae Han’guk Minjung Sinhakui Chongae [The Development of Korean Minjung Theology in the 1980s], 445-456; David Kwang-suh Suh, “Called to Witness to the Gospel Today: Two Responses from Korea (the Priesthood of ‘Han’),” The Reformed World 39, no. 4 (1986): 597-607; Nam Dong Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” in Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History, 55-69. This will be examined further in the following chapter.
theologians contend that han comes from the evil structure of oppression. They argue that the gospel cannot be understood without knowing the han of the minjung.

Nam Dong Suh states, "We should take han as our theme, which is indeed the language of the minjung and signifies the reality of their experiences." Thus, the starting point of minjung theology is the han of the minjung and minjung theologians interpret Scripture from the minjung's experience. From the perspective of the minjung, minjung theologians view sin as a social category and understand the concept of sin not as individual but as social and structural.

Nam Dong Suh holds that structural evils become the eventual factors of poverty, social injustice, and even personal sins. Byung Mu Ahn, the developer of minjung theology, is also convinced that the biblical concept of sin is related to collective and structural evil. For Ahn, the greatest sin in the Bible is to distinguish classes, since this is

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27 Suh, "Towards a Theology of Han," 68.


29 Lee, An Emerging Theology, 21-22.

30 Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 164, 244.
connected directly with the oppression of the poor. Thus, for minjung theologians, conversion of the human heart cannot occur without a decided commitment to transform inhumane social structures.

Furthermore, according to minjung theologians, a belief in an individual, spiritual salvation that ignores the social dimension results in a theology that is irrelevant for people. They raise the question of the relationship between individual salvation in Christ and the resolution of Korea’s socio-political problems. They have demanded that Korean Christianity become involved in the fight of liberation for the minjung, in striving for salvation here and now. They argue that the minjung’s struggle for self-liberation brings about salvation in this world, a resolution of han.

Minjung theology, a form of public theology, is deeply concerned about the relationship between contemporary Christian faith and the socio-political context of Korea. It contends that a real theology must be relevant for the specific conditions of the Korean situation. For minjung theology, the church ought to be the comforter that

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31 Byung Mu Ahn, *Galilee Ui Yesu* [Jesus in Galilee] (Seoul: Korea Theological Study Institute, 1990), 475; idem, *Minjung Sinhak Ijaky* [A Story of Minjung Theology], rev. ed. (Seoul: Korea Theological Study Institute, 1990), 198.


resolves the han of the minjung. Thus, minjung theology argues that the traditional, exclusively soul-saving approach to soteriology is powerless to resolve the deep-seated han of the minjung in Korea.35

Minjung theologians contend that the traditional, spiritual interpretation of the poor has also led Korean Christians to neglect important issues such as social justice, social responsibility, and socio-political life. They have criticized the failure of Korean Christianity to give adequate attention to the needs of those who are socially disadvantaged.36 On the basis of Matt 25:31-46, they assume that Christ identified himself with the minjung and interpreted this solidarity with them as the way to salvation.37 For minjung theologians, the purpose of salvation is to resolve the han of the minjung and to restore social justice. Therefore, the quest to connect the promise of salvation to the social justice of human rights is the core of minjung theology’s existence.

Statement of the Problem

Minjung theology is proposing a new paradigm of biblical hermeneutics and soteriology. Its attempt to reconstruct a contemporary Korean Christian notion of salvation from the present reality of the minjung has provoked a series of theological questions concerning its hermeneutics and soteriology. If the theological process is based on the struggle for the liberation of the minjung from their han, what are the criteria for theology, what is the salvific meaning of human activities in the world, and what is the

35Küster, 223; Bacote, “What Is This Life For?” 99.

36Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 13, 35.

37Ibid., 12-13.
relationship between salvation and social justice? These questions will be dealt in this study.

Aim and Justification of the Study

The aim of this study is to critically analyze minjung hermeneutics and soteriology in order to develop a comprehensive, biblical view of salvation in Korean Christian theology.

This study is important given that a complete study of the relationship between salvation and social justice in minjung theology has not yet been done. While certain aspects of minjung theology have been analyzed, the relationship between salvation and social justice was considered only marginally. None of the accessible works utilized the biblical and theological analysis used in this study.

This study is also significant because there is a need for a comprehensive understanding of salvation in Korean Christianity. Beyond the polarization of the traditional pietistic faith and minjung faith, Korean Christianity has to build a dialectic synthesis of salvation in the present Korean context. Thus, this study will help develop a contemporary Korean Christian notion of salvation wholistically and will shed light on the socio-political responsibility of Korean Christianity in society.

In addition, there have been mostly negative criticisms of minjung theology from Korean traditional theologians. At the very least, however, we must recognize that minjung theology eliminates any excuse for avoiding social involvement that seeks to meet the needs of the oppressed. Thus, this study seeks not only to address the problems of minjung theology but also to evaluate the best of its legacy. An attempt will be made
to determine the strengths and weaknesses as they relate to the central conceptions of salvation in biblical teachings and evangelical soteriology.

Methodology

This study analyzes the relationship between salvation and social justice in the works of two representative minjung theologians, Nam Dong Suh and Byung Mu Ahn. Their primary writings along with secondary sources are examined from the Christian evangelical perspective, which I also share, one that accepts the absolute authority of Scripture and the supreme lordship of Jesus Christ as Savior. The basic approach to this study is analytical and systematic. The ideas espoused by minjung theologians are critically evaluated on the basis of biblical teaching.

The study is organized into three chapters, apart from the introduction and conclusion.

Chapter 2 examines the historical background of minjung theology. The first

38 Suh is the founding father and the main initiator of Asian minjung theology. He held degrees in theology from Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan, and Emmanuel Theological Seminary, Canada. He was formerly a professor of systematic theology at Hanshin Seminary and at the United Theological Seminary at Yonsei University in Seoul. To honor his theological achievements and his commitment to the human rights movement, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Toronto. He published the widely read volume, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology] (1983) and wrote numerous articles on minjung theology. He died on July 18, 1988.

39 Ahn (1922-1996) is a founding representative of Asian minjung theology. He earned a doctorate in theology from Heidelberg University, Germany, then worked as a professor of New Testament at Hanshin Seminary in Seoul. He was author of numerous books and articles, including Minjung Sinhak iyaky [A Story of Minjung Theology] (1988), the classic exposition of this theological movement. He established and served as director of the non-denominational Han'guk Sinhak Yonguso [Korea Theological Study Institute] in Seoul. He also started a monthly magazine, Hyonjon [Existence], and a quarterly magazine, Sinhak Sasang [Theological Thought], acting as chief editor of both.
section of this chapter discusses the religious traditions in Korea. The first section identifies the major religions such as shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Donghak, and Christianity. The second section investigates the socio-political milieu of the emergence of minjung theology and some theological discourses contributing to the characteristics of minjung theology.

Chapter 3 analyzes the essence of minjung theology. The first section of this chapter discusses the concept of minjung. The main theological subject for minjung theology is people—especially the oppressed, the exploited, and the marginalized. This section posits the term minjung and its biblical references as understood in minjung theology. The next section describes the concept of han, which is an essential part of minjung theology. The reality of han, its root causes, and its resolution are discussed. The third section of this chapter explains the theology of praxis. Minjung theology finds its self-identity in the praxis for the resolution of the minjung’s han. Thus, it seeks the liberation of the minjung from their han as its starting point and ultimate goal. The last section of this chapter examines Latin American liberation theology in relation to minjung theology, in an effort to provide a better understanding of minjung theology. This section compares their contextual background and some theological themes.

Chapter 4 consists of a critical evaluation of minjung theology, especially its hermeneutics and soteriology. The first section of this chapter focuses on hermeneutics as used by minjung theologians. Important questions about minjung hermeneutics include: What is the starting point of theology? What are the views held by minjung theologians and their usage of Scripture? What are the hermeneutic criteria? The second section reflects on the implications of minjung soteriology. Central questions about minjung soteriology include: What are the concepts of sin and salvation in minjung
theology? What is the relationship between salvation and social justice?

Limitations

This study is not intended to be a detailed research of all the ideas, features, and problems found in minjung theology. It will focus mainly on the evaluation of minjung hermeneutics and soteriology. Although this study strives to encompass the views of as many minjung theologians as possible, the scope of the study is primarily limited to the task of analyzing the thoughts of two minjung theologians: Suh and Ahn. Their works, which are from the early period of minjung theology, have been selected because, in minjung theology, their teachings have been highly regarded and remain standard and authoritative. Scripture quotations are from The New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated.

CHAPTER II

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MINJUNG THEOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the historical background of minjung theology. Minjung theology is "a contextual theology of the suffering people in Korea." It attempts to contextualize the Christian message to the Korean context. Thus, minjung theologians consider the history of Korea to be an important dimension in its theological reflection. Nam Dong Suh says, "Korean history is one of the paradigms of Korean minjung theology."^1

Those who have studied Korea know the history of oppression, poverty, and affliction imposed upon the Korean people due to frequent invasions by foreign powers, as well as political oppression under tyrannical rulers. In its history, Korea has had only brief periods of peace and autonomy. According to Sok Hon Ham, a famous Korean historian and thinker, there has been a foreign invasion every thirty years throughout Korean history.^2

One of the reasons for this is that geopolitically the Korean peninsula occupies an important strategic position in northeast Asia and is surrounded by three major powers:

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^2Suh, "Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung," 167.

^3Byung Mu Ahn, “Ssialgwa Pyonghwasaang [Seed and the Thought of Peace],” in *Ham Sok Hon Sasangul Chajaso* [In Search of the Thought of Ham Sok Hon], ed. The Ham Sok Hon Memorial Foundation (Seoul: Samin, 2001), 61.
China, Russia, and Japan. Because of this strategic position, the Korean peninsula has served as a battleground for its powerful neighbors in times of war. The general experience of the Korean people in this whole process has been that of the “Queen of Suffering.” This experience of suffering has given rise to a unique Korean feeling referred to as “han.”

The first section of this chapter discusses the religious traditions in order to understand Korean history. The second section examines the socio-political situation of Korea in the 1970s and the minjung theology’s reaction to traditional Christianity.

Religious Traditions

Korea is one of the most religiously pluralistic countries in the world; Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity, as well as several other religious movements, coexist in Korea. Because Korean history evolved in a multi-religious milieu, one of the best ways to understand Korean history is to study the various religions along with their implantation and development.

Korean history can be divided into six different periods. Koreans trace their origins to the founding of Ancient Chosun, the period of prehistoric Dangun mythology.

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7 Dangun, the forefather of the Korean race, is known as the one who established the Ancient Chosun in 2333 B.C. The Dangun myth explains the origin of the Korean race. The date of Korea’s origin is controversial, but a date around 2300 B.C. is generally accepted. Historians say that Korea has been a nation for more than 4,300 years. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Korean race was linked with the people of
The second period includes the Three Kingdoms: Koguryo (A.D. 37-668), Baekje (18 B.C.-A.D. 660), and Silla dynasty (A.D. 57-932). In A.D. 668, Silla unified them all. Following the Unified Silla, Korea witnessed the rise and fall of two dynasties, the third and the fourth period—Koryo (932-1392) and Chosun (or Yi) dynasty (1392-1910). The fifth period was that of Japanese occupation (1910-1945), and the sixth and present period (1945- ) is that of a divided Korea: North and South.8

Shamanism existed from ancient times before there was a Korea; Buddhism and Confucianism were introduced in the fourth century. Taoism was introduced in the seventh century by China, but it has never been a dominant religion in Korea. By the fourth century A.D., shamanism was the only dominant religion of the Koreans. From the mid-fourth century to the end of the fourteenth century, Buddhism became the official state religion of the Three Kingdoms, Unified Silla, and the Koryo dynasty.

During the Chosun dynasty, however, Confucianism took the place of Buddhism as the national religion. Before the coming of Protestant Christianity at the end of the Chosun dynasty,9 the religious orientation of the Korean people could be described as the syncretistic mix of three major religious traditions: shamanism, Buddhism, and

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9Roman Catholicism was introduced into Korea one century before Protestant Christianity came to Korea. However, because of its refusal to accept ancestral worship, the Confucian government issued an edict to ban the Catholic faith for over one century. Roman Catholicism will be discussed later in this chapter.
Confucianism. As one Westerner observed, a Korean carries "a Confucian head, a Buddhist heart, and a Shamanistic belly."¹⁰ At the end of the Chosun dynasty, Korean society was marked by the rise of the Donghak movement and the coming of Protestant Christianity.

Shamanism

Shamanism¹¹ is the oldest religion in Korea and considered the most traditional Korean faith. It is based on the theory of animism, which holds that everything has its own spirit.¹² Korean shamanism, Charles Allen Clark defines, "is a primitive religion of polytheism or polydemonism with strong roots in nature worship, and generally with a supreme god over all."¹³ Shamanism has been the primary way in which Koreans encountered the divine and thus the Korean mind-set has been shamanistic.¹⁴


¹¹According to Mircea Eliade, who undertook a comprehensive study of world shamanism, shamanism is an ancient technique of ecstasy, and the shaman is a specialist in ecstasy. Traditionally a religion in north Asia, and especially Siberia, it has been shaped by the experience of women in their society. Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, trans. William R. Trask (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964), 4-5.

¹²Although shamanism has had a long and prevailing influence among Koreans, it is difficult to find any written document that discusses its beliefs or practices. It is only through the oral form of its rituals that those beliefs and practices have been transmitted. Pak, 13. Cf. Jung Young Lee, Korean Shamanistic Rituals (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton Publishers, 1981).


Average Koreans became shamanist in times of weakness and crisis. Homer B. Hulbert indicates, "As a general thing, we may say that the all-around a [sic] Korean will be a Confucianist when in society, a Buddhist when he philosophizes and a spirit-worshipper when he is in trouble."\textsuperscript{15} In addition, Korean shamanism has addressed the suffering of women in a male-dominated society. So the majority of practitioners of shamanism are women, called mudang in Korean. In fact, shamanism is the only Korean religion in which women are the major figures.\textsuperscript{16}

According to Dong Shik Ryu, who has done a comprehensive study of Korean shamanism, a mudang has four different functions in Korean society.\textsuperscript{17} First, the mudang has a priestly function. She is believed to have the power to mediate between humans and the spirit-god. Second, the mudang has a clinical function through the shamanistic ritual. She finds the hidden cause of illness and heals sickness. Third, the mudang has a prophetic function. She predicts fortune or misfortune by calling on the spirit-god. Last, the mudang has an entertaining function. She performs music and dance to entertain the people. The mudang often carries out these functions through an ecstatic experience.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{itemize}
\item "Mukyouri Yoksawa Gujo [The History and Structure of Korean Shamanism], 2d ed. (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1978).
\item Ryu, 15, 27-30.
\end{itemize}
The ritual that the mudang performs is called gut. Usually gut is performed when a family or a village is suffering from disease, natural disaster, or an accident. Gut has both curative and preventive functions. Generally, the order of gut is composed of three parts. The first part starts with music and dance, expecting the mudang to be possessed by the spirit-god. In the second part of it, the mudang becomes the spirit-possessed being, and during this stage, the mudang announces when the sickness will be over and tells the divination. The last part of it is the procedure for sending away the spirit-god by placating it. Exorcism is at the center of the gut ritual.19

The essence of shamanism lies in the mysterious union between human beings and the spirit-god. Sang Jin Ahn indicates that with the shamanistic faith, people experience not only individual resolution of one’s han but also an empowerment to participate in transforming activity.20 Ahn maintains that the shamanistic faith provides “the spiritual impetus for the people in the face of threats from both inside and outside their nation” and “the cultural spirit for many popular uprisings in the later part of the Josôn (Yi) dynasty, of which Donghak Farmers’ Revolt, is the most well known.”21

Korean shamanism has contributed to the rapid spread of Protestant Christianity


21Ibid., 74, 78. The Donghak Revolution of 1894 is the peasant uprising against the corrupted government and the Japanese colonial attack of Korea. The Revolution will be examined later in this chapter.
in Korea. First of all, the Korean concept of God, named Hananim, "One Supreme God," is an especially unique concept related to Korean shamanism. The concept of one supreme god over many spirits in shamanism was a particularly helpful bridge to Protestant Christianity. According to the shamanistic concept of god, there is a supreme god and under him are numerous lesser deities or spirits. This supreme god is the one who reigns over nature and humans by sending rain and thunder as well as punishment and reward to people in accordance with their behaviors.

The earlier missionaries indicate that "the concept of Hananim has monotheistic implications that are unique to Korean shamanism." It was their understanding that the term Hananim referred to the highest deity in the religious culture of Korea from primitive times. The term actually comes from Hanalnim ("Heavenly Sovereign"), one of the most ancient and indigenous terms for God in Korea. Later, Hanalnim became Hananim, or Hanunim, derived from its strong shamanistic roots. The early Protestant missionaries quickly adopted Hananim as a distinctive Korean deity suited to their own

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22 Clark, Religions of Old Korea, 196; Ryu, Han'guk Jonggyowa Kidokkyo [Korean Religion and Christianity], 16, 19.


26 Ahn, Continuity and Transformation, 51. "Hananim," with its emphasis on monotheism ("hana" means "one"), is the Protestant choice, while "Hanunim," which connotes the "Heavenly Sovereign," is favored by the Catholics. Korean shamanism recognizes one God, Hanunim, who is the one supreme mind. Faith in Hanunim is the most important characteristic of traditional shamanism. Jung Young Lee, "Concerning the Origin and Formation of Korean Shamanism," Numen 20, no. 2 (1973): 152; quoted in Pak, Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church, 24.
image of God.\textsuperscript{27} The term \textit{Hananim} was officially adopted by Korean Protestant
churches in 1912.\textsuperscript{28} This concept of \textit{Hananim} has operated very positively for the
Korean church's mission and growth. Regarding the rapid growth of the Korean
Protestant church, Ruth A. Tucker claims, “One of the reasons for this may have been the
Protestants’ use of the Korean term \textit{Hananim} for God, avoiding the imported Chinese
term that the Catholics used.”\textsuperscript{29}

\textit{Hananim} of Korean shamanism, however, is a relative concept when one
compares it with the Creator and Redeemer God in Scripture. The shamanistic concept
of the spirit world is not to be identified with the Christian worldview and concept of
demons. Korean shamanism has no precise idea of Creation or the concept of sin
between God and human beings, and thus has no concept of redemption and judgment.
Charles A. Clark states, “As to ideas of sin and questions of morality, shamanism does
not seem to have been very much exercised.”\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{quote}
27James Huntley Grayson, \textit{Early Buddhism and Christianity in Korea: A Study in the
Emplantation of Religion} (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), 137; Horace G. Underwood, \textit{The
Religions of Eastern Asia} (New York: Macmillan Company, 1910), 103-111; James S.
Gale, \textit{Korea in Transition} (New York: Eaten and Mains, 1906), 78. For a comprehensive
study on this matter, see Nam Hyuck Jang, \textit{Shamanism in Korean Christianity} (Edison,
NJ: Jimoonbang International, 2004); Young-Bok Rha, “An Analysis of the Terms Used
for God in Korea in the Context of Indigenization” (Th.D. diss., Boston University, 1977).

28David Chung and Kang-nam Oh, \textit{Syncretism: The Religious Context of
University of New York Press, 2001), 178. This official adoption of the term was
fundamentally significant in providing a point of contact between the Korean religious
culture and the imported faith, thereby allowing for a smooth transition from the native
concept of God to that of the Christian image. Ryu, \textit{Han'guk Jongggyowa Kidokkyo
[Korean Religion and Christianity]}, 33.

29Ruth A. Tucker, \textit{From Jerusalem to Iran Jaya} (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan,
1983), 455. Catholics chose the term \textit{Chonju}, “Lord-of-Heaven,” or “Heavenly Lord” for
“God.”

30Clark, \textit{Religions of Old Korea}, 196.
\end{quote}
Second, the priestly function of the mudang as a mediator between a god and humans helped Koreans more easily accept the idea of a Savior who came to the world to intercede between God and human beings. Because the mudang performed the gut to liberate people from their oppression-induced han, Koreans could understand Jesus as One who came to this world to liberate the poor and the oppressed (Luke 4:18). Korean mudangs have played the role of the priestess of han-pu-ri (“release of han”) in their communities.

Although the role of the mudang as a mediator appears similar to the role of Jesus, there are unparalleled differences in substance. Jesus as the Son of God offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for freeing humanity from the bondage of sin and gave people freedom from sin. A mudang, however, is not a loving God and does not offer herself as a sacrifice for sin. A mudang cannot give people freedom from sin. When people evoke rages from the spirit-god, the mudang appeases it for them through shamanistic rituals without any sincere repentance. The priestly function of the mudang has also encouraged a spirit of dependency and fatalism. In the face of difficulty, a person simply goes to the mudang for assistance. This easily falls into fatalism because, in shamanism, one’s destiny or fate is controlled, not by one’s own decision, but by

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31Ryu, Han’guk Jonggyowa Kidokkyo [Korean Religion and Christianity], 20.

32“Han-pu-ri” is an indigenous Korean word which denotes “release or disentanglement of accumulated han.” This term originally came from the Korean shamanistic tradition. This will be explained further in the following chapter.


Third, the shamanistic faith provided Koreans enthusiasm for overcoming their hardships of life. Sang Jin Ahn claims that minjung movements for social justice in Korean history are the "shaman ethos" of the Korean minjung. This kind of zest is found in Korean Protestant Christianity, in which followers are taught to pray zealously to God whenever they face any crisis. The early morning and all-night prayer meetings in most Korean Protestant churches, Dongsoo Kim states, are the result of the influence of shamanism.

Korean shamanism, however, tends to focus on recreational hedonism. Its fatalism brings a focus on temporal pleasure and amusement. This focus is evident in the entertaining function of gut. Therefore, overcoming the negative residues of Korean shamanism is one of the challenges facing Korean Christianity today.

Minjung theologians observe that Korean shamanism has been closely related to the lives of the minjung throughout Korean history. David Kwang-sun Suh, one of the representative minjung theologians, argues that Korean shamanism as "the basic mind-set

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35 Ryu, Han'guk Jonggyowa Kidokkyo [Korean Religion and Christianity], 34.
36 Ahn, Continuity and Transformation, 74.
38 Ryu, Han'guk Mukyoui Yoksawa Gujo [The History and Structure of Korean Shamanism], 345-346.
39 Pak, Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church, 31.
40 Kim, "Christianity, Shamanism, and Modernization in South Korea," 112-119.
41 Suh, The Korean Minjung in Christ, 89-117.
of the Korean people" has been "the religion of the Korean minjung." So, minjung theologians have studied the minjung tradition in Korean shamanism.

Minjung theologians are interested in the shamanistic function that seeks to liberate the minjung from the han-ridden oppression caused by social injustice, political oppression, and foreign invasions. They consider the priestly function of the mudang in their role as an analogy of their role as "priests of han" for the Korean minjung. They value the way that Korean shamanism has historically fulfilled the religious needs of the minjung and continues to be a popular method to release the han of the minjung. Therefore, minjung theologians adopt the cultural and religious context of Korean shamanism as an important source of theology.

Buddhism

Buddhism came to Korea from China in A.D. 372 and became a dominant social

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42 Suh, The Korean Minjung in Christ, 94.

43 Ibid., 102-107.


47 Buddhism originated in India. Its founder is called "The Buddha," i.e., the "Enlightened One." Korean Buddhism is slightly different from the original Indian version. There are two types of Buddhism: Hinayana ("the smaller vehicle"), the austere original form of Buddhism, and Mahayana ("the larger vehicle"), the popular and all-inclusive form of Buddhism. The former is found in Ceylon and Burma and is known as "Southern Buddhism," and the latter, found in all Northern Asia, including Korea and Japan, is known as "Northern Buddhism." The Buddhism of Korea belongs to the Mahayana branch. What made Mahayana "greater" was that it made entrance to Nirvana
presence during the periods of the Three Kingdoms, Unified Silla, and the Koryo dynasty. Buddhism reached its "golden age" in the Koryo dynasty as an official state religion. In this period, it became not only a religious force but also a political power. Toward the end of the dynasty, however, surfeited by material possessions and political powers, it became corrupted. Thus, the majority of Koreans turned their backs on Buddhism. Consequently, the following Chosun dynasty accepted Confucianism as its state religion and adopted a stern anti-Buddhist policy.\textsuperscript{48}

Buddhism has been "an integral part of religious life in Korea ever since its introduction into the country" and "never ceased to be influential among the populace."\textsuperscript{49} Even during the long period of its tribulation in the Chosun dynasty, Buddhism with shamanism had exerted its influence among the majority of the lower class. As a religion of the ruling class, Confucianism excluded the lower class from its benefits. This excluded majority of the society was left to Buddhism and shamanism. Today, a large group of Korean people still regard themselves as Buddhists. Thus, in its long history in Korea, Buddhism has shaped and given direction to many aspects of Korean religious culture. The Buddhist concept of spiritual meditation and awakening, heart cleansing, and the respect for all things is deeply rooted in the minds of the Korean people.\textsuperscript{50}

(Buddhism’s final goal) available to a greater number of people. Clark, Religions of Old Korea, 13-20, 85-90; Wanne J. Joe, Traditional Korea: A Cultural History (Seoul: Choongang University Press, 1972), 114-115; Ryu, Han ’guk Jonggyowa Kidokkyo [Korean Religion and Christianity], 37-40.

\textsuperscript{48} Pak, Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church, 32-36; Ryu, Han ’guk Jonggyowa Kidokkyo [Korean Religion and Christianity], 35-60.

\textsuperscript{49} Chung and Oh, Syncretism, 126.

\textsuperscript{50} Adams, “The Roots of Korean Theology,” 201-204.
The basic concepts of Buddhism have been the “Four Noble Truths and Eight-Fold Path.” The first truth is that life is suffering. In Buddhism, it is believed that life in itself is suffering. The second truth is that desire is the cause of suffering. The third truth is that the way to solve the problem of suffering is by getting rid of desire. True peace is found only when all passions have been completely extinguished. The fourth truth is that one can get rid of desire by following the eight-fold path. The eight-fold path is as follows: (1) right view; (2) right aspiration; (3) right speech; (4) right conduct; (5) right mode of livelihood; (6) right effort; (7) right awareness; and (8) right concentration.

The goal of the doctrine of Buddhism is to enter Nirvana (in Korean, Yolban) through practicing the “Four Noble Truths and Eight-Fold Path.” The term Nirvana is the state reached by a human being who conquers desire. Nirvana refers to the transcending reality and to the conceptual expression of the state of eternal being, or “supreme bliss.” In general, it may be described as a state of perfect peace and tranquility. Buddhists believe that Nirvana comes through a person’s own effort toward enlightenment. It, however, is an ambiguous concept. It is so remote and abstract, and the process is so long and difficult, that very few people have a hope for its achievement.52

One way of looking at the formation of the Korean minjung consciousness is through the Buddhist belief in Maitreya (in Korean, Miruk), or “Buddhism’s Messiah.”53 The name “Maitreya” comes from a Sanskrit word meaning “friendliness or

51Clark, Religions of Old Korea, 85-90; Ryu, Han’guk Jonggyowa Kidokkyo [Korean Religion and Christianity], 36-37.
52Clark, Religions of Old Korea, 85-90.
53Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 174.
benevolence.\textsuperscript{54} The significance of Maitreya varies from place to place and from tradition to tradition, but the common element is the representation of hope for the future. The role of Maitreya was seen as one who brings both individual and national benefits.\textsuperscript{55}

According to Nam Dong Suh, when Buddhism was the state religion in Korea, the oppressed minjung developed the Maitreya tradition of Buddhist belief in opposition to the ruling elite’s official Amita Buddhism. Suh states that in Buddhist cosmology, the history of the world is divided into different aeons. During each of the aeons, a Buddha appears. Among these, Siddharta Buddha or Amita Buddha is of the present world. If one prays to Siddharta Buddha, he or she will enter the Buddhist Western Paradise after death. But, if one makes supplication to Maitreya Buddha, who is the Buddha of the coming world, Maitreya Buddha will help one realize the new world.\textsuperscript{56}

In Korea, while the rulers promoted Amita Buddhism, the common people believed in the coming of the Maitreya. The poet Eun Ko, the first to trace the connection between Maitreya and the minjung, compares Siddhartha (Amita) Buddha and Maitreya. Ko says that while Amita promised an other-worldly paradise after death, Maitreya promised a new coming world. Maitreya Buddhism appeared as a historical demand and responded to the religious needs of people. It is significant that while Amita Buddhism supplanted Maitreya Buddhism in China and Japan, the latter survived among the minjung in Korea.\textsuperscript{57}


\textsuperscript{55}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{56}Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 174-177.

As one of the saviors of Mahayana Buddhism, Maitreya Buddha is seen as a liberative figure closely related to the minjung. The Korean minjung found relief from their suffering through their belief in the coming of Maitreya. This unique belief “has always been a companion of the discontent minjung ever since the inception of Buddhism” and “has influenced the disgruntled people to rise against the oppressive principalities.”

Thus, historically, Maitreya Buddhism arose among the oppressed minjung who were against the existing social system and “helped the Korean minjung revolt against the unjust, anti-minjung, political ideology of domination.”

Likewise, the belief in Maitreya Buddha has given rise to various minjung movements in Korean history and “has played a key role in cutting off the oppressed minjung’s han.” Several revolutionary movements were attempted by the followers of Maitreya Buddhism. For instance, Kyon Hwun, the founder of the Latter Baekje dynasty, claimed himself to be an incarnation of Maitreya. He was successful in revolution, mobilizing the oppressed minjung through Maitreya Buddhism. Later, Kung Ye, who claimed to be the prince of Maitreya, initiated a revolution to overthrow the Silla dynasty. Wang Gun, founder of the Koryo dynasty, also believed in the Maitreya revolution.

In addition, with Christianity and Donghak, Maitreya Buddhism influenced the March First Independence Movement of 1919. Out of thirty-three leaders of the

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58 Ahn, Continuity and Transformation, 110, 111.


61 Jong Sun Noh, Religion and Just Revolution: Third World Perspective (Hamden, CT: Center for Asian Theology, 1984), 27-30; Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 174-177.
movement, two were Buddhists, one of these being Yong Woon Han (1899-1944), a believer in Maitreya. This is one of the evidences of the historical influence of Maitreya Buddhism. Therefore, the belief in Maitreya has become a useful bridge for minjung theology as it tries to relate to minjung Buddhism.

Confucianism

Confucianism is an ethical teaching that attempts to establish an order of human relations. The great source books of Confucianism are mainly concerned with *Samgang Oryun*, the “Three Bonds and the Five Moral Relations” among people.

The Three Bonds describes the three fundamental hierarchical relationships between king and servant, father and son, and husband and wife. The former in each of the three groups has authority over the latter and the relationship is characterized by obedience and subjection.

62 See Yong Woon Han, “Choson Bulkyo Ui Kaehyok [A Reformation of Buddhism in Korea],” in *Han'guk Keundae Minjung Bulkyo Ui Yinyomkwa Jonkae* [Development and Thought of Minjung Buddhism in Korea], ed. Chong Man Han (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1980), 107-143.


64 Confucianism is based on the life and thought of Confucius (552-479 B.C.) in China. The main thesis of Confucius was right relations within the family and society, based on the “Five Classics” and the “Four Books.” The five classics are: *The Book of Poetry*, *The Book of History*, *The Book of Changes*, *The Book of Rites*, and *Annals of Spring and Autumn*. The four books are: *The Analects of Confucius*, *The Works of Mencius*, *The Doctrine of Mean*, and *The Book of Great Learning*. Confucius’s moral and ethical teachings have dominated Chinese philosophical thinking for about two millennia, and also have made an impact on Korean society. Clark, *Religions of Old Korea*, 91; Joe, *Traditional Korea*, 97; Kim, “Oppression and Han,” 58-59.

65 The “Five Classics” and the “Four Books.”

The Five Moral Relations include the following five cardinal articles of morality:
(1) the faithfulness between ruler and subject; (2) the affection between father and son;
(3) the distinction between husband and wife; (4) the right order between old and young;
and (5) the confidence among friends. All of these relationships except the last are
hierarchical; the former exercises more rights and privileges, while the latter is dutiful
and submissive. Therefore, Confucianism regards human society in terms of the ethical
responsibilities that result from such relationships.

As the quintessential feature of Chinese civilization, Confucianism has had a great
influence on the Korean national character with its concept of social harmony and moral
precepts. Ostensibly, it was supposed to show the “dynamic discovery of the worth of
the human person,” “the possibility of moral greatness,” and “a society based on ethical
values.”

In the Chosun dynasty, however, Confucian teachings were taught in a more rigid
manner than in China. The brand of Korean Confucianism was characterized by legalism,
formality, factionalism, and a chauvinistic society of strict hierarchy. For example,
three out of the Five Moral Relations, such as the relations between father and son,
husband and wife, old and young, relates to the family order. The relationship between
the ruler and the subject is understood as the simple extension of the family relationship.
The favoritism based on kinship promotes family-centered rivalry. This factional strife,

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Dong Shik Ryu states, was the cause of the decisive defect of the Chosun dynasty.\(^6^9\)

Confucianism lost its socio-political power in Korea with the fall of the Chosun dynasty, but still remains as a major source of cultural influence. Korea is still a Confucian society, while this is not the case in China and in Japan. The former has been dominated by the Communist ideology which has been predominant for half a century, and the latter has had Buddhism as the strongest religion for many centuries.\(^7^0\) Thus, as Michael Kalton states, “Korean society undoubtedly possesses the deepest and most vital Confucian tradition.”\(^7^1\)

Minjung theologians are particularly concerned with the stratification based upon gender and inherited social status established during the Chosun dynasty.\(^7^2\) The authority of the superior partners was essentially considered to be ethical. Many women were not even given a name by their parents and were denied human rights by their government.\(^7^3\)


\(^7^2\)Yong-Bock Kim, “Korean Christianity as a Messianic Movement for the People,” in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History*, 81; Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” 58.

A distinction between yangban and sangmin was also introduced at this period. Yangban is a bureaucratic structure of literati of the Chosun dynasty. With the ideology of Confucianism, the Chosun dynasty established a yangban society. The yangban enjoyed all the socio-economic privileges, married only among themselves, and preserved their status. During this time, the distinction between the ruler and the ruled was strictly observed. The ordinary people were oppressed by the yangban.

It is in this context that the term “minjung” was used for the first time. Dong Whan Moon states, “The term ‘minjung’ came to be used first during the Yi [Chosun] Dynasty (1392-1910) when the common people were oppressed by the yangban class, the ruling class.” Minjung theologians believe that the strict rules of Confucianism made the minjung a han-ridden people. Therefore, minjung theology tries to articulate theology from these concrete historical experiences.

Taoism

Unlike Buddhism and Confucianism, Taoism has never been a popular religion

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74 Sangmin is a derogatory word that refers to those who were farmers, artisans, merchants, and slaves in the infrastructure of the Chosun dynasty. They had to pay taxes and contribute military services and other duties, while the yangban were exempt from military and other duties.


76 Dong Whan Moon, “Korean Minjung Theology” (unpublished manuscript), 3-4; quoted in Lee, An Emerging Theology, 4.

77 Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” 55-69.

78 Taoism presumably originated with Lao-Tzu (ca. 604-ca. 531 B.C.), the master of the ancient Chinese mystics. The primary books of Taoism are not many. The Lao-Tzu, also known as Tao Te Ching, and the Chuang-Tzu are the chief sources of Taoist
in Korea. There are two kinds of Taoism: philosophical and religious. The central theme of philosophical Taoism is the Tao ("Way," or "Ultimate"). Tao, as both spirit and matter, is not only the first cause of all things but also their effect. It encompasses and sustains all things. Both the individual and the larger social structure must be molded on this great principle.

After its humble beginning in China as a philosophy, Taoism evolved into a complex religious system involving geomancy and thaumaturgy. This was the brand of religious Taoism that was introduced into Korea. Its ideas and concepts were incorporated into the minds of common Koreans. Divination, geomancy, and those Taoist ideas particularly related to immortality became deeply entrenched in the Korean mindset.

Taoism has both influenced and has been influenced by other Korean religious systems. Because of its mystical and naturalistic inclinations, Korean Taoism was easily assimilated into Korean shamanism. It is evident that Korean shamanism borrowed heavily from the religious features of Taoism. The idea of shinson ("divine immortals") in Taoism is associated with shamanistic mountain cults in Korea. This is shown in the language, where shinson is used interchangeably with sanshin ("mountain-god").

thought. See Julian F. Pas, The A to Z of Taoism, rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006); Chung and Oh, Syncretism, 146-147; Pak, Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church, 40-41.


80 Pak, Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church, 16.

81 Ahn, Continuity and Transformation, 11.
For example, Dangun is said to have become sanshin. He was not only the supposed forefather of the Korean race but also the religious head of the nation. Dangun is considered the very first shaman because, according to Dangun myth, he is a mediator between the spiritual world of heaven and the material world of earth. This concept of shinson is made more “this-worldly transcendent” in Korean shamanism.

Taoist ideas incorporated with shamanism also influenced the Donghak movement which is regarded “as an important spiritual root of Minjung theology.” For example, the Donghak founder Je-Woo Choi’s idea of jisang shinson (“earthly divine immortals”) resembles similar ideas in Korean Taoism and shamanism. Choi taught his followers that they should aspire to be jisang shinson. In this manner, the Donghak adopted “the Taoist ‘spiritual techniques.’”

The Donghak

At the end of the Chosun dynasty, Korean society experienced great social and political upheaval. Je-Woo Choi felt a calling to transform the contemporary social situation from its root cause by confronting the social injustice and political corruption.

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82 Ryu, Han'guk Jonggyowa Kidokkyo [Korean Religion and Christianity], 18.
83 Clark, Religions of Old Korea, 176.
84 Ahn, Continuity and Transformation, 8. Jae Woong Ahn states, “The most outstanding of religious wisdom of the minjung, which arose out of established religions, is the Tonghak” (“The Wisdom of the Minjung in Korea,” 113).
85 Ahn, Continuity and Transformation, 24; Chung and Oh, Syncretism, 153. See also Adams, “The Sources of Minjung Theology,” 187-189.
Choi, a man of deep thought and insight, felt the "nearness of the end of the world." Even though he believed that religion constituted the deepest fundamental needs of human beings, Choi considered the traditional religions "dead" since they were powerless to reform a corrupt society.

Accordingly, Choi first explored the universal truth in the religious traditions of his time and then wandered and observed the world for several years. Through extensive study, Choi selectively integrated the essential features of the traditional religions and created the Donghak ("Eastern Learning"). Thus, the Donghak was in essence a syncretistic religion. For example, Choi took the ethics from Confucianism such as proper inter-human relationships; from Buddhism, the concept of heart cleansing and the respect of all things; from Taoism, the idea of immortality such as jisang shinson; and from shamanism, the liberating spirituality for the minjung.

Choi's primary motivation in creating a new religion was to rescue people from their socio-political turmoil as well as their spiritual poverty. Sang Jin Ahn claims that Choi's starting point was the social situation of his day and his method of transforming the present social situation was in discovering a connection between past religious ideas and the present reality. Choi's teaching was summed up in the Donghak's main doctrine.

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87 Pak, Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church, 18.

88 Choi understood that Confucianism, which had been a strong supporter of the political and social status quo of the Chosun dynasty over five hundred years, was unable to correct the corruption of the society. He also believed that Buddhism and Taoism had no spiritual power to save the people and the nation from the current turmoil. Ahn, Continuity and Transformation, 46, 58.

Innaechun, which is translated—"Humanity is Heaven."\(^{90}\)

The concept of Innaechun is seen in the theory of Jisang Chunguk, "Heaven on Earth." In order to bring this about, Tuk-hwang Kim states, spiritual, national, and social enlightenment must proceed. The spiritual enlightenment involves individual liberation and changes in the idea of humans. The national enlightenment involves the liberation of every nation from foreign domination. The social enlightenment means the elimination of all obstacles that hinder progress in society.\(^{91}\) Thus, the concept of Innaechun expresses the dignity and equality of all people,\(^{92}\) and its norms are "equality, freedom, and justice."\(^{93}\) The ultimate thought of the Donghak, Woo-Keun Han states, draws the conclusion: "It envisioned an earthly paradise which should come into existence when the corrupt bureaucracy had been overthrown and the foreigners, with their disruptive ideas and their crude commercialism, had been driven away."\(^{94}\)

Consequently, Choi viewed inequality as the main cause of widespread corruption among the different social strata in the Confucian Chosun dynasty. His goal was to dismantle inequality in all areas of social life. His way of tackling the ideology of the oppressive ruling class was "a radical reinterpretation of human nature."\(^{95}\) Choi believed

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\(^{90}\) Ahn, Continuity and Transformation, 62-67.

\(^{91}\) Tuk-hwang Kim, Han'guk Sasangs [The History of Korean Thought] (Seoul: Han'guk Sasang Yon'gusa, 1963), 232-233.

\(^{92}\) Ryu, "Ch'ondogyo: Korea's Only Indigenous Religion," 77.

\(^{93}\) Noh, "Donghak and Liberation," 223.

\(^{94}\) Han, The History of Korea, 356-357.

\(^{95}\) Ahn, Continuity and Transformation, 66, 67. Choi’s sincerity was seen in the way he set his slaves free: he made one of his maids his daughter-in-law, and the other his adopted daughter.
that when people came to realize their worth as human beings, they could be changed and then would change society. On the doctrinal basis of Innaechun, Choi advocated an egalitarian ethic which served to shed a new light on the self-understanding of the people. The Donghak ideals of egalitarianism and social justice had great appeal to the oppressed populace, and the Donghak was eventually embraced as Korea’s indigenous religion.

The Donghak movement culminated in the Donghak Revolution of 1894. It was February 15, 1894, when the peasants in Gobu, Cholla Province, revolted against the corrupt local aristocrats. Gobu was known as the most fertile land for rice production. Since the unequal treaty with Japan, the peasants were forced to sell their rice to Japan cheaply. The peasants gathered around Bong Joon Chun (1854-1895), one of the Donghak leaders. Chun “was strongly influenced by Donghak beliefs and principles.” He appealed for support to all Donghak leaders in the country, and some 600,000 followers joined the revolution. It quickly swept across the Cholla Province, the southern part of Korea, and beyond.

The central government was greatly threatened and asked China to send its military. In June 1894, about three thousand Chinese soldiers came. As China became involved, Japan feared a Chinese monopoly in the Korean peninsula. So Japan also sent military.

96Lee, Religion and Social Formation in Korea, 118.
97Ibid., 119.
98The Donghak was an effective transition for the people who had been shaped by shamanistic culture. The shamanistic faith was, Jong Sun Noh states, “incorporated as a positive and authentic religious experience of the socially discriminated, educationally deprived, and politically oppressed people.” Thus, “shamanism in Donghak made Donghak a religion of the oppressed” (“Donghak and Liberation,” 218, 219).
99Lee, Religion and Social Formation in Korea, 122.
100Kang, “Belief and Political Behavior in Ch’ondogyo,” 41.
seven thousand soldiers. This resulted in the Sino-Japanese War, in which the Japanese
defeated the Chinese army. The Japanese overcame the Korean government army and
then turned against the Donghaks. Now the goal of the Donghak army shifted from
economic and political reform to the expulsion of the Japanese. The Donghak army was
attacked and crushed, and Bong Joon Chun, the leader of the revolution, was captured
and executed at the end of 1894.  

This revolution was, Yong Choon Kim states, “the concrete expression of the
spirit of Innaechun.” The Donghak belief instilled a revolutionary mind-set in the
oppressed, playing a critical role in the revolution and the rise of a new government.
Significant aspects of the Kab-O Reform (a renovation of the political system) that
occurred later in the same year were the following reforms: (1) a restructuring of the class
system; (2) abolition of the slavery system; (3) abolition of the law that prevented
widows from remarrying; and (4) abrogation of the national examination for government
positions; among other reforms.

According to minjung theologians, the spirit of the Donghak was passed down to
other minjung movements throughout the twentieth century in Korea, particularly the

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101 See Ahn, Continuity and Transformation, 67-69; Kang, “Belief and Political
Behavior in Ch’ondogyo,” 38-42; Lee, Religion and Social Formation in Korea, 120-127.
102 Kim, The Ch’ondogyo Concept of Man, 113.
103 Ryu, Han’guk Jonggyowa Kidokkyo [Korean Religion and Christianity], 103.
104 Ibid., 105-106.
105 Ahn, Continuity and Transformation, 70; Kim, The Ch’ondogyo Concept of
Man, 113-114; Ryu, “Ch’ondogyo: Korea’s Only Indigenous Religion,” 75-76. See also
Ahn, Continuity and Transformation, 49-71; Wanne J. Joe, A Cultural History of Modern
Korea: A History of Korean Civilization (Seoul: Hollym, 2000), 95-139, 216-250; Lee, A
New History of Korea, 281-299.
minjung democratization and human rights movements of the 1970s. During the military dictatorship in the 1970s, minjung theologians reread the Donghak history while being expelled from their professorships or jailed for their involvement in protest for democratization and human rights.

With careful analysis of the Donghak liberation ideology, minjung theologians are attempting to discover a biblical vision of God's mission in the Donghak movement for justice. The Donghak beliefs emphasize the importance of the individual in relation to others in society in the area of social relationships. Their concerns were social justice, protection of the nation, and security for the people. The Donghak notion of salvation is in both the individual and social dimension. The Donghak, Wi Jo Kang states, "never separated the individual from the society; rather the teaching emphasized the importance of the individual in relation to his fellowmen and his countrymen. For the disciple of Donghak, 'Any personal salvation is but a constituent element in social salvation. Salvation is the liberation of mankind from all man-inflicted suffering." Consequently, the minjung theological movement of the 1970s "can trace its inspiration, in part, to the Donghak leaders' thinking." The legacy of the Donghak was an influence on the emergence of minjung theology. According to Daniel Adams, minjung theology has inherited the essence of the Donghak, such as minjung

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106 Chai Yong Choo, "A Brief Sketch of the Korean Christian History: From the Minjung Perspective," in Theology of Korean Culture, ed. The Theology of Korean Culture Society (Seoul: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 2002), 227, 228. This will be explained more later in this chapter.


109 Noh, "Donghak and Liberation," 213.
consciousness, the liberation movement, and a this-worldly view of social change.\footnote{Adams, "The Sources of Minjung Theology," 187-189.}

Christianity

Roman Catholicism came to Korea in 1784.\footnote{Informal contacts of Japanese Catholic believers with Koreans are known to have begun in the late sixteenth century. But the Japanese Catholics with whom Koreans met were the soldiers who invaded Korea. So, any connection with later Christian communities is yet to be traced. Kyung Bae Min, Han’guk Kidok Kyohoesa [The History of the Korean Christian Church], rev. ed. (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1993), 34-43.} In 1783, Seung Hoon Lee (1756-1801), son of a Korean tribute envoy for China, accompanied his father to Beijing. He was baptized and became a Christian there. When he returned home in 1784, he held regular worship services with the people. This marked the beginning of the Catholic movement in Korea. The church began to grow.\footnote{Min, Han’guk Kidok Kyohoesa [The History of the Korean Christian Church], 56-57.}

At that time, Korea was an absolute monarchy based on Confucian principles. Confucianism included the important element of ancestral worship, which the church renounced as idolatry. The Roman Catholic Church condemned ancestor worship as pagan rites. In 1790, Alexander de Gouvea, the Catholic bishop of Beijing in China, prohibited Korean Catholics from engaging in ancestor worship. This edict was based on Pope Clement XI’s prohibition of ancestor worship in March 1715 and again in July 1742. This had scandalized Korean Confucianists, and thus the Roman Catholic Church became anathema to the Confucian Chosun dynasty as an anti-national and anti-patriotic religion.\footnote{L. George Paik, Han’guk Kaesinkyosa, 1832-1910 [The History of Protestant Missions in Korea, 1832-1910] (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1973), 30; Pak, Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church, 250.} Christians were accused and persecuted for immorality, since filial impiety...
was considered a crime in Confucian society.

Sang Taek Lee states, "At the heart of the conflict was the dispute over who was the true king. The Christians proclaimed God as King and as their Heavenly Father, these being the very titles the Korean King took upon himself."\(^{114}\) This led to a clash between Catholicism and the government. The government called Catholicism "the Evil Religion" and issued an edict to ban the Catholic faith in 1785.\(^{115}\) The first-century history of Korean Catholicism was dominated by repression and bloody persecution.\(^{116}\) In spite of severe persecutions, however, Korean Catholicism was firmly established, and by 1850 the number of known Catholics had reached 11,000, and in fifteen years that number more than doubled.\(^{117}\)

After nearly a century of persecution, the ban on the Catholic faith was officially

\(^{114}\)Lee, *Religion and Social Formation in Korea*, 130. For example, in his letter to China, the king wrote that "Christianity is utter blasphemy against Heaven" and charges the Christian heresy with stifling "all feelings of filial piety, abolishing sacrifice to ancestors, and with burning the memorial stones." The Institute of Korean Church Studies, ed., *Han’guk Kidokkyoui Yoksa* [A History of Korean Church], vol. 1 (Seoul: The Christian Literature Press, 1989), 88; quoted in ibid.

\(^{115}\)Clark, *Christianity in Modern Korea*, 5.

\(^{116}\)Samuel Hugh Moffett, *The Christians of Korea* (New York: Friendship Press, 1962), 33. Korean Catholics had the most violent persecution from the Chosun government, especially in 1801, 1839, and 1866. The great persecution in 1866 lasted for five years. These series of persecutions show the government’s concern for the subversion of traditional social customs and fears of the loss of national sovereignty. For example, part of the persecution in 1801 was due to a letter of Sa Young Hwang in which Hwang appealed for a Western army to protect the fledgling church. This made the government think that Catholicism both endangered the social ethics by its refusal of ancestor worship and raised the question of political subordination of the nation. Through these persecutions, thousands of people died for their faith. Min, *Han’guk KidokKyohoesa* [The History of the Korean Christian Church], 67-70, 91-95; Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Mission*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 349-350.

\(^{117}\)Pak, *Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church*, 17.

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lifted in 1896.\(^{118}\) This opened the way for missionary work, both Catholic and Protestant.\(^{119}\) Korean Catholicism grew relatively slowly until after World War II. Since the 1960s, the Korean Catholic Church has been in the forefront of the pro-democracy and human rights movement and has made ministry to the poor a primary focus of church work. Its social outreach has been greater than at any time in the past. The church was particularly involved in movements for the welfare of industrial workers in Korea's rapidly changing society.\(^{120}\) Although the Korean Catholic Church has been involved in social issues, it draws a distinction between social action and support for minjung theology. The church hierarchy has its own theology of social concern and thus claims no connection to minjung theology.\(^{121}\)

Since Pope John Paul II's visit to Korea at the bicentennial of Korean Catholic mission in May 1984, the Catholic Church in Korea has made rapid growth. Pope John Paul II canonized 103 martyrs from the Korean church, the largest number of saints canonized at any one time. According to the 1995 National Household Census, there were approximately three million self-identified Catholics.\(^{122}\)

The first Protestant missionary came to Korea in 1884, around the time of the fall

\(^{118}\)Ryu, *Han'guk Sinhakui Kwangmaek* [The Vein of Ore of Korean Theology], 42.


\(^{120}\)Grayson, “Cultural Encounter,” 67.

\(^{121}\)Clark, “Growth and Limitations of Minjung Christianity,” 98, 99.

\(^{122}\)Clark, *Christianity in Modern Korea*, 35-36; James Huntley Grayson, “A Quarter-Millennium of Christianity in Korea,” in *Christianity in Korea*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Timothy S. Lee (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006), 19. For more about Korean Catholicism, see Min, *Han'guk Kidok Kyohoesa* [The History of the Korean Christian Church], 47-112.
of the Chosun dynasty. In that year, a medical doctor named Horace N. Allen was transferred from the Presbyterian Mission in China. The following year, mission work began in earnest when Horace G. Underwood from the Presbyterian Church and Mr. and Mrs. Henry G. Appenzeller from the Methodist Church came from the United States. Before the turn of the century, many other pioneers joined these early workers.

Other Protestant denominations came into Korea after the first three missionaries' coming, such as the Baptist Church (1889), Anglican Church (1890), Seventh-day Adventist Church (1904), Holiness Church (1907), Salvation Army (1908), etc. The advent of Christian missionary work marked the gradual decline of traditional Korean religions, and in the late nineteenth century Christianity filled the religious vacuum in Korea.

One unique feature of Korean Protestant Christianity is the fact that the Bible had already been translated into Korean before foreign missionaries set foot in Korea. John Ross and John McIntyre, Scottish United Presbyterian missionaries in Manchuria, translated the Gospel of Luke into Korean in 1882 with the help of their Korean language teacher, Ung Chan Lee, who became the first Protestant Korean Christian when he was baptized in Manchuria in 1876.

In 1887, the whole New Testament was translated into Korean. It is called the

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123 Ryu, Han’guk Sinhakui Kwangmaek [The Vein of Ore of Korean Theology], 42, 43.
124 Min, Han’guk Kidok Kyohoesa [The History of the Korean Christian Church], 146-150.
125 Ryu, Han’guk Sinhakui Kwangmaek [The Vein of Ore of Korean Theology], 43.
126 Pak, Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church, 44.
"Ross Version." It used *Hangul*, the vernacular Korean script for the commoners. This was in contrast to Korean Catholicism, which was accepted by the nobility and used Chinese, the language of the literate. By speaking to the people in their "heart language," Protestant Christianity in Korea held the attention of the common people from the very beginning. The Bible became the book of the common people, and its messages inspired them. This not only made Bible study possible for large numbers of common people, but also helped them have direct access to the liberating messages of Scripture. Much of the success of the Protestant churches in earlier years after the arrival of the missionaries in Korea was generally understood as a result of the translation of the Bible into their own language.128

The reason that early Protestant Christianity became the religion of the common people was due to its mission policy. John Livingstone Nevius, a Presbyterian missionary to China, visited Korea in 1890. During his visit, Nevius explained the mission policy, later known as "the Nevius Method," to missionaries in Korea. The method emphasized a self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting church. The important principles of the method were systematic Bible study and common-people-oriented evangelism. The method advised that it was better to aim at the conversion of the working class and women rather than the higher classes. This common-people-oriented mission policy became the social character of the early Korean churches. The mission was particularly directed toward those who were oppressed and excluded. The Nevius method became the universally accepted policy of Protestant missions in Korea.

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127 Choo, "A Brief Sketch of the Korean Christian History," 220; Min, *Han'guk Kidok Kyohoesa* [The History of the Korean Christian Church], 143.

128 Pak, *Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church*, 44.
and had a great influence on the extraordinary success of missions in Korea.¹²⁹

Since the days of the early missionaries, Protestant Christianity in Korea has contributed to the creation and development of modern schools and hospitals. Protestant missionary activities included medical work, education for women as well as men, media, and communication. The mission schools, such as Baejae Hakdang (1886), the Underwood Orphanage (1886), Ewha Hakdang (1886), and Euimyung Hakkyo (1906) would later develop into Baejae University, Yonsei University, Ewha Women’s University, and Sahmyook University, respectively.¹³⁰ At the same time, the Religious Tract Society for the distribution of the Scriptures and religious materials was created. Church hymnals in Korean were published by both the Methodists and Presbyterians in 1908, and the translation of the whole Bible was completed in 1910.¹³¹

During Japanese colonial rule, officials banned the circulation of certain books in Scripture, particularly Exodus, Daniel, and Revelation. They knew that these books exerted strong spiritual power on Korean Christians when they read them in light of the historical situation. Hee-suk Moon says that the Exodus story was reinterpreted through the social biography of the minjung in Korea. The Exodus model was “a revolutionary


¹³¹England et al., eds., Asian Christian Theologies, 494.
"paradigm" for Koreans. For instance, a preface to a Sunday-school lesson from this period states as follows:

The Book of Exodus is written about the powerful God, who liberated the people of Israel [which would have been interpreted as meaning the Korean people] from suffering and enslavement and made them the people who enjoyed glorious freedom; God appeared as Yahweh before Israel, and as the whole and just God. God exists by himself and of himself, God has sympathy, and God is the Savior. Exodus is the book of the miracle of God's liberation of the people of Israel from the power of Pharaoh [the Japanese emperor] with God's power. God has saved Israel first and established it as holy. This book is a foreshadowing of the redemptive love of Jesus in the Gospels and of God's power that cleanses; that is, the miracle of the grace shown forth.

During their national crises, Koreans would often turn to the church as an outlet for their national hopes in their sufferings. They perceived the Christian church as an open channel to the modern West and a resource for Korea's betterment. Korean Christians were empowered to play a major role in their national crises, such as the March First Independence Movement of 1919.

In 1918, Woodrow Wilson, then President of the United States, spoke of "the self-determination of small nations." It encouraged the Korean people to claim their independence. Christian churches, the Chondoists (Donghak believers), and a few Maitreya Buddhists met together to discuss how to achieve independence. On February

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22, 1919, the last king of the Chosun dynasty, Ko Jong, died unexpectedly. Mourners gathered all over the nation, and many traveled to Seoul.

At 2:00 p.m. on March 1, 1919, a crowd gathered in Pagoda Park in the heart of Seoul and heard the Declaration of Independence read. The Declaration of Independence was signed by thirty-three leaders: sixteen of them were Christians, fifteen were Chondoists, and two were Buddhists. The crowd began to march through Seoul, waving the Korean national flag. Demonstrations also took place that day in major cities all over the country, and the independence movement spread rapidly throughout Korea. During March and the following two months that year, there were about 1,500 demonstrations involving over two million people. But the Japanese response was brutal. It is generally agreed that about 7,500 people were killed, 16,000 wounded, and 46,000 imprisoned. In addition, 47 churches, 2 schools, and 715 homes were destroyed.\(^{135}\) The independence movement in 1919 was nonviolent and humanistic.\(^{136}\) It became "a pivotal event in modern Korean history."\(^{137}\)

Minjung theologians insist that Korean Protestantism engages with the socio-political issues of the day. Sang Taek Lee maintains that Korean Christians were active participants in the movement of 1919 because the newly emerging church was "comprised of the minjung classes," and "identified with the alienation of the Korean


\(^{137}\)Clark, *Christianity in Modern Korea*, 9.
people and in consequence shared in the sufferings under the Japanese.\textsuperscript{138}

The Protestant Church not only sponsored modern educational institutions and hospitals in Korea but also introduced modern key values such as human rights, democracy, and equality. Christians played important roles in South Korean politics. For example, Andrew E. Kim states, "Between 1952 and 1962 more than 32 percent of the Korean political leadership was comprised of Protestant Christians, which is astonishing given the fact that only about 4 percent of the Korean population was Protestant Christian during the same period."\textsuperscript{139}

Since the liberation from Japan in 1945, Protestant Christianity has seen dramatic growth, particularly during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. By 1989, about one fourth of South Korea’s population of 40 million were Protestant Christians.\textsuperscript{140} This number represented over 14 percent of the total Protestant population in Asia, where only 2 percent of the total population was Protestant Christian.\textsuperscript{141} It seems readily apparent that Protestant Christianity, as one of the major religions in Korea, has played a leading role in the modernization, democratization, and enlightenment of Korea since its introduction.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{138}Lee, Religion and Social Formation in Korea, 135-136. See also Taek Bu Chun, "Samil Undongui Kyohoesajok Uimi [The Church Historical Significance of the March First Independence Movement]," Kidokgyo Sasang [Christian Thought], no. 165 (March 1972): 42-55.


\textsuperscript{140}Kim, "Christianity, Shamanism, and Modernization in South Korea," 117; Min, Han’guk Kidok Kyohoesa [The History of the Korean Christian Church], 566.

\textsuperscript{141}Kim, "Christianity, Shamanism, and Modernization in South Korea," 118.

\textsuperscript{142}See Clark, Christianity in Modern Korea, 29-30; Byong-suh Kim, "Modernization and the Explosive Growth and Decline of Korean Protestant Religiousity," in Christianity in Korea, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Timothy S. Lee
Emergence of Minjung Theology

The purpose of this section is to examine the socio-religious milieu in which minjung theology emerged.

The Social Milieu in Korea during the 1970s

Korea's experiences of suffering in the twentieth century led some Korean theologians to pioneer a new spirit of inquiry regarding the Korean situation. Their theological reflection would contribute greatly to the movements in minjung theology. Chung Hee Park's military regime was politically authoritarian but economically liberal. For Park, the goal of economic growth surpassed other political goals, and he always emphasized that "without 'economic equality,' political democracy is no more than an 'abstract, useless concept.'" Because of the deficiency of assets, raw materials, and technology, Park's regime had export-oriented economic growth policies that depended on foreign assets and cheap wages for laborers in the country. Its economic policies proved highly successful. Ezra F. Vogel states, "South Korea was unrivaled, even by Japan, in the speed with which it went from having almost no industrial technology to taking its place among the world's industrialized nations."

\[\text{Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006}, 309-324; \text{Ryu, Han'guk Sinhakui Kwangmaek [The Vein of Ore of Korean Theology]}, 44-46.\]


\[144\text{England et al., eds., Asian Christian Theologies}, 540.\]


However, as in other industrializing countries, there were poor wages, dehumanizing working conditions, and a general exploitation of laborers.  

In 1972, Park tried to construct a one-man dictatorship, gaining long-term power through the introduction of the Yushin Constitution, which meant “a revitalizing reform.” The Yushin Constitution allowed the President the power to directly appoint one third of the Assembly and to enforce special emergency decrees that the president could use in an ad hoc manner. The Yushin Constitution effectively “transformed the presidency into a legal dictatorship.”

Korean Christian leaders responded to this in different ways. A majority of the Christian leadership cooperated with the regime, while a minority of Protestant leaders became champions of human rights and democracy by opposing the Yushin regime. They had launched the Urban Industrial Mission (UIM) during the 1960s. With increasing social unrest because of the regime’s economic and political policies, the UIM was concerned with the exploitation of laborers in the mass-production-oriented economy and the low-wage system of the government. The UIM ministers and church leaders obtained jobs as manual laborers in order to work alongside laborers and help them organize. Their activities consisted of providing Bible studies for workers, educating and training them in the organization of a labor union, and advising them on strategies for collective bargaining. The UIM continued its educational, organizational, and

147 Chang, “Carrying the Torch in the Darkest Hours,” 208.


149 Ibid., 365.
strategizing work with laborers throughout the 1970s.\textsuperscript{150}

Because their galvanizing of the "worker's consciousness" among laborers was perceived as a challenge to the Yushin regime,\textsuperscript{151} the UIM workers "were continually harassed and often arrested, interrogated, and even tortured."\textsuperscript{152} The work of the UIM spurred the interest of a few Christian theologians in the liberation movement. With this movement of awakening for human rights and social justice in Korea, "the emerging theological concern was on the minjung, the poor and the oppressed."\textsuperscript{153} Thus, even if the liberation movement for the poor and oppressed had its roots in early Protestant Christianity in Korea, the beginning of the theological movement for them can be traced to the activities of the UIM. According to Donald Clark, the UIM "is the quintessence of minjung activism,"\textsuperscript{154} and its history "is the quintessential praxis of minjung theology."\textsuperscript{155}

Not only did the UIM oppose Park's regime, but in 1973, one year after the introduction of the Yushin Constitution, a group of theologians issued the "Theological Declaration of Korean Christians"\textsuperscript{156} which is the "theological basis for Christian


\textsuperscript{152}Clark, "Growth and Limitations of Minjung Christianity," 96.

\textsuperscript{153}Lee, \textit{An Emerging Theology}, 7.

\textsuperscript{154}Clark, \textit{Christianity in Modern Korea}, 45.

\textsuperscript{155}Clark, "Growth and Limitations of Minjung Christianity," 97. See also Chang, "Carrying the Torch in the Darkest Hours," 212.

\textsuperscript{156}Lee, \textit{A Comparative Study between Minjung Theology and Reformed Theology}, 69. This declaration was issued on May 20, 1973.

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involvement in society.” Its statement became “the charter, in effect, for the Christian church in Korea to become involved in politics as a matter of faith in action.”

The declaration begins and concludes with the following remarks:

We make this declaration in the name of the Korean Christian community. But under the present circumstances, in which one man controls all the powers of the three branches of government and uses military arms and the intelligence network to oppress people, we hesitate to reveal those who signed this document. We must fight and struggle in the underground until our victory is achieved.

Jesus the Messiah, our Lord, lived and dwelt among the oppressed, poverty-stricken and sick in Judea. He boldly stood in confrontation with Pontius Pilate, a representative of the Roman Empire, and he was crucified in the course of his witness to the truth. He has risen from the dead to release the power of transformation which sets the people free. We resolve that we will follow the footsteps of our Lord, living among our oppressed and poor people, standing against political oppression, and participating in the transformation of history, for this is the only way to the Messianic Kingdom.

The declaration is considered to be “the starting point” of and “a forerunner” to minjung theology. By this time, the term minjung was in use in connection with Christianity. The Korean democracy/human rights movements in the 1970s, Grayson states, were “the reemergence of the liberal, political active strand of Protestantism that had lain virtually dormant since the 1920s.” Thus, minjung theology is “an accumulation and articulation of theological experiences of Christian students, laborers,

157 Billings, Fire beneath the Frost, 22.
158 Clark, “Growth and Limitations of Minjung Christianity,” 89.
159 Billings, Fire beneath the Frost, 79, 81.
160 Lee, A Comparative Study between Minjung Theology and Reformed Theology, 69.
161 Chang, “Carrying the Torch in the Darkest Hours,” 213.
the press, professors, farmers, writers, and intellectuals as well as theologians in Korea in
the 1970s.\textsuperscript{163}

Although minjung theology was derived from the theologians' socio-political
experiences and Christian faith in the 1970s, it is a reflection on the minjung movement
in Korean history. It attempts to facilitate mutual illumination between the minjung
liberation movements in Korean history and the liberating spirituality of Scripture. Nam
Dong Suh describes it this way: "[The minjung] movement . . . acts as a paradigm for the
human rights struggle in Korea today. . . . For, it is evident that those who participate in
the human rights struggle see their genealogy beginning with the Donghak movement and
. . . the March First (Independence) Movement."\textsuperscript{164} Thus, minjung theology is an
affirmation of the liberating traditions of the minjung in Korean history.

Reactions to Traditional Protestant Christianity

An awareness of minjung theology must begin with a consideration of the existing
Korean Christianity as well as the current socio-political oppression. After the failure of
the March First Independence Movement in 1919, the Korean church was severely
persecuted during the period of Japanese colonial rule. This was because of her close
connection to nationalistic and independent movements.

In this situation, the conservatism within the Korean church, which emphasized
personal and spiritual salvation with a strong eschatological expectation, grew strongly
after 1919. Because of the Japanese persecution and the conservative tendency of the

\textsuperscript{163}Suh, "A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation," 16.

\textsuperscript{164}Suh, "Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung," 171.
church, “Christianity began to lose its leading role in the society”\textsuperscript{165} and “stayed passive in political matters for the last hundred years or so.”\textsuperscript{166} Theological conservatism was determined and reinforced by the theological direction of the early missionaries. Most missionaries believed in political neutrality, and the church stressed the importance of the separation between politics and religion.\textsuperscript{167}

The 1920s, however, witnessed the rise of socialism and the appearance of liberal theology. In Korea, the social gospel was introduced by American missionaries, but Christian socialism was initiated mostly by Christian nationalists.\textsuperscript{168} When the Christian faith began to incline to its other-worldliness and lack of social concern and did not fulfill the Christian nationalists’ desire to reform society, its place was taken by socialism.\textsuperscript{169} Many Korean nationalists and young intellectuals in the Korean church were interested in the ideas and principles of socialism, along with those of the social gospel.\textsuperscript{170}

It was in the 1930s that the theological foundation of the Korean church was laid. The contours of the conservative and liberal positions were drawn at this time, as the two

\textsuperscript{165}Pong Bae Park, “The Encounter of Christianity with Traditional Culture and Ethics in Korea” (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1970), 282.

\textsuperscript{166}Kim, “Characteristics of Religious Life in South Korea,” 301.

\textsuperscript{167}See Clark, \textit{Christianity in Modern Korea}, 8-10, 39-40.


\textsuperscript{169}Pak, \textit{Millennialism in the Korean Protestant Church}, 163.

\textsuperscript{170}According to James S. Gale, Koreans were intensely aware of the spread of socialist doctrines after the failure of the March First Independence Movement. Richard Rutt, \textit{James Scarth Gale and His History of the Korean People} (Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, 1972), 66.
camps clarified their views regarding the authority of the Scriptures. Because the fundamentalist tradition of missionaries had a strong influence during the first hundred years of Protestantism in Korea, fundamentalism continues to influence the contemporary Korean Protestant church. Traditional Christianity in Korea has identified with the fundamentalist tradition of missionaries, which “vigorously defended the literal interpretation of Scripture against modern science and its offshoot, evolution.”

Korean conservative Protestants have never tolerated higher criticism and liberal theology and continue to uphold biblical authority and the inspiration of Scripture. They are convinced that evangelism is more basic to traditional Christianity than concern for socio-political liberation, and the duty of Christianity is to preach God’s salvation through Jesus Christ. They believe that Jesus Christ changes individual hearts, and that the mission is not to transform human society at large. Thus, Korean conservative Protestants are mainly concerned about evangelism and church growth, but are reluctant to be involved in socio-political issues and the fulfillment of social justice.

On the other hand, there has been a tendency among the Korean liberal theologians to argue that the Korean churches need to have a paradigm shift from the dogmatized theology to a politico-socialized one. This means that the church must act on

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171 Young-Il Seu, “To Teach and to Reform: The Life and Times of Dr. Yune Sun Park” (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1992), 158.

172 Ryu, “Rough Road to Theological Maturity,” 165.


174 Clark, Christianity in Modern Korea, 39-42; Lee, A Comparative Study between Minjung Theology and Reformed Theology, 58-60; Chang Sik Roh, “Minjung Kyohoiui Yoksawa Panghyang [The History and Direction of Minjung Church],” in Minjung Sinhak Immun [Introduction to Minjung Theology], 35.
behalf of the poor socially, and promote democracy politically, advocating the human 
rights of the oppressed to function in a Korean contextual theology.

There has been a critical reassessment of the missionaries' efforts within the 
Korean church by liberal theologians. Liberal theologians have emphasized the human 
rights issues and stood for the poor and the oppressed. They contend, "The attempt of the 
missionaries was to spiritualize the Christian message and thus to depoliticize and even 
denationalize Korean Christianity... The revival meetings set the subsequent tone of 
Christianity in Korea as emotional, conservative, individualistic, and other-worldly."175

Liberals believe it is a Christian duty to struggle for economic and social justice. 
After the Japanese forced the Presbyterian Seminary of Pyongyang to close its doors in 
1938, Jae Joon Kim, the godfather of liberal theology, left for Seoul in 1940 and founded 
the new "Chosun Theological Seminary." This was an effort to become liberated from 
the influence of conservative Presbyterianism.176 With the liberation in 1945, this 
seminary became the cradle for the present Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea 
(Kijang),177 which became a prime exponent of minjung theology.178

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175 David Kwang-sun Suh, "A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological 
Consultation," in Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History, 21.

176 Clark, "Growth and Limitations of Minjung Christianity," 94.

177 In 1953, due to the emergence of liberal theology, the Presbyterian Church split 
into two streams, commonly known as the Ki Dok Kyo (Christ) Presbyterian Church (or 
Kijang, for short) and the Ye Soo Kyo (Jesus) Presbyterian Church (or Yejang, for short). 
The "Jesus" group is relatively more conservative, and the "Christ" group is more liberal 
in style and theology. The dividing lines between conservatives and liberals in Korea are 
their views on the Bible and their attitudes toward ecumenism. The Ye Soo Kyo (Jesus) 
Presbyterian Church views historical and critical study of the Bible as heretical and 
rejects the ecumenical movement and emphasizes evangelism and revival meetings for 
church growth. The Ki Dok Kyo (Christ) Presbyterian Church, however, accepts both of 
them and stresses the human rights issues. The framework of its thought is the 
participation in history, democratization, and social involvement. One of the 
representatives of this group is Nam Dong Suh. Ryu, "Rough Road to Theological
Since the 1970s, such “dissenting elements within the church have been brewing a unique Korean theology,” namely, minjung theology. In the view of minjung theologians, traditional Christianity has been in favor of oppressors and ignored the social responsibility of defending the oppressed, emphasizing salvation in an individual, spiritual, and other-worldly way. Myung Soo Kim, minjung theologian, critically comments on this: “Most of the Korean churches blocked themselves to the unjust society and avoided the responsibility for the society, repeating the prosperity-oriented message as a unique method of salvation.”

As a challenge to traditional conservative Christianity, minjung theology emerged largely as a result of “the experiences of the theologians who were involved in the Korean human rights movement and in the mission of the church with the lower echelon of Korean society, namely, the minjung.” It manifests itself in various theological themes such as the concept of minjung and han, soteriology, and biblical hermeneutics.


Jae Joon Kim’s strain of Presbyterianism today is headquartered in the Hanshin Seminary. See Clark, “Growth and Limitations of Minjung Christianity,” 93-95; Sang-Bok Lee, A Comparative Study between Minjung Theology and Reformed Theology from a Missiological Perspective, Asian Thought and Culture, vol. 22 (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 58-60; Ryu, “Rough Road to Theological Maturity,” 168-169; idem, Han’guk Sinhakui Kwangmaek [The Vein of Ore of Korean Theology], 183, 252, 282.

Clark, Christianity in Modern Korea, 44.


Kim, “Korean Christianity as a Messianic Movement for the People,” 80.

Chang, “Carrying the Torch in the Darkest Hours,” 204. These themes will be explored in the following chapters.
Summary

Since minjung theology is a Korean contextual theology that attempts to relate the Christian message to the Korean context, it is necessary to know some basic Korean history in order to understand minjung theology. Korea is known as one of the most religiously pluralistic countries in the world, and Koreans have lived in a multi-religious milieu with influences from shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity, among other religious traditions.

One distinctive feature of Korean history is that a regime change was usually accompanied by a religion switch as well. In early times, shamanism was the dominant religion; Buddhism was the major religion in the Three Kingdoms, Unified Silla, and Koryo dynasties; in the Chosun dynasty, Confucianism was the leading religion; and during the late Chosun era and following, Christianity replaced the traditional religions.

Minjung theologians maintain that these religions have contributed to the rise of the minjung movements for liberation. Shamanism as a religion of the Korean minjung significantly influenced the common people to release their han and to fight for revolution when faced with national threats. The belief in Maitreya Buddha provided hope for the minjung and gave them the courage to raise minjung movements in Korean history. However, it seems that Confucianism played a negative role for the minjung during the Chosun dynasty. As an ideology of the ruling class, it oppressed the minjung and turned them into a han-ridden people. Taoism was absorbed into local shamanistic practices and emerged in the Donghak movement. As Korea’s indigenous religion, the Donghak movement advocated an egalitarian ethical practice on its doctrinal bases of Innaechun. Minjung theologians insist that the Donghak spirit was inherited by the minjung democratization movement in the 1970s. They pay attention to the Donghak
message of egalitarianism and social justice.

The socio-political context of Korean Christianity has changed rapidly in the twentieth century. This context includes the Japanese colonization and liberation, the division of the country, the Korean War, and the dictatorial rule. Minjung theology emerged as some Korean theologians reflected on this historical situation and the relationship between their faith and their involvement in the struggle on behalf of the oppressed. They wanted to make the Christian faith relevant to concrete socio-political realities.

Minjung theologians opposed the dictatorial military regime and played a leading role in the movements for human rights and social justice in the 1970s. They believe that the traditional approach to salvation is powerless to transform the deep-seated social injustice built into the socio-economic and political systems in Korea. As a challenge to the existing traditional theology, minjung theology is not only an affirmation of the minjung traditions of liberation in Korean history, but also a theological product shaped by the turmoil of Korea’s socio-political context. The following chapter will examine the essence of minjung theology.
CHAPTER III

THE ESSENCE OF MINJUNG THEOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the essence of minjung theology. The first section of this chapter explains the theology of minjung. The main theological subject for minjung theology is people, especially the oppressed. In the history of Korean Christianity, minjung theology was the first to treat the oppressed people as its major theological subject.

The second section of this chapter analyzes the concept of han. Minjung and han are inseparable. Since “the inner reality of minjung is han,”¹ to know the minjung is to know han and vice versa.² The concept of han is an integral part of minjung theology. The third section of this chapter addresses the theology of praxis. Minjung theology is “a theology of praxis”³ because it finds its self-identity in the praxis for the resolution of the minjung’s han. Minjung soteriology is oriented to social justice.⁴ In order to understand


²Chang-Hee Son, Haan of Minjung Theology and Han of Han Philosophy: In the Paradigm of Process Philosophy and Metaphysics of Relatedness (Lanham; New York; Oxford: University Press of America, 2000), 33.

³Lee, A Comparative Study between Minjung Theology and Reformed Theology, 88.

minjung theology better, the last section of this chapter explores the relationship between
the minjung theology in Korea and the liberation theology in Latin America.

A Theology of the Minjung

The aim of this section is to examine the term minjung as understood within
minjung theology. In minjung theology, the concept of minjung is the key for theological
reflection. Minjung theologians attempt to identify biblical parallels to the minjung and
try to affirm that the concept of minjung is one of the most important themes in the Bible.
Accordingly, in minjung theology the term minjung becomes formative for doing
theology and identified its self-description with a "theology of the minjung."

Minjung as Understood within Minjung Theology

As noted in the previous chapter, the term minjung was first used during the
Chosun dynasty. The usage of this term grew during Japanese colonization, when "most
Koreans were reduced to minjung status."5 Since the 1960s, the term has been used in a
political sense by Korean historians, such as Sok Hon Ham and Ki-Baik Lee. They
understood minjung to mean underdogs, victims of social injustice.6 From a socio-
political context of the 1970s, this term became more popular and gained importance in
the struggle for human rights and democracy. Throughout this period, "the identity of
minjung came to form the rhetoric of Christian protest."7 Later, what Nancy Abelmann

5Dong Whan Moon, "Korean Minjung Theology" [Unpublished manuscript], 3-4; quoted in Lee, An Emerging Theology, 4.

6Ham, Queen of Suffering; Lee, A New History of Korea.

7Chang, "Carrying the Torch in the Darkest Hours," 196.
has called the "minjung imaginary" became one of the main theological themes of minjung theology. In this period, the term minjung was first used in theology.9

The concept of minjung "has remained the same and the context has always been the suffering and struggle of the people in an unjust situation."10 Currently, minjung theologians have rediscovered the minjung as their primary subject for doing theology. They derive the term from the conflictive relationship of the ruling and ruled in their national history. The term cannot be understood apart from the Korean people and their history.11 The minjung are the people who have been deprived of all socio-economic-politico-cultural human rights by the privileged elite.12 Thus, minjung theologians summarize: "The minjung are those who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated socially, and kept uneducated in cultural and intellectual matters."13

Hee-suk Moon asserts that the role of the minjung is "being realized through their struggles against oppression, exploitation, and repressive social structures. In these

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10 Ucko, *The People and the People of God*, 79.


struggles, the *minjung* have risen up to be subjects of their own destiny, refusing to be condemned to being objects of manipulation and suppression."\(^{14}\) Thus, the minjung are the subjects of history in the sense that they have their own power and authority in making and sustaining human history.\(^{15}\) This is "a key theme of minjung theology."\(^{16}\)

According to Nam Dong Suh, the minjung movement in Korean history, as a struggle for freedom and the transformation of society, is a meaningful paradigm for minjung theology. The theology depicts the minjung as gradually liberating themselves from the position of historical objects to historical subjects. Minjung history testifies to the fact that the minjung overcome external conditions that confine them to become subjects of history.\(^{17}\) Throughout their history, the minjung have demonstrated their own creative power to overcome difficulties. They have resisted both oppressive rulers and invading forces to open up a new history. Thus, pointing out these historical traditions of minjung movements, minjung theologians declare, "The minjung are the masters of the world and history."\(^{18}\)

Minjung theologians understand the concept of minjung as active and inclusive. The concept of minjung, Yong-Bock Kim states, is "a living reality which is dynamic,


\(^{15}\)Ibid.

\(^{16}\)Jin Kwan Kwon, "The Emergence of Minjung as the Subjects of History: A Christian Political Ethic in the Perspective of Minjung Theology" (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1990), 23.

\(^{17}\)Suh, "Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung," 169.

\(^{18}\)Suh, "A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation," 34. See also Yong-Bock Kim, "Songseowa Minjungui Sahoe Junki [The Bible and the Sociobiography of Minjung]," in *Chongubaekpalsipyondaehan'guk Minjung Sinhakuisonggae* [The Development of Korean Minjung Theology in the 1980s], 157-178; Suh, "Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung," 167-176.
changing, and complex.” Kim claims that any ethnic group, gender, race, or group of intellectuals can be minjung when they are politically dominated by another group. In this context, the minjung can be interpreted as the people being politically ruled. Even if “kingdoms, dynasties, and states rise and fall,” the minjung “remain as a concrete reality of history, experiencing the comings and goings of political powers.”

Minjung theologians agree in the understanding of minjung “as the complementary concept” that “embraces the cross-section of politics, economy, religion, society, and culture.” This functional flexibility of the minjung makes it difficult to define its conclusive meaning. However, as noted above, the minjung are generally understood as a socio-economic-politico-cultural group of suffering people in Korean history.

Biblical References for Minjung

Minjung theology is based not only on the minjung experience in Korean history, but also on biblical references. In their biblical studies, minjung theologians have sought to find biblical parallels for the minjung to support their theology. In minjung theology, some biblical terms such as the Hebrew and *anawim* (the poor) in the Old Testament, and *ochlos* (the crowd) and *ptochoi* (the poor) in the New Testament are used as equivalents.

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19 Kim, “Messiah and Minjung,” 186.

20 Ibid., 183, 185.


of the minjung. For minjung theologians, these terms represent the biblical synonyms of the minjung.

Hebrews as the Minjung

Minjung theologians have developed a theological concept of minjung by interpreting the Old Testament word “Hebrew.” Nam Dong Suh and Byung Mu Ahn assert that the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage constitutes the biblical basis of minjung theology. Suh refers to the Hebrews of the Exodus event as the scriptural reference for the minjung, who are the politically oppressed class. Under Egyptian rule, the Hebrews were slaves with neither nationality nor citizenship. They were afflicted with forced hard labor.

So, minjung theologians place emphasis on their identification of the Hebrews with the minjung. They understand the Hebrews as a synonym of the habiru, which they take to mean the poor, exploited group of wanderers, outlaws, outcasts, and mercenary soldiers. In this respect, minjung theologians prefer the political liberation motif in the Exodus event over some spiritual meaning of the Exodus. Suh and Ahn are supported in

23 Ahn, Minjung Sinhak Iyaky [A Story of Minjung Theology], 79; Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 184.

24 Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 158.

25 Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 259.

26 Ahn, Minjung Sinhak Iyaky [A Story of Minjung Theology], 79, 310; Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 236-237, 262.

this by other Old Testament scholars who identify the Hebrews of the Exodus with the
habiru in ancient Near Eastern literature.\(^{28}\)

According to Old Testament minjung theologian Hee-suk Moon, the term habiru
can be traced to records in the second millennium B.C. in Egypt, Babylonia, Syria, and
Palestine. Moon states, "The nature and identity of the habiru have been the subject of
considerable literature, for the term provides a clue to who the minjung of that time
were."\(^{29}\) He quotes from the supplementary volume of *The Interpreter's Dictionary of
the Bible* to define habiru as mercenary soldiers, people under treaty, and prisoners of
war.\(^{30}\) Moon quotes also Marvin L. Chaney who suggests the habiru were outlaws,
outcasts, and those who stood outside the dominant social system.\(^{31}\) Based on these
studies, Moon argues that the habiru "were part of the minjung of their time, driven by
their han (grudge or resentment) to act against what they felt to be injustices imposed on
them by those in power."\(^{32}\)

Moon interprets the Old Testament story of the Exodus as the biblical basis for
the minjung's liberation movement in which the minjung are the people of God.\(^{33}\) He

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\(^{28}\) Suh, *Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu* [A Study of Minjung Theology], 235-239, 260-
267; Ahn, *Minjung Sinhak Iyaky* [A Story of Minjung Theology], 78-80.


\(^{30}\) See M. C. Astour, "Habiru, Hapiru," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,

\(^{31}\) See Marvin L. Chaney, "Ancient Palestinian Peasant Movements and the
Formation of Premonarchic Israel," in *Palestine in Transition: The Emergence of Ancient


states that the Hebrews in Egypt were forced to serve as slaves under the repressive rule of the Egyptians. Yahweh appeared as the liberator of the Hebrews and brought about the confrontation between Yahweh and the Pharaoh. This is the biography of the Hebrews and also the revelation of God. Thus, Moon concludes, “We can find the meaning of the minjung in their relation to God and their welfare becomes God’s concern.”

Joon Suh Park, an Old Testament theologian, refers to the clay tablets at Amarna, Wadi Hammamat, Mari, and Nuzi to identify the habiru not as an ethnic group, but as the appellative of the poor and exploited group of wanderers. In these tablets, the habiru are anti-Egyptian powers which spread throughout all areas of Canaan. In records from Ancient Egypt (1450-1150 B.C.), the habiru were mentioned in reference to prisoners of war from the area of Asia (Middle East). Foreigners flowed into Egyptian society from other places as forced laborers or slaves working in construction. These people were of the lower class outside the dominant social system. The habiru did not belong to the political ruling class, but to the group described as lawless plunderers, and socially alienated marginals. Park identifies the Hebrews of the Exodus as a synonym of the habiru. In analyzing the Old Testament usage of the word Hebrew, he acknowledges that


the word Hebrew is a synonym for “Israel” as the specifically chosen people of God (Jonah 1:9; Phil 3:5), but he sets aside this concept of Hebrew as an exception.38

Park enumerates the following texts to support his argument. Abraham is called a Hebrew, an alien wanderer in the land of Canaan (Gen 14:13; 23:3; Deut 26:5); Joseph is called “a Hebrew” or “the Hebrew slave” (Gen 39:14, 17) and his brothers are treated as Hebrews with whom the Egyptians could not eat bread (Gen 43:32); Moses and other Israelites are called Hebrews, referring to those who were the forced slave-workers of the Egyptians (Exod 1:15; 2:6, 11). In Exod 9:1, 13; 10:3, the Lord introduces himself as the God who liberated the Hebrews from the bondage of the Egyptian’s house. The God of the Hebrews is the God of the oppressed. Similarly, in 1 Sam 13:19-22, the Philistines call the Israelites “Hebrews,” because the Philistines understood themselves to be superior to the Israelites. Thus, Park summarizes that these scriptural references use the term “Hebrew” in the same sense as the ancient Near-Eastern habiru, the lowest-class slaves wandering in the Middle East.39

Hence, minjung theologians claim that the Hebrews in the Bible were the oppressed minjung who lived both in Egypt and in the land of ancient Palestine.40 They are the despised, the powerless, the outcasts, and those who had no rights at all. Moses

38 Yong Hwa Na, Minjung Sinhak Pyongga [A Theological Assessment of Minjung Theology, Systematically and Biblically] (Seoul: Christian Literature of Society of Korea, 1987), 88.


emerged as the liberator of the Hebrews (Exod 3:1-14). The revelation of the name of God, Yahweh, assures the Hebrew slaves “of the very real presence of God who will act justly for the liberation of the minjung.” The name Yahweh “not only makes history but also intervenes in history.” The God of the Hebrews is not only throned afar, but the God of justice who is a very helpful presence in time of need, especially of oppression and trouble. Therefore, minjung theologians identify the Hebrews with the minjung.

Ochlos as the Minjung

Byung Mu Ahn, a New Testament minjung theologian, builds minjung theology through identifying a special category of people called ochlos in the Gospel of Mark. Ahn argues that New Testament scholarship has paid a great deal of attention to the audience of Jesus’ teaching, but neglected to focus on their actual social character. Accordingly, Jesus’ words and deeds have been de-socialized in the interpretation of the New Testament. In order to understand the historical character of Jesus’ words, one needs to see the total social context of the people surrounding Jesus.

Ahn investigates the social character of the ochlos in order to find the reality of the minjung in the Bible. He asserts that the term ochlos in Mark’s Gospel has never been used in relation to the Jewish ruling class. The ochlos were not just “people,” which would be laos, but an unorganized crowd that was constantly around Jesus. Ahn claims

41Moon, “Culture in the Bible and the Culture of the Minjung,” 183.

42Ibid., 184. See also Moon, “A Korean Minjung Perspective: The Hebrews and the Exodus,” 228-232. A criticism of this interpretation of the Hebrews will be addressed in the following chapter.


44Ibid., 85-104.
that Mark distinguishes the *ochlos* from the *laos* because the former denotes the poor and the oppressed, while the latter denotes rulers or upper classes.\(^{45}\)

Ahn has tried to establish the *ochlos* in the Gospel of Mark as a particular social class which includes the sick, the tax-collectors, the sinners, prostitutes, and women (Mark 2:13-17).\(^{46}\) Mark shows that sick persons hold an important position among the *ochlos* of Jesus (Mark 1:21ff. 34, 40ff.; 2:1ff.; 3:1ff.). The tax-collectors, the sinners, and the prostitutes also belonged to the *ochlos* (Mark 2:14, 15) of Jesus. Finally, in the Gospels, women are referred to as those who observed Jesus' suffering right to the end and became eyewitnesses to the empty tomb. This tells the importance of the women's position among the *ochlos* who followed Jesus.

Ahn states, “Jesus, sharing the living realities of the sick, the poor, the alienated, and the women, speaks to God on behalf of the minjung, as if he was their spokesman.” In order to correctly interpret Jesus as the Christ, one must “endow *ochlos* in the Gospels with the proper esteem with regard to their relationship with Jesus.”\(^{47}\) Thus, Ahn's sociological implication of the crowds around Jesus has connected the minjung of Korea with the *ochlos* in the Bible.\(^{48}\)

Ahn contends that Jesus loved the *ochlos* with partiality and always stood on their side.\(^{49}\) The Gospel of Mark particularly denotes the crowds who were the addressees of

\(^{45}\) Ahn, “Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark,” 87.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 91-96.


\(^{49}\) Ibid., 96.
Jesus' message, using the term "ochlos" to indicate that the crowds are the minjung of Jesus' time.\textsuperscript{50} Thus, Ahn concludes that the ochlos in the Gospel of Mark are the oppressed minjung.\textsuperscript{51}

Ahn categorizes the particular characteristics of the ochlos in the Gospel of Mark as follows:

1) Everywhere Jesus went, the ochlos followed (2:4-13; 3:9-20, 32; 4:1; 5:21-24, 31; 8:1; 10:1). They formed the background of Jesus' activities. The Gospels are the history of Jesus' minjung movement.

2) Jesus shared the same table with the ochlos (2:13-17). Jesus ate and drank with "sinners" and was their friend.

3) By placing the ochlos at odds with the rulers in Jerusalem of that period, a relationship of solidarity between Jesus and the ochlos against the Jerusalem citizen is alluded to (2:4-6; 3:2-6, 22-35; 7:1-2; 8:11; 11:18, 27-33). The ochlos as the minjung of Galilee are contrasted with the ruling class from Jerusalem who attack and critique Jesus as their enemy.

4) The ochlos were a threat to the powerful ruling classes (11:18-32; 12:2). Because the ochlos were against the rulers, the rulers were afraid of them and tried not to raise their anger.

5) Jesus perceived the ochlos as "sheep without a shepherd" (6:34). The expression "sheep without a shepherd" implies a tradition of criticism against the rulers, who had a responsibility to take care of the people (e.g., Ezek. 34:5).

6) Jesus declared that the ochlos are "my brother, and sister, and mother" (3:31-35). This announcement indicates that the ochlos are the members of a new community (family) (2:13-17).

7) Jesus did not make any ethical or religious judgments against the ochlos. Without making any demands, he defended them unconditionally. Jesus did not hesitate to severely criticize the ruling class (Matt. 23:1-36; Luke 12:1-3), but he did not say one

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 86.

\textsuperscript{51} Byung Mu Ahn, "Yesuwa Oklos [Jesus and Ochlos]," in Minjunggw'a Han 'guk Sinhak [The Minjung and Korean Theology], 86-103.
chastising word against the *ochlos* (Luke 15:11-32; 19:1-10). He accepted the *ochlos* just as they were and opened himself up to them.**52**

Ahn focused on the socio-political implications of two places: Galilee and Jerusalem. He symbolized that Galilee, as the place of the minjung, represents a suffering field, where Jesus preached the kingdom of God. Jerusalem was the power of oppression, sustaining a status quo at the cost of the poor, powerless people. Ahn said that Galilee had accepted Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God, while Jerusalem, the place of those in power, had rejected Jesus. For this reason, Ahn was convinced that the former denotes the side of the minjung, while the latter represents the side of the ruling power.**53**

Drawing on this concept of *ochlos*-minjung, Nam Dong Suh argues that Jesus is the personification or symbol of the minjung. Jesus, as one of the *ochlos*-minjung, lived and worked in rural Galilee, the land of the *ochlos*-minjung, showing his solidarity with them.**54** Jesus preached to them about the coming liberation of God’s kingdom and gave them a new hope. Because of his solidarity with the minjung, Jesus was put to death; but by rising again from the dead, Jesus gave them assurance of new life.**55** Furthermore, Suh professed that Jesus is a “tool” for understanding the minjung. He states, “The

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**54**Suh, *Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu* [A Study of Minjung Theology], 129

**55**Suh, “Du Iyakiui Hamnyu [Confluence of Two Stories],” 245.
theme of minjung theology is the minjung rather than Jesus. In minjung theology, Jesus is a tool to be used to understand the minjung, not the other way around.™

Anawim or Ptochoi as the Minjung

Defining minjung theology as a “theology of the poor”™ suggests that the word “poor” in the Bible is equivalent to the minjung.™ Byung Mu Ahn says, “If we had to choose a common word to describe the minjung, it would be ‘poor.’”™

Among the terms for the poor in Scripture,™ Nam Dong Suh selects anawim (plural of anaw)™ and ptochoi (plural of ptochos), as the most correlative to the

56 Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 53, 187. Suh’s assertion, however, may raise problems in minjung theology. It is alien to traditional Christology. A criticism of the interpretation of the ochlos in minjung theology will be considered in the following chapter.

57 Ibid., 396-406.

58 Ibid., 356, 357.

59 Ahn, Jesus of Galilee, 120.

The terms *anaw* and *ani* are the most significant among the several synonyms that the Old Testament uses to describe the poor. George M. Soares-Prabhu argues that, of the synonyms which the Hebrew Bible uses to describe the poor, the words *ani* and *anaw* are certainly the most significant. Not only are they the most used of these words, they are also the richest in meaning. They express most accurately and completely the multifaceted character of the biblical understanding of the poor.

Suh refers to Zephaniah to illuminate the word *anawim*. The Book of Zephaniah is "the very starting point of and the father of the whole Anawim-movement." Suh argues that the *anawim* in Zeph 2:3 refer to the han-ridden minjung because the *anawim* experienced poverty, oppression, exploitation, and discrimination as the minjung do. They are the remnant and the hope of Israel beyond the destiny of the destruction of the nation.

The Book of Zephaniah focuses on the Day of Judgment and the remnant of Israel. On the day of the LORD, God will completely remove all things and punish all men of the earth, but the remnant of Israel will be hidden from his anger and survive from

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61 Sometimes Suh includes *ani*. Suh, *Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu* [A Study of Minjung Theology], 403.

62 Ibid., 397-404.


his judgment (Zeph 1:2, 18; 2:3; 3:12-20). This remnant of Israel is described as the
ananim, the “humble” of the earth (Zeph 2:3); and the ani, the “lowly people” (Zeph
3:12). These humble and lowly people are the ones who were underprivileged, who have
felt righteous indignation, yearning for justice to be done. Suh asserts that they are the
people who will be invited to the kingdom of God in the new history (Luke 14:15-24).67
He identifies the anawim with the han-ridden minjung.68

According to Suh, the New Testament equivalent of the minjung is ptochot. The
term ptochos is the standard, indeed almost the exclusive, designation for the poor in the
New Testament.69 Suh contends that most of the occurrences of this term ptochos
indicate merely the economically distressed or the destitute.70 He says that while penes
means relative poverty, ptochos connotes absolute poverty.71 The ptochoi are literally
beggars who are to be the recipients of alms.72 The good news is preached to them and
for them, for the kingdom of God is theirs.73 Suh claims that the ptochoi, the

67 Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 53-55.
68 Suh, “Du Iyakiuui Hamnyu [Confluence of Two Stories],” 240.
70 Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 109, 356, 398-404. Three times the word is used for the spiritually poor (Matt 5:3; Gal 4:9; Rev 3:17),
22 occurrences indicate merely the economically poor (Mark 12:42ff.; Luke 16:20, 22;
Jas 2:2-6, etc.), and in three texts (Matt 5:11=Luke 7:22; Luke 4:18 and Luke 6:20) the
meaning of ptochos is in dispute. See K. Thanzauva, Transforming Theology: A
Theological Basis for Social Transformation (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading
Corporation, 2002), 131-134.
71 Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 398.
72 Mark 10:21; Luke 14:5, 13, 21; 19:8; John 13:29; Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 6:10; Gal
2:10, etc.
economically destitute in the New Testament, are the bearers of the gospel and the subjects of the salvation history of God.  

Suh contends that in the New Testament, the term pтоchoi denotes the poor in socio-economical terms, even though in Matt 5:3 it is spiritualized to signify "the poor in heart." He illustrates four groups as the contents of the poor in the New Testament: (1) the sick (Matt 11:5; 25:35f.; Mark 10:46; Luke 4:18; 7:22; 14:13; 16:20, etc.); (2) the naked (Matt 25:36; Jas 2:15-16; Rev 3:17, etc.); (3) the hungry (Matt 6:25; 25:35-36; Luke 3:11; 6:20-21; Jas 2:15-16, etc.); and (4) the destitute (Matt 25:35-36; Luke 16:20; Acts 3:1f.; Rev 3:17, etc.). Therefore, Suh understands the anawim and the pтоchoi as the best correlative to the minjung.  

The Concept of Minjung as Formative for Theology

As noted, minjung theology comes out of the biographies of the suffering minjung and deals specifically with their han. It starts with a definition of who the minjung are and how Christians are able to serve them. In its history, Korean Christian theology has never paid special attention to the traditions of the oppressed. However, minjung theology has not only treated the minjung as its central theological subject but has also

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74 Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 398-399.
75 Ibid., 399.
76 Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 109, 309. A criticism of the interpretation of the anawim and the pтоchoi is discussed in the following chapter.
given theological value to the minjung traditions. With their interpretation of biblical terms such as Hebrew, ochlos, anawim, and ptochoi, minjung theologians have tried to make the concept of minjung formative for theology.

For minjung theology, Korean history is as valuable as the history of the biblical revelation. Defining the relation between Korean minjung traditions and the liberating message of the Bible, Nam Dong Suh states, “Now, the task for Korean minjung theology is to testify that in the Mission of God in Korea there is a confluence of the minjung tradition in Christianity and the Korean minjung tradition.”

Minjung theologians also refer to the Covenant Code (Exod 20:22-23:19) as a scriptural reference for the minjung. They consider it as “the Code of Protection for the weak,” or “the Code of Social Justice.” Yong-Bock Kim asserts, “The most important text in connection with socio-economic developments in the context of the covenant between Yahweh and the Hebrew people is the covenant code.”

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80 Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung.”


82 Yong-Bock Kim, “Minjung Economics: Covenant with the Poor,” The Ecumenical Review 38, no. 3 (July 1986): 281.
Code protects the weak, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. It is extended even to the enemy (Exod 23:4).^8^3

Hee-suk Moon states that the Code constantly “warned the people not to oppress the minjung. . . . The memory of the exodus, in which Yahweh had heard the cry of the Hebrews and gone to liberate them, left an indelible mark upon the covenant code. The Hebrews began to understand the mysterious preference of God for the minjung.”^8^4 Minjung theologians attempt to regard the concept of minjung as synonymous in meaning to “the poor” in the Covenant Code.\(^^8^5\)

**A Theology of Han**

This section discusses the reality of han, the root causes of han, and the resolution of han. Minjung and han are the two concepts that are essential to Korean self-understanding in minjung theology. Han, as a cluster of the minjung’s experiences of suffering, arises when the minjung are exploited socio-politically, whether at an individual or a collective level.\(^^8^6\)

According to Nam Dong Suh, han is the most important element in the political consciousness of the minjung, which is expressed in the social biography of the

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\(^{83}\)Kim, “Minjung Economics: Covenant with the Poor,” 281.


\(^{85}\)Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 160. See also Won Don Kang, “Minjung Hyonsile Daechan Balkyonkwa Urtui Kot’e Daechan Chugu [Discovering the Reality of the Minjung and a Search for Our Own],” in *Chongubaekpalsipyondae Han’guk Minjung Sinhakui Chongae* [The Development of Korean Minjung Theology in the 1980s], 91-94.

oppressed people of Korea. Suh observes han as the essence of the Korean minjung and is inseparable from their suffering experiences. Furthermore, minjung theology understands han as a unique experience of the Korean minjung and regards it as the most important cultural motif. Minjung theologians utilize the problem of han as their major theological theme. Accordingly, minjung theology is often called a “theology of han.”

The Reality of Han

The concept of han is difficult to define as a single term because it is so variable and complex in its connotation. According to minjung theologians, han is a deep-seated lamentation of the Korean minjung. Han is, Nam Dong Suh explains, “a deep feeling that rises out of the unjust experience of the people,” or “just indignation.”

In his exposition of the han of the minjung, Suh gives credit to Chi Ha Kim, human rights activist and famous minjung poet, and speaks of him as “the person who has done most to develop han as a theme of Christian theology.” Suh depicts Kim’s


91Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” 63. Chi Ha Kim (1941- ) was born in Cholla province, graduated from Seoul National University, and participated in the
idea of han as “an accumulation of suppressed and condensed experiences of oppression. Thus ‘accumulated han is inherited and transmitted, boiling in the blood of the people,’ which is also defined as ‘the emotional core of anti-regime action.’ This is the genesis of han.”^92

David Kwang-sun Suh, another chief exponent of minjung theology, describes a different aspect of han. He defines it as “a deep awareness of the contradiction in a situation and of the unjust treatment meted out to the people or a person by the powerful,” which is not just a one-time feeling to a situation but “an accumulation of such feelings and experiences.”^93

Although David Suh recognizes the han of an individual, his theological perspective is focused on the collective aspect of han: “[Han] is a collective feeling in the collective social biography of the oppressed minjung of Korea.”^94 He sees that the primary cause of han is in social injustice which results in the accumulative development of han. He says, “The feeling of han rises to the level of psycho-political anger, human rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Through his poetry and literary works, he has deep concern for the han of the minjung in Korean history and conveys the bitter experience of the poor and the oppressed. These works made him known as a foremost critic of socio-political injustice and corruption. His thought and works contributed much to the formation of minjung theology. Selected works of Chi Ha Kim are: Cry of the People and Other Poems (Hayama, Japan: Autumn Press, 1974); The Gold-Crowned Jesus and Other Writings (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978); Donghak lyagi [A Story of Donghak] (Seoul: Sol, 1994); Kim Chi Ha Jonjip [Collected Writings of Chi Ha Kim], 3 vols. (Seoul: Silchon Moonhaksa, 2002).

^92 Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” 64.


^94 Ibid., 25.
frustration and indignation. The feeling of han is an awareness both at an individual psychological level as well as at a social and political level.\textsuperscript{95}

For Hee-suk Moon, han is a “grudge” or “resentment.” Moon says, “Han is the anger and resentment of the minjung which has been turned inward and intensified as they become the objects of injustice upon injustice.” Han is “the result of being repressed for an extended period of time by external forces,” such as “political oppression, economic exploitation, social alienation, and restrictions against becoming educated in cultural and intellectual matters.” For Moon, “Han is a hallmark of the Korean minjung.”\textsuperscript{96}

Andrew Park, who has done an extensive study of han, describes han as the “frustrated hope, the collapsed feeling of pain, letting go, resentful bitterness, and the wounded heart.”\textsuperscript{97} Park adds, “Han is a physical, mental, and spiritual repercussion to a terrible injustice done to a person, eliciting a deep ache, a wrenching of all the organs, an intense internalized rage, a vengeful obsession, and the sense of helplessness and hopelessness.”\textsuperscript{98}

In summary, Young Ae Kim proposes the following working definition of han:

Han is the Korean people’s collective emotion which is embedded in community as well as the individual, and inherited through generations. This repressed, emotional sentiment is accumulated through the repetitive process of experiencing multi-layered

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\item \textsuperscript{95} Suh, “A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation,” 25.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Moon, \textit{A Korean Minjung Theology}, 1-2. Italics his.
\item \textsuperscript{97} Andrew Sung Park, \textit{The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 31.
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sufferings due to existential and environmental conditions which inhibit the community or persons from realizing full potential, and deprive them of means to eliminate or correct the causes. Han is also dynamic energy which can be directed, either constructively or destructively, to others or to oneself.99

Thus, han originates in the antagonistic relation between the oppressor and the oppressed. In a broader sense, han is the common feeling of the Korean people that comes from their extended experiences of suffering, and its very feeling is very much alive in the subconscious minds of the oppressed within Korean society.100

Minjung theologians contend that, in order to do justice to the meaning of han as a whole, one must examine the complex suppressed feelings in the minds of the Korean minjung. Nam Dong Suh divides han into two categories: “On the one hand, it is a dominant feeling of defeat, resignation, and nothingness. On the other hand, it is a feeling with a tenacity of will for life which comes to weaker beings. The first aspect can sometimes be sublimated to great artistic expressions and the second aspect could erupt as the energy for a revolution or rebellion.”101 These two feelings of han in the life of the minjung come and go interchangeably.

99Young Ae Kim, “Han: From Brokenness to Wholeness: A Theoretical Analysis of Korean Women’s Han and a Contextualized Healing Methodology” (Ph.D diss., School of Theology at Claremont, 1991), 10-11.


101Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” 58.
Andrew Park analyzes the reality of han in detail. He divides han into eight subcategories, with individual and collective dimensions, and both dimensions have conscious and unconscious levels, and active and passive expressions. The individual conscious active/passive han produces the will to revenge/resignation; the individual unconscious active/passive han: bitterness/helplessness; the collective conscious active/passive han: the corporate will to revolt/corporate despair; and the collective unconscious active/passive han: racial resentment/the ethos of racial lamentation.  

Kwang Don Chun classifies han into two categories: dormant and eruptive. The former has seven feelings: freedomlessness, peoplelessness, rootlessness, powerlessness, senselessness, meaninglessness, and hopelessness; while the latter has three feelings: anger, ressentiment, and revolt. When the latent feelings of han are prevalent, victims tend to remain silent and the society is calm. But when the active feelings of han are dominant, the victims turn irritable and society undergoes major upheaval. The former is similar to an acquiescence, while the latter is closer to aggression. Korean history is the periodic repetition of the inactive and active forces of han. Minjung theologians

102Park, The Wounded Heart of God, 31-44.

103Kwang Don Chun, “A Critical Analysis of the Conception of Han in Relation to the Blues” (Ph.D diss., Vanderbilt University, 1998), 52-71. Ressentiment is a French term initially introduced by Friedrich Nietzsche and later fully elaborated by Max Scheler, to account for the particular emotional phenomenon of the weak and marginal occupying the underprivileged positions of the social structure. According to Scheler, “Ressentiment is a self-poisoning of the mind which has quite definite causes and consequences. It is a lasting mental attitude caused by the systematic repression of certain emotions and affects which, as such, are normal components of human nature.” Ressentiment, trans. William W. Holdheim (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), 45; quoted in ibid., 69.

104Chun, “A Critical Analysis of the Conception of Han, 71-75.
particularly emphasize the revolutionary dimension of han, which has functioned as a driving force in the historical minjung movements of Korean history.\(^{105}\)

According to Chun, the han that is embedded in the wounded hearts of the Korean people has always revealed itself through distinctive channels such as socio-political movements and folk religions.\(^{106}\) Young-Hak Hyun, a minjung theologian, believes that han contains an emancipatory power of social transformation that will catapult society toward the revolutionary epoch of history. Hyun states, “Through the experience of han, one’s spiritual eyes are opened and one is able to see the deep truth about life. In han, we come to see the infinite value of personhood and are able to assert our precious rights as human beings. . . . With han as our point of departure, we begin to dream of a new, alternative future and dedicate ourselves to the cause of making that future reality.”\(^{107}\) David Suh puts it this way: “Revolution is the explosion and culmination of the oppressed people’s cries and shouts of ‘han.’”\(^{108}\) Minjung theologians claim that the emancipation power of han can be used into the power of revolution.\(^{109}\)

The painful reality of han has also disclosed itself through religious practices. Folk religions such as shamanism and the Donghak movement in the Korean historical context are transcendental ways of releasing the repressed feelings of the minjung’s han. As examined in the previous chapter, the shamanistic faith of the minjung played a role in


\(^{106}\)Chun, “A Critical Analysis of the Conception of Han,” 75, 76.


\(^{109}\)Cf. Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 71.
releasing han and became “the spiritual impetus” for many popular uprisings. According to David Suh, shamanism not only has resolved han but also has evoked a religiously passionate energy. He maintains that by this latter function of shamanism the han of the minjung can be turned into power for social revolution and transformation.111

The Donghak movement also gave the inspiration for the liberation of the minjung from their han. Minjung theologians have been concerned with this liberating spirituality for the minjung in shamanism and the Donghak movement.112 For the minjung, such folk religion is a vital medium of emancipatory transcendence. Folk religion has its deepest root in the han of the minjung and thus has its full relevance in the reality of han.113 Thus, without the reality of han there would be no need for emancipatory socio-political movements. In the reality of han, minjung theology perceives a deeper dimension of human suffering and its latent liberating power.114

110 Ahn, Continuity and Transformation, 74, 78.


112 Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 170-173.


The Root Causes of Han

Nam Dong Suh identifies the three major causes of han as colonialism, sexism, and classism. Suh states:

Koreans have suffered numerous invasions by surrounding powerful nations so that the very existence of the Korean nation has come to be understood as han. Koreans have continually suffered from the tyranny of the rulers so that they think of their existence as "Baeksong." Also, under Confucianism's strict imposition of laws and customs discriminating against women, the existence as women was han itself. At a certain point in Korean history, about one third of the population were registered as hereditary slaves, and were treated as property rather than as people of the nation. These people thought of their lives as han.

Colonialism

As was examined in the last chapter, Koreans have suffered from frequent foreign invasions. The Korean peninsula was often a battleground of neighboring powers such as China, Manchuria, Mongols, Japan, and Russia, and the wars between them caused great suffering to the Korean people. Representative foreign interventions are as follows: In 993 A.D., the Khitan empire based at Lio-Yang invaded the Koryo dynasty (932-1392); in 1231, the Mongols invaded Korea; in 1592, Japan invaded Korea; in 1627, Manchuria

Classism here means "the systemic tendency of ruling classes to reinforce the distance between themselves and ruled classes by preventing the dispersal of power through a restructuring of wealth, privilege, and access to resources and technology." Mark Kline Taylor, Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 122.

Baeksong means people who are under the rule and control of a sovereign. Nowadays this term is used to denote "common people." Suh, "Towards a Theology of Han," 68.

Nam Dong Suh, "Hanui Hyongsanghwawa Ku Sinhakjok Songchal [Configuration of Han and Theological Reflection]," in Minjunggwa Hankook Shinhak [The Minjung and Korean Theology], 323-324.
invaded Korea; in 1894, China and Japan came to suppress the *Donghak* Revolution and triggered the Sino-Japanese War in Korea; in 1910, Japan annexed Korea.\(^{118}\)

Sok Hon Ham states that Korean history is "like a restless sea, a continual ebb and flow of invasion and oppression by different foreign powers."\(^{119}\) With the exception of a few brief periods in their history, Koreans have not been able to live in peace. They have been constantly terrorized and their land devastated by numerous imperialistic aggressions. A Japanese historian writes, "The history of Korea from its beginnings to the present is a history of suffering and destruction caused by foreign oppression and invasions."\(^{120}\) Thus, Ham remarks: "Throughout our history, over four thousand years until this very day, we have not known a period of peace."\(^{121}\)

Ham compares the victimization of the Korean people by imperial colonialism to the image of "The Old Courtesan" by French sculptor Rodin. He writes, "This work is the very image of Korea . . . an old woman is sitting, her torso bent forward, a hand behind her back with the fingers bent in pain, the other hand resting limply on her seat. Her head is hung low. She is emaciated, bones showing through; her neck is thin and stringy, her chest caving in; she is decrepit and infirm with age."\(^{122}\)

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\(^{118}\)Park, "Theology of Han (The Abyss of Pain)," 55-57. For a detailed chronological chart and explanation of major historical events, see Son, *Haan of Minjung Theology*, 22-26.

\(^{119}\)Sok Hon Ham, quoted in Son, *Haan of Minjung Theology*, 21.


\(^{121}\)Sok Hon Ham, *Ttus'uro Pon Han'guk Yoksa: Cholmunidulul Wihan Sae P'yonyip* [Korean History from a Spiritual Perspective: New Edition for Youth] (Seoul: Hangilsa, 2003), 460.

\(^{122}\)Ham, *Queen of Suffering*, 177-178.
This image represents the Korean people suffering from dehumanizing oppressions by neighboring countries. For example, during the Japanese colonial rule, the Japanese colonialists banned the Korean language and taught a biased Korean history. The Japanese tried to make Koreans disregard the Donghak Revolution and the March First Independence Movement. Also, Korean women were forced into sexual slavery to the Japanese military during the colonization. These women were called a distorted term, “military comfort women” (Jongunwianbu or Jungshindae in Korean). Approximately 200,000 Korean women, 80 percent of the entire Asian “comfort women” population, were conscripted by deceit or abduction. This hard fact was concealed until the early 1990s.

When Korea was liberated from the Japanese colonialism, it was once again arbitrarily divided between two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. This tenuous situation later developed into the Korean War, which led to the separation of millions of family members, who have not been allowed to communicate with each other for more than a half-century. Andrew Park states that this division “has been the main cause of the present Korean minjung’s han.”

Minjung theologians put priority on a political resolution to the han of the minjung, because “there is no other way to resolve the gravest han by the Korean people, than to bring about a peaceful, free and united Korea.”

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123 Suh, *Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu* [A Study of Minjung Theology], 151-152.
124 Yoo, “*Han-Laden Women,*” 37.
125 Park, “*Theology of Han (The Abyss of Pain),*” 55-57.
127 Suh, “*Called to Witness to the Gospel Today,*” 607.
Sexism

Minjung theologians understand that the reality of han is inseparably related to the tragic experiences of Korean women under the sexism of a patriarchal society. The oppression of women reached its peak in the Confucian Chosun dynasty, in which women's inferiority to men was one of the principles of Korean ethics. Women “had no proper name, no right to receive education and thus no means to claim their humanity or to enjoy an independent life.”128 The yangban developed the ideology of female chastity and obedience.129

There are two Confucian principles: Samjongjido, or “Women’s Three Virtues of Obedience,” and Chilgojiak, or “Seven Eligible Grounds for Divorce.” The former principle required woman to obey: (1) her father when she is young; (2) her husband when she is married; and (3) her son when she is old.130 The latter principle formed the justification for a man to divorce his wife: (1) if she behaves disobediently to her parents-in-law; (2) if she fails to give birth to a son; (3) if she fails to be silent; (4) if she commits adultery; (5) if she is jealous of her husband keeping a concubine; (6) if she has a malignant disease; and (7) if she commits a theft.131 Women were totally dependent on

129 Paik, Constructing Christian Faith in Korea, 32; Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” 58.
men. A bride “was required to be blind for three years, to be dumb for three years, to be deaf for three years—nine years altogether.”

The wives of the lower class were especially oppressed. Female minjung theologian Hyun Kyung Chung contends that Korean women were the oppressed among the oppressed, or “the minjung within the minjung.” Their common sigh is that: “Oh! Han, Oh! Han, it’s a Han to be a woman!” Minjung theologians recognize that to be a woman under Confucianism’s chauvinistic patriarchy was han itself.

Classism

Confucian ethics mandates a strictly hierarchal social order. This rigid hierarchy is one of the root causes of han in Korean society. The yangban systematically exploited the sangmin. During the Chosun dynasty, classism between these two classes was strictly enforced and resulted in discrimination in every aspect of life.

Chun describes the three major outcomes of this hierarchical classism. First, classism kept the minjung in a constant state of deprivation. The yangban made every effort to extract as much as possible from the minjung by imposing heavy taxes, exploiting their labor, and expropriating their lands. Hunger was the common

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133Chung, “Han-Pu-Ri,” 31; Paik, *Constructing Christian Faith in Korea*, 32.


135Suh, “Hanui Hyongsanghwawa Ku Sinhakjok Songchal [Configuration of Han and Theological Reflection],” 323.


language of the minjung. Poverty struck their whole being and became their hereditary
destiny.

Second, classism made the minjung a landless people. The systematic
exploitation by the yangban class made the minjung lose their homes, families, and
native places. They moved from place to place with no fixed abode. Han emerges from
the excruciating experiences of these rootless people.

Third, classism produced a slavery system. Ki Baik Lee states, "The houses of
the highest officials possessed as many as three thousand slaves."¹³⁸ Torture and
imprisonment were common punishment for rebellious slaves. Han developed from the
ongoing conflict between the ruler and the ruled in a hierarchical classism.

Minjung theologians contend that the sickness of han, the painful experience of
the minjung in Korean history,¹³⁹ can be healed only through changing the total structure
of Korean society and culture.¹⁴⁰ They understand the Christian gospel in the light of
han¹⁴¹ and see themselves as being called to witness to the Gospel as priests of han.¹⁴²
They argue that traditional Christianity has dealt with the problem of sin without
considering the problem of han. Thus, Korean Christians should take han as their theme

¹³⁸Ibid., 78-79.
¹³⁹Ahn, Minjung Sinhak Iyaky [A Story of Minjung Theology], 198; Suh, Minjung
Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 244.
Lee, Religion and Social Formation in Korea, 53; Paik, Constructing Christian Faith in
Korea, 32.
¹⁴¹Park, "Theology of Han (The Abyss of Pain)," 50.
¹⁴²Suh, "Called to Witness to the Gospel Today," 602. Minjung theologians
understand that God anointed Jesus Christ as the high priest of han for resolving the han
of the minjung.
and pray for the resolution of han of the minjung.\textsuperscript{143} Minjung theologians believe that there is nothing more urgent in the mind of God than to mete out justice for the han of the minjung.\textsuperscript{144} Thus, they make the resolution of the minjung’s han as the most important task of their theological reflection.\textsuperscript{145}

The Resolution of Han

To release han is a common factor between shamanism and minjung theology.\textsuperscript{146} For thousands of years, shamanism as a most prominent religion in Korea has sought to resolve the han of the minjung.\textsuperscript{147} The broken-hearted minjung resort to shamanistic ritual to resolve their han. For example, Hyun Kyung Chung explains the resolution of Korean women’s han in some detail.\textsuperscript{148} Chung adopts the indigenous Korean word, “han-pu-ri,” which denotes “disentanglement of accumulated han.” The term han-pu-ri originally came from Korean shamanistic tradition, in which Korean shamans have played the role of the priestess of han-pu-ri in her communities.

\textsuperscript{143}Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” 68.

\textsuperscript{144}Nam Dong Suh indicates that the Korean Bible translates “I will grant justice. . . .” as “I will resolve your suppressed han” (Luke 18:7). Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” 58.

\textsuperscript{145}Kim, “God’s Suffering in Man’s Struggle,” 15; Lee, The Exploration of the Inner Wounds--Han, 5.


\textsuperscript{148}Chung, “Han-Pu-Ri,” 27-36.
There are three important steps in han-pu-ri. The first step is *speaking and hearing*. The shaman gives the han-ridden people the chance to break their silence and enables them to let their han out publicly. The shaman makes the community hear the han-ridden stories. The second step is *naming*. The shaman enables the han-ridden persons to name the source of their oppression. The third step is *changing* the unjust situation by action so that han-ridden persons can have peace. Thus, for the Korean women, who are "the minjung within the minjung," han-pu-ri has been an opportunity for collective healing via group therapy.

Chung insists that for Korean women, salvation is attained by being exorcised from their accumulated han and by disentangling themselves from their many-layered han. Since this can be achieved only through a shaman, Korean women see in Jesus the ultimate shaman or mudang. Jesus also healed and comforted women in his ministry. Just as Jesus cried out for the pain of suffering humanity and comforted the han-ridden people, the Korean shaman also cries out for the pain of the suffering minjung and comforts the han-ridden minjung as a healer, comforter, and counselor.

Chung notes three fascinating factors, which she names the "hermeneutics of suspicion," in regard to Korean han-pu-ri, as follows: (1) the majority of shamans who

149 Chung, "Han-Pu-Ri," 35.
150 Ibid., 31. See the discussion of women's han in Hyun Kyung Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990); Kim, "Han: From Brokenness to Wholeness."
151 Chung, "Han-Pu-Ri," 34.
152 Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 66.
play the role of the priestess of han-pu-ri in Korean society are women; (2) the majority of people who participate in the han-pu-ri gut in Korean society are women; and (3) the majority of characters in ghost stories are women. The notion which Chung calls “epistemological privilege” discloses that Korean women are the very embodiment of the worst han in their history. Hence, minjung theologians argue that Korean women can easily link the Jesus of the New Testament with their shamanist priestesses.

According to David Suh, there are two dimensions in Korean shamanism: inner and outer. Korean shamanism not only has resolved han, which is the inner dimension of shamanism, but also it has evoked passionate, religious energy, which is the outer dimension of shamanism. Suh asserts that, so far, Korean Christianity has not overcome the private level of the Christian faith, thus simply taking the place of the inner dimension of shamanism. Suh envisions that by waking up the outer dimension of shamanism, Korean Christianity could turn the han of the minjung into power for social revolution and transformation and thus fulfill the historical mission of Korean society as a prophetic religion.

Nam Dong Suh accepts Chi Ha Kim’s idea of dan as a way of overcoming the problem of han. Dan is a Korean word, originally coming from a Chinese concept, meaning “a cutting off,” and is an attempt to destroy the greed at the center of the oppressor-oppressed cycle. Suh argues that the accumulation of the han of the

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154 Chung, “Han-Pu-Ri,” 34-35.
155 See ibid., 27-36; Kim, “The Healing of Han,” 123-139.
oppressed minjung is resolved through an act of dan. Through dan, han of the oppressed minjung is transformed into revolutionary energy.\textsuperscript{158}

Suh describes the relationship between han and dan as follows: “On the one hand, there is the fearful han which can kill, cause revenge, destroy, and hate endlessly, and on the other, there is the repetition of dan to suppress the explosion which can break out of the vicious circle, so that han can be sublimated as a higher spiritual power. . . . Dan is to overcome han.”\textsuperscript{159}

Jae Hoon Lee summarizes dan as follows: “First, ‘dan’ liberates han from its masochistic exercise and channels its energy into social revolution. Second, ‘dan’ purifies the revengeful impulse to become a desire for God’s justice. Third, ‘dan’ organizes and controls the direction and the limits of the explosion of han in the revolution so that establishment of a new social reality based on justice becomes possible.”\textsuperscript{160}

Dan has two levels: personal and social. At the personal level, it is self-denial or self-sacrifice. At the social level, it seeks to cut the vicious cycle of revenge, transforming the secular world. The former casts out the temptation of selfishness, by detaching oneself from the dreams of a comfortable material life, and seeing the temporal world as delusions that pass away. The latter leads to social transformation.\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{158}Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 173.

\textsuperscript{159}Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” 65.

\textsuperscript{160}Lee, The Exploration of the Inner Wounds—Han, 154.

\textsuperscript{161}Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” 65.
Accordingly, *dan* is the transformation of the personal or social problems that cause *han*, and works as the process of salvation in minjung theology.

Chi Ha Kim uses the terminology created by the *Donghak* to explain the social and individual *dan*. *Donghak* describes the process of *dan* in four stages: The first stage is *Shichonju* (worshipping the divine embodiment), the second stage is *Yangchonju* (nurturing the divine embodiment), the third stage is *Haengchonju* (practicing the divine embodiment), and the fourth stage is *Saengchonju* (transcending the divine embodiment). Kim applies these four stages from *Donghak* to Christianity. “The first stage is to realize God in our heart. This realization motivates us to worship God. The second stage is to allow the divine consciousness to grow in us. The third stage is to practice what we believe in God. This stage marks our struggle to overcome the injustice of the world through the power of God. The final stage is to overcome the injustice through transforming the world.”

Dong Whan Moon explains that the first-stage experience transforms the minjung’s self-image and makes them new persons. The story of Zacchaeus is the best example of this. Experiencing the transforming friendship of Jesus, Zacchaeus becomes a new person. With the second-stage experience the minjung have the foretaste of the kind of life they had been yearning for in the fellowship of the community. The second aspect of Jesus’ ministry was the formation of a new community, which is governed by

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the spirit of love and mutual respect. The third stage is the action taken against the rulers, who are the taskmasters over the helpless minjung. Jesus countered the evil forces through exorcism, which is a frontal attack against the enemy. Finally, Jesus offered the way of life of heaven, which is ever victorious. Toward the end of his life, he told his disciples, "In the world, you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (John 16:33).^{165}

Chang-Hee Son states, "The theological basis of daan is the death of Jesus which has swallowed the injustice and the oppression and thus broken the chain of the circulation of haan. . . . The cross is God's ultimate negation of haan. The crucifixion is the very daan and haanpuri of God for the minjung."^{166} Thus, dan is the antidote to han and becomes a soteriological motif in minjung theology.^{167} Accordingly, Nam Dong Suh systematized minjung theology as a theology of han and dan. Suh interprets the dialectic unification of han and dan as follows:

Solving the discontent han that accumulated so long among the people must be resolved by the act of dan. To change the worldliness around us, we must altogether stop the vicious cycle of han, and practice the decisive act of dan. Then we could transform the destructive force of hatred and revenge into creative spiritual powers. . . . With this dialectical method of han-dan, I believe we would overcome the very weakness of social revolution theory and the naïve social redemptive approaches of

^{165}Dong Whan Moon, "Doing Theology in Korea with Reference to Theological Education," The East Asia Journal of Theology 4, no. 2 (1986): 41, 42.

^{166}Son, Haan of Minjung Theology, 59.

the West, which only justify the ideology of the oppressor. Thus, the church of Christ would become the priesthood of han for salvation and liberation.\textsuperscript{168}

\section*{A Theology of Praxis}

In common language, praxis means nothing other than practice in the sense of theory being applied to a particular situation. However, when the term is used by minjung theologians, it is related to the movement of the minjung’s liberation. Praxis here refers to “a life that wills the liberation of the minjung and the political revolution that attempts to change the present reality.”\textsuperscript{169} The term praxis has acquired a special status in minjung theology as it has in Latin American liberation theology.\textsuperscript{170} Since minjung theology has accepted the minjung and their han as its central themes, it must necessarily deal with the liberation of the minjung, which is an escape from socio-political and economical oppression. Minjung theology’s goal is for the minjung to become the subjects of history in their struggle for a more humane society.\textsuperscript{171}

Minjung theologians prefer praxis to theory. They argue that traditional theology is a discipline of systematization of the philosophical assumptions about revelation, knowledge, the existence of God, or the contents of faith. It does not consider praxis as a

\textsuperscript{168}\textsuperscript{168}Suh, \textit{Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology]}, 81.

\textsuperscript{169}\textsuperscript{169}Kim, “Korean Minjung Theology,” 13.


necessary element of theological work, believing that theology is a pure theoretical work. For minjung theology, however, Christian theology is "a critical reflection on the praxis of Christians."\(^{172}\) Chang-Nack Kim claims, "The true way of knowing or correct understanding comes from praxis."\(^{173}\) Praxis is regarded as the "epistemological foundation."\(^{174}\) Kim describes the supremacy of Christian praxis on the basis of a new hermeneutic principle. Praxis is supreme over knowledge and gives birth to understanding.\(^{175}\)

Minjung theologians believe that the minjung know the social ills better than do the non-minjung. Thus, they admit the minjung’s epistemological privilege in their hermeneutics.\(^{176}\) Within the perspective of the minjung, salvation cannot be merely an internal, personal relationship with God.\(^{177}\) Salvation ought to include the liberation of the minjung from oppressive social structures, the so-called humanization. For minjung theologians, salvation is identification with the humanization of the minjung from the oppressive social structure.\(^{178}\) The goal of minjung theology is the restoration of human

\(^{172}\)Kim, "Korean Minjung Theology," 10.

\(^{173}\)Ibid., 13.

\(^{174}\)Ibid.

\(^{175}\)Ibid. See also Chang-Nack Kim, "Iyagi Sinhakurosoui Minjung Sinhak [Minjung Theology as a Narrative Theology]," in Chongubaekpalsipyondae Han'guk Minjung Sinhakui Chongae [The Development of Korean Minjung Theology in the 1980s], 393; idem, "Minjung Sinhake Isoso Minjungui Euimi [The Significance of Minjung in Minjung Theology]," in ibid., 112.

\(^{176}\)Jae Soon Park, Yolin Sahoilul Wihan Minjung Sinhak [Minjung Theology for the Open Society] (Seoul: Hanul, 1995), 196. Minjung hermeneutics will be explored more in the following chapter.

\(^{177}\)Bacote, "What Is This Life For?" 97, 107.

\(^{178}\)Suh, "Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung," 166.
rights and the building of a new society in which the minjung can be treated as humans.\(^{179}\)

Byung Mu Ahn understands salvation as the restoration of the human rights of the minjung and the struggle against the evil social structures which control present oppressive situations.\(^{180}\) Ahn insists that when the humanization of the minjung is achieved, the salvation of history becomes possible.\(^{181}\) He states that the Bible is the history of the liberation of the oppressed and God identifies himself with them and continues his liberation work throughout history.\(^{182}\) Ahn contends that through the minjung movements of liberation, the minjung save themselves and the non-minjung are saved by participation in the minjung movements of liberation.\(^{183}\) Thus, the suffering minjung who participate in the liberation movements become their own Messiah.\(^{184}\) For Ahn, salvation is not an individual redemption or spiritual deliverance but the liberation of all the minjung from the historical reality.\(^{185}\)

In his theology, Nam Dong Suh also focuses on the human rights and social justice of the minjung. Suh maintains that the God of the Hebrew slaves is the protector of the human rights of the underdogs. He is the God of vengeance, who repays the

\(^{179}\) Ahn, *Haebangja Yesu* [Liberator Jesus], 183.

\(^{180}\) Ibid., 108; idem, *Minjung Sinhak Iyaky* [A Story of Minjung Theology], 307-314.


\(^{182}\) Ahn, *Minjung Sinhak Iyaky* [A Story of Minjung Theology], 79.

\(^{183}\) Ibid., 125, 126.

\(^{184}\) Ibid., 19, 96.

\(^{185}\) Ahn, *Galilee Ui Yesu* [Jesus in Galilee], 90.
suffering of his slaves. God is always in the midst of the underdogs of society and stands up for them.\(^{186}\)

Suh claims that one’s response to suffering neighbors determines his or her salvation, because Jesus identifies himself with them.\(^{187}\) For Suh, the suffering minjung are conceived as Savior God. That is why Jesus said that at the last judgment (Matt 25:31-46), people will be rewarded or condemned according to their own service to the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned, and the thirsty. The second coming of Jesus will be the realization of the humanity of the suffering neighbors. The realization will be recognized in the face of the suffering people. This means one’s salvation can be determined by the result of one’s behavior and how one works for the minjung.\(^{188}\)

**Relation to Latin American Liberation Theology**

The emergence of minjung theology did not occur in a vacuum. Korean Christians in the minjung movement of the 1970s were aware of liberation theologies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, especially after the 1960s when the liberation theology of Latin America had a global impact. But after their unique experience with the Marxist terror and the rigid anti-communist state during the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, minjung theologians could not admit any association with Latin American liberation theology. This does not mean that they were trying to isolate themselves from other liberation movements.

\(^{186}\) Suh, *Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu* [A Study of Minjung Theology], 237.

\(^{187}\) Nam Dong Suh, *Jonwhansidaeui Sinhak* [Theology at Turning Point] (Seoul: Korea Theological Study Institute, 1976), 75, 76.

For example, Chi Ha Kim states that the Korean church in the Korean historical and political situation "should refine the historical tradition of the Korean minjung movement with the chisel of a liberation-oriented theology so that it may suggest the direction along which the people's rights movement should go."189 Also, Dong Whan Moon claims that liberation theology may simply be irrelevant in Korea, but Koreans must compare their experience with the experience of the minjung in other parts of the world and in other periods of human history.190

Thus, it would be worthwhile to investigate the relationship between the minjung theology in South Korea and the liberation theology in Latin America in order to better understand the characteristics of minjung theology. This section compares the contextual background and the three main theological themes in both theologies—namely, the topics of suffering people, salvation, and hermeneutical methodology.

The Contextual Background

Historically, Latin America was controlled by Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Many people in Latin America suffered from poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy as a result of the long-lasting economic subordination to capitalistic superpowers. This wide gap between the rich and the poor caused most of the poor to feel despair about the existing system.191 Liberation theology began from this

189Suh, "Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung," 156.


exploitation of Latin America during the 1960s.\(^\text{192}\) As Gustavo Gutiérrez, the father of Latin American liberation theology, states, liberation theology started from the efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a just society in which human beings can live with human dignity.\(^\text{193}\)

José Miguez Bonino, another Latin American liberation theologian, argues that liberation theology started from the desperate situation of Latin America. He states, "The socioeconomic, political, and cultural situation of the Latin American peoples challenges our Christian conscience. Unemployment, malnutrition, alcoholism, infant mortality, illiteracy, prostitution, and an ever-increasing inequality between the rich and the poor, racial and cultural discrimination, exploitation, and so forth are facts that define a situation of institutionalized violence in Latin America."\(^\text{194}\) Liberation theology, therefore, has seriously dealt with the problem of economic exploitation and attempted to change the unjust socio-economic structures of Latin America, with the hope of constructing a more egalitarian society.\(^\text{195}\)

On the other hand, although its direct historical background is found in the socio-political situation of Korea in the 1970s, minjung theology arose from the suffering and resistance of the minjung interpretation of its national history.\(^\text{196}\) Centuries of Chinese


\(^{193}\)Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, x.

\(^{194}\)Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, 21-22.


\(^{196}\)Suh, “A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation,” 16.
hegemony, Confucianism’s strict rule over the Chosun dynasty for five centuries, Japanese colonization, the traumatic post World War II division of the country, a painful civil war, and the dictatorial rule are its basic data. Therefore, minjung theology is a theology that attempts to combine Christian faith with the minjung movements in Korea and seeks to resolve the han of the Korean minjung.

There are similarities and differences between the two theologies. First, both theologies are the outcome of similar historical circumstances. Liberation theology began with the socio-political corruption, economic poverty, and dehumanization of Latin Americans in the 1960s; minjung theology emerged from the social, political, and economic situation of Korea in the 1970s. Second, both theologies are similar in their themes and goals. Both have been deeply concerned about the historical reality of the suffering people and seek to liberate them from the unjust social, political, and economic circumstances. Both have the goal to construct a new society where there is no injustice.

However, there are some differences between minjung and liberation theologies. First, their cultural backgrounds are different. While liberation theology originated from Western socio-cultural structures, minjung theology formulated its own theology from Eastern religio-cultural structures. As James Cone points out, minjung theology is rooted in the culture and history of Korea and takes religious traditions and historical minjung movements seriously in its theological reflection. Second, while the influence of Christianity has been strong in Latin America because of its conquest by Catholic Spain in the sixteenth century, the influence of Christianity in Korea is relatively weaker.

because the Christian history in Korea is shorter. Instead, other traditional religions have had a stronger influence on Korean culture. Thus, minjung theology strongly reflects the long pre-Christianity history of the minjung while liberation theology almost neglects the native Latin American history before Christianity.  

Suffering People

Both minjung and liberation theologies understand that God has a special concern for suffering people and desires to liberate them. There are two words meaning people in both theologies: “pueblo” in liberation theology and “minjung” in minjung theology. These words have some similarities and differences. Míguez Bonino states, “It is clear that both in minjung and in Latin American liberation theology ‘people’ does not stand simply for ‘human beings’ nor for all the inhabitants or natives of a given country, nor for an ethnic entity.” However, “each one has its own connotation and history. And such differences are not purely linguistic; they represent different ‘social histories’ of the reality that they denote.”

The word “pueblo” in liberation theology is regarded as the poor and the oppressed. Liberation theologians take poverty as their point of reference for proclaiming the gospel. The purpose of Christ’s life was to change the sinful human condition with all its consequences, such as poverty. Gutiérrez calls this poverty


200 A subjective evaluation of “minjung” and “pueblo,” see ibid., 137-144.

“Christian poverty.” He states, “Christian poverty has meaning only as a commitment of solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer misery and injustice.” He believes that “only through concrete acts of love and solidarity can we effectively realize our encounter with the poor and the exploited and, through them, with Jesus Christ.” This solidarity with the poor is meant to evince itself in action, and for building a new society.

Liberation theologian Jon Sobrino calls the oppressed the “crucified people” and regards them as “the historical continuation of Yahweh’s Suffering Servant” and a “martyred people.” As Yahweh’s Suffering Servant, “the normal condition of the crucified people is hunger, sickness, slums, illiteracy, frustration through lack of education and employment, and pain and suffering of all kinds.” They are despised and rejected by the oppressors. Everything has been taken from them, even their dignity. This is the reality of a crucified people.

The pueblos in liberation theology do not include the indigenous history before Spanish conquerors. Jae Sik Ko states that the concept of pueblo is derived from the

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202 Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 300.

203 Ibid.


205 Ibid.


207 Ibid., 256.

208 Sobrino, Jesus the Liberator, 257-258.
analysis of the present society and is so preoccupied with the social injustice of the present society that it discards the cultural aspects of history. Miguez-Bonino states, "The Latin American people are Christian—in the particular syncretisms which they have themselves created. This is their 'spirituality,' their subjective reality." Thus, the concept of pueblo in liberation theology is "a relatively exclusive and concrete socioeconomic concept" within the Marxist analysis and category. As the crucified people, they are like the Suffering Servant in their poverty and struggle for justice.

On the other hand, the Korean minjung are not the Marxist proletariat. Miguez Bonino agrees that the minjung are not proletariat, which is a "fixed category." The concept of minjung is a living, dynamic, and changing reality which is portrayed as the subjects of history and the "han-ridden minjung who have struggled for liberation and justice under oppression in Korean history." The han of the minjung is the accumulated wrongs committed through imperial colonialism, patriarchal sexism, and hierarchical classism in the socio-political and economic situation in Korea. Yong-Bock Kim describes this as follows:

The minjung bear the historical burdens to sustain human societies. They work, they cultivate, and they serve. Therefore, they are the subjects, not merely of real historical understanding, but of real history-making. It is through their suffering,

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209 Ko, "Minjung Sinhakkwa Haebang Sinhak [Minjung Theology and Liberation Theology]," 143.


211 Ko, "Minjung Sinhakkwa Haebang Sinhak [Minjung Theology and Liberation Theology]," 140.

212 Sobrino, Jesus the Liberator, 258-259.

213 Miguez Bonino, 159.

214 Kim, "Messiah and Minjung," 184, 185.
which forms the core of the historical experience, that history is sustained. The 
sustenance of human life, the creative process in cultural life, the transforming 
dynamics of the social and political process, are fundamentally based upon the 
endurance and suffering sacrifice of the minjung. Therefore, their suffering becomes 
the foundation of the society, and they sustain the ups and downs of the historical 
process. In this sense, they are subjects in the understanding of history, in the telling 
of their stories of historical experiences and in the making of history. They are the 
subjects of history.\(^{215}\)

Consequently, the term minjung, as a Korean folk term that has been formed 
through the long history of Korea, is “a more comprehensive, symbolic cultural concept” 
within the minjung movements in Korean history than that of the pueblo.\(^{216}\) While 
liberation theology recognizes the pueblo as the object of liberation, minjung theology 
understands the minjung as the subjects of liberation as well as of history and culture.\(^{217}\)

Understanding of Salvation

The goal of liberation theology is to liberate the poor and to construct a just 
society. The liberation is freedom from the oppressive social structures, and it comes 
through a struggle for the poor. Gutiérrez states, “To work, to transform this world is to 
become a human and to build the human community; it is also to save. Likewise, to 
struggle against misery and exploitation and to build a just society is already to be part of 
the saving action, which is moving towards its complete fulfillment.”\(^{218}\) He believes that 
salvation in Christ is “a radical liberation” from all misery, despoliation, and alienation,

\(^{215}\) Kim, Messiah and Minjung, 5.

\(^{216}\) Ko, “Minjung Sinhakkwa Haebang Sinhak [Minjung Theology and Liberation 
Theology],” 140.

\(^{217}\) Sung Jae Kim, “Minjung Sinhakui Baljongwajongkwa Bangbumnon [the 
Process of the Development of Minjung Theology and Methodology],” 212-213.

\(^{218}\) Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 159.
"which in turn necessarily implies a political liberation."\(^{219}\)

Gutiérrez defines sin as follows: "In the liberation approach, sin is not considered as an individual, private, or merely interior reality—asserted just enough to necessitate a 'spiritual' redemption which does not challenge the order in which we live. Sin is regarded as social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood and love in relationships among men, the breach of friendship with God and other men, and, therefore, an interior, personal fracture."\(^{220}\) Thus, the concept of sin in liberation theology is collective and structural, which necessitates a political liberation.

Liberation theology discovers a new image of Jesus, "the liberator."\(^{221}\) Jesus came to free all human beings from a variety of social evils such as ignorance, hunger, poverty, and oppression. In such suffering situations, Jesus is seen as the liberator who frees and saves the suffering people from evil structures.\(^{222}\) The salvation that he gives is a liberation from socio-political oppression and economic exploitation. Thus, in liberation theology, a political liberation is identified with salvation.\(^{223}\)

Salvation in minjung theology is also a political liberation from the unjust social situation.\(^{224}\) However, minjung theology claims that the minjung can achieve their own salvation by themselves\(^{225}\) and salvation of all humankind comes through the minjung’s


\(^{220}\) Ibid., 175.

\(^{221}\) See Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*.

\(^{222}\) Ibid., 12, 17-18.


\(^{224}\) Suh, *Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu* [A Study of Minjung Theology], 170.

\(^{225}\) Ibid., 180-181.
In minjung theology, the minjung’s suffering constitutes the Messiah’s role. Ahn identifies the minjung with Jesus. He states, “Jesus is the minjung, and the minjung are Jesus.” The minjung Jesus has a salvific function for the minjung and others. Thus, minjung theology replaces “the Savior-saved schema” with “the Jesus-minjung schema.”

**Hermeneutical Methodology**

In an attempt to be relevant to the Latin American context, liberation theology has a radically different starting point: a decided commitment to praxis for the liberation of the oppressed. Liberation theologians denounce traditional theologies for being too theoretical, too prone to spiritualize away the liberating content of the gospel. They argue that the knowledge of the gospel is not an abstract, propositional knowledge, but “one that is achieved through identification with the oppressed.”

According to Juan Segundo, “a hermeneutic circle in theology always presupposes a profound human commitment, a partiality that is consciously accepted—

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229 However, the notion of “minjung Jesus” is against traditional Christian doctrine. Moltmann asserts, “Minjung christology is not the exclusive ‘representation’ christology of the Reformation’s *solus Christus*. It is the inclusive solidarity christology of the divine Brother, who suffers with us and who identifies himself with ‘the least’ among the people.” *Experiences in Theology*, 256.

not on the basis of theological criteria, of course, but on the basis of human criteria."\textsuperscript{231}

Segundo believes that the "only thing that can maintain the liberating character of any theology is not its content but its methodology."\textsuperscript{232}

Gutiérrez regards liberation theology not so much as a new theme for reflection, but as "a new way to do theology."\textsuperscript{233} He begins from praxis for the liberation of the oppressed because he believes that truth is known not in abstract theory but in praxis, in the midst of historical involvement.\textsuperscript{234} Similarly, for liberation theologians, praxis is the starting point of theological reflection.

Since the main concern of liberation theology is with the liberation of the oppressed, it needs to analyze the structures of society in which oppression exists. For liberation theologians, Marxism is considered to be the best option to uncover the causes of poverty in Latin America. Segundo states, "Whether everything Marx said is accepted or not, and in whatever way one may conceive his 'essential' thinking, there can be no doubt that present-day social thought will be 'Marxist' to some extent: that is, profoundly indebted to Marx. In this sense, Latin American theology is certainly Marxist."\textsuperscript{235}

Gutiérrez indicates that "it is to a large extent due to Marxism's influence that theological thought, searching for its own sources, has begun to reflect on the meaning of

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{231}Juan Luis Segundo, \textit{Liberation of Theology} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 13. This book is especially concerned with theological methodology.
\item \textsuperscript{232}Segundo, \textit{Liberation of Theology}, 40.
\item \textsuperscript{233}Gutiérrez, \textit{A Theology of Liberation}, 15. See also Miguez Bonino, \textit{Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation}, 61.
\item \textsuperscript{234}Gutiérrez, "The Hope of Liberation," 65. See also Miguez Bonino, \textit{Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation}, 86-105, for a more detailed discussion of "Hermeneutics, Truth, and Praxis" in liberation theology.
\item \textsuperscript{235}Segundo, \textit{Liberation of Theology}, 35.
\end{footnotes}
the transformation of this world and the action of man in history." In the methodology of liberation theology, the "text" is the historical situation. Hugo Assmann, a Latin American liberation theologian, declared that "the text is our situation."

Since liberation theology attempts to formulate its theology from the historical praxis, "the political question is the first one that we must ask as we approach any biblical passage." Segundo justifies this approach: "I hope that it is quite clear that the Bible is not the discourse of a universal God to a universal man. Partiality is justified because we must find, and designate as the Word of God, that part of divine revelation which today, in the light of our concrete historical situation, is most useful for the liberation to which God summons us."

The methodology in minjung theology derives from the minjung wisdom, which arises from their historical experience of suffering—han. The inspiration for the methodological tool of minjung theology is the historical movements of minjung liberation in Korea such as shamanism and the Donghan movement. Sang Jin Ahn claims that Je-Woo Choi uses the religious context as the "methodological past" and the social context as the "methodological present." In other words, the present is to be the

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241 Suh, "Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung," 155-182. About these movements, see the previous chapter.
norm for accepting the past.\(^{242}\) The method suggested by Choi has become the norm for minjung theology and “is corroborated by other liberation theologies.” Namely, “what is primarily normative in theology is what reflects the experience of the oppressed and contributes to their liberation.”\(^{243}\)

Since minjung theology admits the epistemological privilege of the minjung in its hermeneutics, it interprets the Bible from the minjung perspective.\(^{244}\) Chang-Nack Kim calls this biblical interpretation a “sociological” biblical interpretation.\(^{245}\) The sociological approach is a method used to interpret the Bible, researching the sociological context of the scriptural text according to the methods and theories of the social sciences.\(^{246}\) The sociological method in biblical interpretation assumes that the traditional grammatical-historical method is insufficient because it disregards sociological concerns and is interested in literal, historical, and theological concerns. The sociological method tries to research the sociological context or *Sitz im Leben* of the scriptural text. The modern sociological hermeneutic movement began in the 1970s with such Old Testament scholars as George E. Mendenhall and Norman K. Gottwald and such New Testament scholars as Kenzo Tagawa. This sociological hermeneutics

\(^{242}\) Ahn, *Continuity and Transformation*, 73-86.

\(^{243}\) Ibid., 73, 82.

\(^{244}\) Park, *Yolin Sahoilul Wihan Minjung Sinhak* [Minjung Theology for the Open Society], 196. Minjung hermeneutics will be further explored in the following chapter.

\(^{245}\) Kim, “Korean Minjung Theology,” 12. Although socio-economic method is included in sociological method, they are used interchangeably without any distinction in this dissertation.

\(^{246}\) See Ahn, *Sahothakjok Songsohaesok* [Sociological Interpretation of the Bible].

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There are similarities in hermeneutical methodology between minjung and liberation theologies. First, both theologies use sociological analysis as a desirable method for doing theology. The critical investigation of the social situation becomes an element in their theological work. Second, both theologies have a common starting point: the social situation. Third, both theologies interpret the Bible from a sociological viewpoint, that is, from the viewpoint of the oppressed. Lastly, both theologies seek the interpretation of praxis in the biblical text as an effective weapon in the social struggle of the oppressed for social justice. For them, praxis is a part of the theological method. Thus, both are not a theoretical theology but a praxis-oriented theology.

However, the praxis of minjung theology is said to learn from the past historical minjung movements of Korea. Minjung theologians do not dare to include an emphasis on the Marxist sociological perspective as their method in their theological reflection. They contend that they receive insight from the historical revolutionary movements of Korea rather than the praxis of Marxist philosophy.\footnote{Hong Jei Lee, “The Comparative Study of the Christology in Latin American Liberation Theology and Korean Minjung Theology” (Ph.D diss., The University of Glasgow, 1990), 349, 350.} Although minjung theology does not explicitly use the Marxist analysis of socio-economic categories, the class struggle...
between the ruling and the oppressed and the goal of an egalitarian world through revolutionary praxis in minjung theology implicitly require attention be given to the Marxist analysis of the socio-economic structures.\textsuperscript{249}

Despite their good intentions for liberating the poor and the oppressed from the unjust social situation, both Korean minjung theology and Latin American liberation theology seem to have a tendency to replace the religious with the socio-political. Both theologies suggest that socio-political analysis guides their reconstruction of the biblical hermeneutics and their soteriology.\textsuperscript{250}

**Summary**

The essence of minjung theology is characterized by the themes of minjung, han, and praxis. The concept of minjung is key for minjung theological reflection and becomes formative for doing minjung theology. Minjung theology understands that the minjung, as an active and inclusive reality, are the subjects of history. Minjung theologians use biblical references such as the Hebrew, \textit{ochlos}, \textit{anawim}, and \textit{ptochoi} as equivalents of the concept of minjung. They regard the minjung as their major theological subject.

The inner reality of the minjung is han, which is one of the distinctive characteristics of the minjung experience. The minjung and han are inseparable from each other. Thus, the basic stance of minjung theology appears in its understanding of the minjung and han. Minjung theologians understand that the han of the minjung is the

\textsuperscript{249}Lee, \textit{An Emerging Theology}, 19.

\textsuperscript{250}Minjung hermeneutics and soteriology will be examined and evaluated in the following chapter.
collective suffering experience of the Korean people from imperial colonialism, patriarchal sexism, and hierarchical classism. The problem of han is resolved by the act of dan, which, as the antidote to han, works as the process of salvation in minjung theology.

Minjung theology suggests a new hermeneutic principle that Christian praxis is the true way of knowing and correct understanding. From this hermeneutical perspective, minjung theologians understand salvation as the humanization of the minjung from the oppressed social structure. Thus, salvation in minjung theology is not spiritual deliverance but the restoration of human rights and the building of a just society. Such salvation is determined by one’s attitude towards the minjung.

In comparison with liberation theology, although it has similar historical circumstances, motives, goals, and methods, minjung theology has some unique characteristics. The concept of minjung is a more comprehensive, symbolic cultural concept than the concept of pueblo which is an exclusive socio-economic concept within the Marxist analysis. In its soteriology, minjung theology emphasizes the “minjung Jesus,” who has a salvific function for the minjung and others through exercising dan. Even though both liberation and minjung theologies adopt sociological analysis as a basic method for theological reflection, minjung theology gets its insight in its theological reflection from the various religious traditions and minjung movements in Korean history. The following chapter analyzes and evaluates the minjung hermeneutics and soteriology.
CHAPTER IV

AN EVALUATION OF MINJUNG THEOLOGY: ITS HERMENEUTICS AND SOTERIOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to critically evaluate the hermeneutics and the soteriology of the works of two minjung theologians, Nam Dong Suh and Byung Mu Ahn, which belong to the early part of minjung theology. The key features of minjung theology are its proposal of a method of reading Scripture and its interpretation of salvation. The first section of this chapter examines minjung hermeneutics, and the second section analyzes minjung soteriology. The evaluation reflects an evangelical perspective.

The Issues in Minjung Hermeneutics

The aim of this section is to examine the hermeneutics of minjung theology. Fundamentally, what distinguishes minjung theology from traditional theology is its hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is important because it determines the results of

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1Hermeneutics is the science of interpreting text. In a narrow sense, it indicates critical reflection upon the processes of interpretation, especially the interpretation of biblical texts. In a broad sense, it means the understanding and interpretation of life in content as well as method. In the context of minjung theology, hermeneutics is the method of interpreting the biblical text to identify the experiences of the minjung. See Prasad, The Book of Exodus and Dalit Liberation, 96; Anthony C. Thiselton, “Hermeneutics,” Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 283.

2The perspective includes acceptance of the normative and final authority of Scripture and the supreme lordship of Jesus Christ as Savior.
theological work.  

The Starting Point of Theology

One of the basic characteristics of minjung theology is its point of departure. Challenging traditional theology for its neglect of the social conditions of human existence, minjung theology asserts that theological interpretation ought to start from the social context of the minjung and a commitment to their liberation. Similar to the liberation theologies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, it puts the social context of the minjung before the biblical text.

Minjung theology insists that a socio-economic approach can help fully explain the circumstances of the minjung’s lives. However, the socio-economic method, used to understand the human condition of the past and present, is one of class-conscious struggle for power and economic status. More specifically, for minjung theologians, dogmatic hermeneutics is inadequate for overcoming the han of the minjung. Nam Dong Suh argues that dogmatic theology assumes that “one’s being determines one’s situation rather than one’s environmental condition determines one’s being. . . . But in order to overcome the viewpoint or prejudice of dogmatic theology, political theology takes the

\(^{3}\)Gerhard Maier comments, “Modern physical research could teach theology in this area how the selection of a method of study can predetermine and prefigure the scope, extent, and type of results.” *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans. Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977), 11.


\(^{5}\)Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 157-158.

\(^{6}\)Cf. Hugo Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church*, 104.

\(^{7}\)Kim, “The Explosive Growth of the Korean Church Today,” 59-66;
stand that social situations determine humanity.”

Minjung theology understands its class-conscious, socio-economic hermeneutics as a scientific approach that views history as a dynamic relationship of conflict between the ruling and ruled classes. Suh states, “The limitations in the situation of the minjung, who are to be contrasted with the ruling regime, may be clarified when we use the approach of socio-economic history. Once we clarify the history of the minjung through this approach, we can then see through the social biography of the minjung their corporate spirit, their consciousness and their aspirations, by using the method of the sociology of literature.”

Minjung theologians employ socio-economic methods in their biblical interpretation. They think that, since traditional approaches to biblical interpretation are insufficient in that they do not consider the social situations of the minjung, a socio-economic method is necessary in order to research the social context of the scriptural text. They contend that through understanding the socio-economic struggle of the

8 Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 157-158.

9 Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 157; “Symposium: Han’guk Sinhakuirosou Minjung Sinhakui Kwaje [Discussion on the Task of Minjung Theology as Korean Theology],” 113. See also Ahn, Sahohakjok Songsohaesok [Sociological Interpretation of the Bible].

10 Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 157. According to Suh, “Augustine’s theology had as its framework Plato’s philosophy of ideas. Thomas Aquinas’s theology made Aristotelian philosophy its framework. The liberal theology of the nineteenth-century made Kantian philosophy its frame of reference. . . . Today, we are convinced that the perspectives or framework of socio-economic history and the sociology of literature will reveal the identity of the minjung” (ibid.).

11 Lee, A Comparative Study between Minjung Theology and Reformed Theology, 110; Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” 55-69. A socio-economic approach to biblical interpretation is not exclusive to minjung theology. This hermeneutical practice is one of the common factors in liberation theologies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. See Phan, “Method in Liberation Theologies,” 40-63.
minjung, one gains a comprehensive understanding of the Bible and can participate in the praxis of the minjung. Jung Joon Kim states that by interpreting the Bible in socio-economic terms, “one discovers more practical truths than by speculating.”

On adopting this method, as stated in the previous chapter, minjung theologians were influenced by sociological interpreters of the Bible. Nam Dong Suh, being influenced by Mendenhall and Gottwald, interprets Scripture in sociological terms. Mendenhall proposed the “Peasants’ Revolt” model as an explanation for the emergence of Israel in Canaan. He argues that ancient Israel, not as a group of geographical outsiders but as a group of socio-political outsiders, was composed of native Canaanites who revolted against their city-state overlords. Instead of the traditional nomad, the proposed sociological identity is that of peasant, which means the economically marginal element of society whose labor the elite exploited. Through the peasants’ revolt among the Canaanite lower classes, catalyzed by the escaped slaves from Egypt, Israel established an egalitarian state.

Gottwald follows Mendenhall’s “Peasants’ Revolt” model. The conquest of Canaan took place, not via invasion or immigration from outside, but rather via a revolt of the disgruntled lower classes in Canaan. Gottwald contends that the result of the liberation from Egypt was not a Yahwistic covenant community but a classless,

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14Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 49-55.
16See Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh.
egalitarian, and socialistic society. Israel became a confederacy of tribes bonded equally on an egalitarian basis. Gottwald interprets the Exodus as the ideal of the premonarchic liberation movement.

In minjung theology, the Mendenhall-Gottwald hypothesis of the revolt model provides a key to theologically interpreting the Korean traditions of minjung movements. In fact, minjung theologians adopt their conclusions as biblical references for minjung theology. Minjung theologians regard the Exodus and the Crucifixion as pivotal events for their theology that serve to interpret the Korean minjung movement. Suh argues, “The events of the Crucifixion of Christ and the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt can never be understood properly apart from this [socio-economic] method of interpretation.”

Suh interprets the event of the Exodus as a political revolution which took place in a socio-economic context. The Hebrews as slaves in Egypt rebelled against the oppression of the Egyptians and escaped from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. He states, “The event of the Exodus was historical. The lowest class Hebrews in Egypt could not endure the cruel and merciless rule they faced. They were extricated from

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17 ibid., 210-219.
18 Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh, 223.
21 Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 164. See also idem, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 158-159.
22 Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 158.
Egypt through rebellion. This event should not be sublimated as a religious and spiritual symbol, explaining the salvation of God for the world, because it was actually rooted in history and politics."^23 Suh also states, “Jesus was crucified on the cross because he was accused of being a political criminal."^24 For him, Jesus’ crucifixion was a political event rather than a vicarious death for the sins of the world. Therefore, Suh emphasizes the political dimension of both events.^25

Byung Mu Ahn explains minjung theology in sociological terms borrowed from sociological interpreters.^26 Ahn’s editing of Sahoihakjok Songsohaesok [Sociological Interpretation of the Bible] clearly shows the influence of the sociological hermeneutics on his theology.^27 Tagawa reflects on the socio-political tensions between Jerusalem and

\[23\] Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 235.

\[24\] Ibid., 317-318. Suh is also influenced by Tagawa, a Japanese theologian, who has followed the sociological interpretation of the New Testament, and interprets “minjung” as a negative concept against the authoritative class. Ibid., 52-53.

\[25\] From a socio-economic perspective, Suh contends that Jesus was a friend of the minjung. The rulers of the time thought of him as a dangerous figure who would awaken the minjung to oppose them. For living as the “companion-in-resistance” of the minjung, Jesus was executed as a political criminal. “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 161.

\[26\] Ahn, Sahoihakjok Songsohaesok [Sociological Interpretation of the Bible], 205-237.

Galilee and develops the political concept of *ochlos*. In minjung theology, the Tagawa hypothesis of class conflict between Jerusalem and Galilee provides the key to interpreting the contemporary socio-political situation in Korea.

Ahn emphasizes the liberating acts of God in Scripture. He states, “The core of the Bible is the ‘liberating event.’” For him, the Bible is the history of the liberation of the minjung. The Exodus was a “liberating event from economic exploitation and political oppression.” Ahn understands the salvation of Israel from Egypt as a political, not a spiritual, liberation. He also states that the Crucifixion was not a unique event that occurred two thousand years ago, but a repetitive suffering and liberating event of the minjung throughout history. Because the death of Jesus represents the culmination of the minjung’s suffering, his death is not the death of an individual, but the minjung’s death by the dominant and oppressive powers. Jesus’ crucifixion cannot be fully understood from a religious perspective. Therefore, minjung theologians have sought

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29Na, “A Theological Assessment,” 141.

30Ahn, *Minjung Sinhak Ikaky* [A Story of Minjung Theology], 78.

31Ibid., 79.

32Ibid.

33Ibid., 104, 284.

34Ibid., 99.

35Ibid., 104, 284.
to make their theology applicable to the minjung's contemporary historical situation and have emphasized the socio-political and economic dimensions of the Bible.\textsuperscript{36}

The View and Usage of Scripture

Minjung hermeneutics as a socio-economic approach to the Bible retains the presuppositions of the historical-critical method.\textsuperscript{37} Since the post-Enlightenment emphasis on higher criticism, liberal theologians have questioned the authority of the Bible. The Enlightenment was characterized by rational and empirical critique which advocated the primacy of reason as the final criterion of truth. It reacted against any form of supernaturalism and encouraged revolt against the traditional understanding of authority. This led to a rejection of the authority of the Bible as the inspired Word of God.\textsuperscript{38}

During the Enlightenment era, the Bible was thrown into a new dark age. Bernard Ramm states: "The Enlightenment was a shattering experience for orthodox theology

\textsuperscript{36}Lee, \textit{A Comparative Study between Minjung Theology and Reformed Theology}, 106.


from which it has never fully recovered." Consequently, the Bible came to the same level as other literary productions, to be studied by the same method as any other literary productions. The Enlightenment provided the conceptual framework for the historical-critical method. With its various forms, the historical-critical method is continuously used to the present day in the interpretation of the Bible by "liberal" and "modernistic" scholarship. Most of the modern critical approaches to Scripture, Richard Davidson states, "retain the critical presuppositions of the historical-critical method."^40

Liberal theologians have tried to situate the Bible in various historical contexts. In this vein, minjung theologians purposefully developed their own biblical hermeneutics.^41 They construe the Bible as an account of the minjung and see the Bible in essence as a testimony of liberation. They regard the Bible as "one of the reference books that shows aspects of minjung movements in particular socioeconomic situations in the past."^42

Nam Dong Suh states that Scripture is the "point of reference" or "reference book"^43 for theology. For Suh, Scripture is simply a written record of historical events that occurred in the process of liberating people, and these liberating events are God's


^41Chang, "Carrying the Torch in the Darkest Hours," 207.


^43Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 166, 184.
revelation.44 Byung Mu Ahn also views Scripture as the sole point of reference through which he reads the Korean history of the minjung events as well as church history. Ahn states, “The Bible is the only ‘point of reference’ for me.”45

The Hermeneutic Criterion

One of the important issues of minjung methodology is the hermeneutic criterion. The minjung hermeneutical criterion is the minjung experience.46 Minjung theologians investigate the social biography of the minjung in order to understand the minjung experience. They discover God in Korean history where the minjung struggle against the oppressors. From this perspective, Young Hak Hyun states, “My understanding of God’s incarnation was deepened in more concrete and existential terms. God is working and revealing his will in and through the minjung of Korea, especially minjung’s history and culture.”47 Thus, minjung theologians affirm that a social biography of the minjung suggests “the hermeneutics of minjung experience.”48

The perception of the minjung’s experience provides minjung theologians with “the epistemological lens” for viewing and interpreting scriptural data.49 Minjung

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44Ibid., 233-234.
45Ahn, *Minjung Sinhak Iyaky* [A Story of Minjung Theology], 75.
46Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 157-158.
47Hyun, “A Theological Look at the Mask Dance in Korea,” 54.
experience is used "as the critical principle for hermeneutics." It provides the key to understanding the historical Jesus. Nam Dong Suh argues: "If we do not meet suffering neighbors who groan under the structure of evil society, nowhere will we meet Christ in this age." Minjung theologians emphasize the epistemological privilege of the minjung in their biblical interpretation. To interpret the Bible from the minjung perspective is the core of minjung hermeneutics. Therefore, the general impression that one has on reading minjung hermeneutics is that the final hermeneutic criterion is the minjung experience by which Scripture is interpreted.

Problems of Minjung Hermeneutics

The aim of this section is to critically evaluate the issues of minjung hermeneutics examined in the previous section.

The Starting Point of Theology

It is true that no theology exists in isolation from one's own social and historical situation. William Hordern expresses this well: "Theology by its nature, stands poised between the Scriptural message on one hand and a particular historical situation on the American liberation theology emphasizes the experience of economic exploitation, and Black theology in North America stresses the experience of racial discrimination. Minjung theology prefers the minjung experience to any theoretical speculation for theology.


51 Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 119.

52 See Park, Yolin Sahoilul Wihan Minjung Sinhak [Minjung Theology for the Open Society], 196.

other. . . If theology's one foot is planted firmly in the Bible, the other foot must be planted in the world. Theology is the attempt to relate the eternal Gospel message to the age in which it lives.”

Minjung theology critiques the indifference of traditional theology to the problems of sociological context such as poverty, oppression, and alienation. Nam Dong Suh points out that "theological activities do not end with the exposition of the biblical texts of salvation or liberation of man by God. In the Bible, the Exodus, the activities of the prophets, and the event of the Cross offer new insights, but these texts ought to be rediscovered and reinterpreted in the context of the human struggle for historical and political liberation today.”

Minjung theologians are to be commended for their commitment to join the struggle for the oppressed. They have taken seriously the situation of the poor and the oppressed in Korea and are committed to fight for a just society. They have challenged Korean Christianity to examine its own social conscience. In the history of Korean Christianity, minjung theologians are the pioneers in interpreting Scripture from a socio-economic perspective. The emphasis on the socio-political aspects of the Bible complements traditional theology, which emphasizes mainly the spiritual and individual aspects of Scripture.

Minjung theology's emphatic reinterpretation of the Christian gospel challenges the church to make theology relevant to the life situation. It questions the value of

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56Suh, "Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung," 158.
theological study divorced from historical situations. Hence, its insights are likely to be an enduring legacy for future theological reflection.

However, minjung theology swings the pendulum to the other extreme by making the human situation the “text.” Minjung theology, as a “situation theology,” adopts a situational hermeneutical practice. As John H. Stek points out, situational hermeneutics, when absolutized, means the silencing of the Scriptures. It “reduces the Bible to a tool (or weapon) that we grasp in our hands to promote whatever cause seems to hold hope for the world—for the world as we see it.”

When the present situation is allowed to determine the meaning of the biblical text, the way is open for a reductionist reading and the subordination of Scripture to the human context. If Scripture is subordinated to the human situation, it ceases to be the

57See Clark, “Growth and Limitations of Minjung Christianity,” 103.


59Kim Chi-chol calls minjung theology “a situation theology.” Kim states: “Minjung theology is better understood as a situation theology because its ‘Koreaness’ does not depend on its theological and hermeneutical originality so much as on its ability to deal sensitively with the minjung reality in the Korean situation.” Minjung Sinhakui Songso Ilgi-e Daehan Bipanjok Kochal [A Critical Observation on Minjung Theology’s Bible Reading], Sinhak Sasang [Theological Thought] 69 (1990): 442; quoted in Wonil Kim, Minjung Theology’s Biblical Hermeneutics: An Examination of Minjung Theology’s Appropriation of the Exodus Account,” in Christianity in Korea, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Timothy S. Lee (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 228.


supreme norm for faith and conduct, and the biblical meaning will always be modified by the different situations in society. Scripture is then replaced by situational context and reduced to the level of a secondary reference for theology. Although the Bible must speak to any situation and the human condition should affect one's reading of the Bible, the intended meaning of Scripture should not be sacrificed for the sake of hermeneutical assumptions. The interpretation of the biblical terms "Hebrew" and ochlos in minjung theology illustrates this problem.

Hebrews as the Minjung

As noted in the previous chapter, minjung theologians identify the word Hebrew with the minjung. Mendenhall and Gottwald influenced minjung theologians' interpretation of the term Hebrew. According to Mendenhall, by the process of withdrawal, not physically and geographically, but politically and subjectively, from any obligation to the existing political regimes, large population groups became "Hebrews." He claims that genealogical descent did not actually produce any tribe in antiquity, but "what constituted membership in the tribe was essentially a subjective feeling of belonging and loyalty." Thus, Mendenhall asserts that no one could be born a "Hebrew"; one became so only by his or her own socio-political action.

Hee-suk Moon states, "Definitely, the Hebrews in Egypt were the socially outcast, politically enslaved, and religiously suppressed people who could be equated with the

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63 Cf. Suh, "Du Iyakiui Hamnyu [Confluence of Two Stories]," 240.
64 Mendenhall, "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," 70-75.
65 Ibid., 66-87. See also Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh, 419-425.
'apiru, as G. E. Mendenhall has stated." Based on his study of several scriptural references using the term "Hebrew," Joon Suh Park also concludes that the Hebrews were not an ethnic group but the ancient Near-Eastern habiru, the socially-alienated marginals.  

However, scriptural references show that the biblical Hebrew is an ethnic term and is not used in the same sense of the ancient Near-Eastern habiru. The term "Hebrew" is originally used to distinguish the descendents of Abraham "as a specific ethnic group from the Canaanites, Hurrians, and other inhabitants of Syria-Palestine." This term appears relatively infrequently in the Old Testament and is confined to certain parts of the Old Testament: the story of Joseph (Gen 37-50), the history of Israel in Egypt (Exod 1-15), and 1 Samuel (4:6, 9; 13:3, 7, 19; 14:11, 21; 29:3), with a few other passages (Gen 14:13; Exod 21:2-11; Deut 15:12; Jer 34:8-22; Jonah 1:9).  

In reference to people in later periods, the word "Hebrew" was employed by foreigners speaking about Israelites (Gen 39:14, 17; 1 Sam 4:6; 13:19; etc.), or by the Israelites speaking about themselves (Jonah 1:9) or speaking about their country to  

Abraham is the first and the oldest in the Old Testament to be called a “Hebrew” (Gen 14:13-14). He represents the powerful and not the powerless. He had 318 trained men allied with the Amorites; the king of Sodom welcomed him after his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer (Gen 14:13-17). In Gen 23:4, although Abraham introduced himself as an alien, the Hittites called Abraham a mighty prince among them (Gen 23:6). This clearly contrasts with the habiru, the mercenaries in wartime, or robbers and plunderers during times of political upheaval. Also, after he rescued Lot and his family and recovered the possessions stolen from the king of Sodom, Abraham returned the goods (Gen 14:21-24). This attitude directly contradicts that of a habiru, “whose opportunistic, selfish behavior is everywhere evident in ancient Near Eastern texts.”

The usage of the word “Hebrew” in the stories of Joseph and Moses indicates that the term is used more as an ethnic than as a social designation. The significance of the term Hebrew in those stories is that they occur in “pre-conquest” stories. The term is used three times by a foreigner to describe Joseph’s ethnic identity (Gen 39:14, 17; 41:12). In the expression “the Hebrew slave” in Gen 39:17, “slave” indicates Joseph’s social status, while “Hebrew” distinguishes him ethnically from other slaves. The name

70Lemche, “Hebrew,” 95. Perhaps one exception is in the Covenant Code, Exod 21:2-11, which regulates the service of the Hebrews who had been enslaved and in texts dependent on this law (Deut 15:12; Jer 34:8-22).


72Freedman, Willoughby, and Fabry, “‘Ibri,” 438.
“Hebrews” denotes Jacob’s family as a kinship or family unit. The expression “the land of the Hebrews” (Gen 40:15) indicates a country belonging to the Hebrews and refers to the geographical area controlled by the “Hebrews.” Furthermore, “the habiru are in general never associated with landownership or land possession.” Thus, this expression of Joseph’s self-identification contradicts those who identify the biblical Hebrew with the habiru.

And the term “Hebrew” in the biography of Moses (Exod 1:15-2:22) demonstrates that it is used in an ethnic sense, distinguishing the Hebrews from the Egyptians. Such an expression, “Hebrew midwives” (1:15) or “Hebrew women” (1:16, 19), indicates that the word “Hebrew” is “an ethnic term distinguishing the ‘Hebrews’ from the ‘Egyptians’” and “has nothing to do with social status.”

Moses is introduced as one of the Hebrew children (2:6), and Pharaoh’s daughter employs a Hebrew woman (2:7) as a nurse. The story of Moses’ killing an Egyptian for his own people, “Hebrews” and the flight from Egypt, distinguishes the Hebrews from the Egyptians (2:11, 13). The remaining occurrences of “Hebrew” are in the chapters concerning Moses’ calling and confrontation with the Pharaoh (3:18; 5:3; 7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3). “The God of the Hebrews” (3:18) is identified with “the God of your [Moses’] father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (3:6), and is synonymous with “the God of Israel” (cf. 5:1). Here the term “Hebrew” “refers neither

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.


to social status nor to class but to the Hebrew people."^{77}

The word "Hebrew" also occurs in the law concerning Hebrew slaves in the Covenant Code (Exod 21:2-21; cf. Deut 15:12; Jer 34:8-22).^{78} There exists a clear distinction between Hebrew slaves and slaves of foreign origin (cf. Lev 25:44-46). Treatment of a "Hebrew slave" is completely different from that of a "non-Hebrew slave." The Hebrew slave is a "brother," or "member of the community" (Deut 15:12; cf. Lev 25:35, 39). The period of slavery for a Hebrew slave is limited (cf. Lev 25:40). This legislation is founded upon "the ethnic bond and the historical inheritance" that the Hebrews share (Deut 15:15; cf. Lev 25:42, 55).^{79}

Contrary to Gottwald's claim, Israelite society in premonarchic times was not an egalitarian society but consisted of several different social classes, including slaves and

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^{77}Ibid., 439.


^{79}Freedman, Willoughby, and Fabry, "Ibri," 440. In reference to people in later periods, Jeremiah explicitly states that the status and treatment of a Hebrew slave (34:8-22) are governed by Deut 15:12-18. He suggests that Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem is God's punishment on Judah for having failed to follow the laws governing the release of the Hebrew slaves. Every Hebrew slave must be freed after serving six years (Jer 34:9, 14). In Jer 34:9, "Hebrew" and Judean are used synonymously, "thus completing the terminological development regarding the designation of Abraham's descendants from Hebrew to Israel to Judah." The remaining occurrences of "Hebrew" are in 1 Samuel (4:6, 9; 13:3, 7, 19; 14:11, 21; 29:3) and Jonah (1:9). In every instance in 1 Samuel, the term "Hebrew" occurs in the narrative of the war with the Philistines and is used alongside Israel to point out the descendants of Abraham living under the covenant with Yahweh. In 1 Samuel, the word "Hebrew" is clearly a synonym for Israel, the chosen people of God. All these texts are used to distinguish Hebrews, the descendants of Abraham, from the Canaanites, the Philistines, and other foreigners. In Jonah 1:9, the prophet describes himself as a "Hebrew" as opposed to the inhabitants of Nineveh, just as the Israelites identify themselves as Hebrews as opposed to foreigners in Exodus. This is the only text where a person describes himself as a Hebrew; in all other instances they are described as such by other peoples. See ibid., 441, 442; Gray, "The Habiru-Hebrew Problem," 180-182; Gray, "The Habiru-Hebrew Problem," 186; Lemche, "Hebrew," 95.
strangers, rich and poor. Thus, "there is no basis for identifying the Habiru with the ‘Hebrews’ as basic identities, because it is clear that the Habiru are a social element, while ‘Hebrews’ are the people of God."

**Ochlos as the Minjung**

As examined in the previous chapter, Byung Mu Ahn interprets the ochlos in the Gospel of Mark exclusively in reference to the oppressed. Following the example of Tagawa, Ahn claims that ochlos in Mark is identified with the Korean minjung.

In the New Testament usage, however, the term ochlos means "crowd of people," "host," "troop," or "people." Apart from Rev 7:9, and 19:1, 6, the term ochlos appears only in the Gospels and Acts. In the Gospels, the ochlos denote the crowd of people who were anonymous followers of Jesus. Jesus calls them to himself, showing his compassion (Mark 6:34; 7:14; 8:34; Matt 15:10). Jesus often leaves the ochlos and goes into a house to give further instruction to his disciples (Mark 6:45; 7:33; Matt 13:36; 15:27).

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80 Freedman, Willoughby, and Fabry, "'Ibri," 444.

81 Moshe Greenberg, "Habiru (Hapiru)," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. Cecil Roth (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971), 7:1034. The three passages using the term Hebrew in the New Testament (2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:5; Acts 6:1) are also applied to the Jews of Palestine. In 2 Cor 11:22 and Phil 3:5, Paul calls himself a Hebrew, thus indicating that he wanted to distinguish between himself as a Jew and the Gentiles. Also the designation "Hebraic Jew" (Acts 6:1) is used to distinguish the Hebrew from the Greek. See Siegfried Herbert Horn, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1979), 468, 469; Lemche, "Hebrew," 95.


84 Ibid., 586.
14:22f.; John 5:13). Some of the _ochlos_ accept Jesus as a prophet and Messiah, but others doubt and reject him. In John, as in the Synoptic Gospels, there are those of the _ochlos_ who fall away after first believing in him and paying homage to him (John 6:15, 66).

The term _ochlos_ in the Gospel of Mark simply refers to a group of gathered people without specifying their socio-economic status. Sometimes, the _ochlos_ in Mark indicates the crowd induced to condemn Jesus at the trial (15:8, 11) and an armed body (14:43). Omitting this point, Ahn distinguishes the _ochlos_ from the _laos_ in class-conscious perspective, which sees the former as the oppressed and the latter as the privileged elite belonging to some ruling community.

However, the word _laos_ in Mark is not used to refer to the rulers or upper classes. In many cases, _laos_ in the Bible denotes “the people as distinct from the rulers or upper classes.” In the New Testament, the term _laos_ appears 140 times and indicates “crowd,” “population,” or “people.” In the Septuagint, the word _laos_ occurs about 2,000 times as the translation of the Hebrew word, _am_ (people). The meaning of _laos_ in

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85 Ibid., 586, 587.
86 Ibid., 588, 589.
89 H. Strathmann and R. Meyer, “_Laos_,” *TDNT*, 4:34.
90 Ibid.
the Septuagint is in the sense of a people as a union.\textsuperscript{91} And, in a specific usage, it indicates Israel, the \textit{laos} of God.\textsuperscript{92}

Mark’s usage of \textit{laos} is identical with that of Matthew and Luke.\textsuperscript{93} The word \textit{laos} is one of Luke’s favorite words. More than half the occurrences of the word in the New Testament are in Lukan writings.\textsuperscript{94} In Luke, \textit{laos} and \textit{ochlos} are often used interchangeably and carry the same meaning as \textit{ochlos} in Mark. In some cases, \textit{laos} is another word for a preceding \textit{ochlos} (Luke 7:29, cf. 7:24; 8:47, cf. 8:42, 45; 9:13, cf. 9:12), or it corresponds to an \textit{ochlos} in Mark or \textit{ochloi} in Matthew (Luke 19:48, cf. Mark 11:18; Luke 20:45, cf. Matt 23:1; Luke 20:19, cf. Mark 12:12; Matt 21:46).\textsuperscript{95} In the Gospel of Mark, therefore, there is no distinction between \textit{laos} and \textit{ochlos}.

Ahn argues that Jesus accepted the \textit{ochlos} unconditionally, without any demand of repentance from sin. He contends that Jesus never rebuked the \textit{ochlos}, but received them as they were and promised them the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{96} On the basis of this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{91}For example, in Gen 34:22 “one people” is a union to be established between the Shechemites and the family of Jacob. This union of people could be thought of with varying degrees of comprehensiveness. Ibid., 32-34.
\item \textsuperscript{92}Ibid., 34.
\item \textsuperscript{93}In the Gospel of Mark, the term \textit{laos} appears three times (7:6; 11:32; 14:2), of which 7:6 and 14:2 occur in Matt 15:8 and 26:5; 27:24, and 11:32 and Mark 14:2 in Luke 19:48 and 22:6.
\item \textsuperscript{94}Matthew has the word \textit{laos} 14 times, Mark has 3, and Luke has 36 in the Gospel and 48 in Acts. John has 2 instances in the Gospel and 8 or 9 in Revelation. Paul has 12 instances, Peter has 2, and Jude has 1. Strathmann and Meyer, “\textit{Laos},” 50.
\item \textsuperscript{95}Strathmann and Meyer, “\textit{Laos},” 51. Also \textit{laos} in Matt 27:25 is to be equated with the \textit{ochlos} of vs. 24.
\item \textsuperscript{96}Ahn, “Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark,” 142.
\end{itemize}
assumption, Ahn argues that the ochlos-minjung are the innocent and sinless, the already-
saved, and God’s chosen elite.  

Nam Dong Suh also contends that the minjung are not those who sin, but those who are “sinned-against.” Suh argues that the minjung in Luke 14:15-24, such as the poor, crippled, blind, and lame, are invited to the great banquet without any condition, such as repentance of sins or faith in God’s forgiveness. Thus, minjung theologians understand that the future kingdom of God, promised by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount, belongs to the minjung without condition.

Mark, however, reports that Jesus demanded the ochlos to repent of their sins, taught them the kingdom of God, and rebuked them for their lack of faith. In the Gospel of Mark, the ochlos not only followed Jesus from Galilee, but also crucified him (15:13). This ochlos referred to the same minjung. The Son of God was crucified amid their shouts, “Crucify him! . . . Crucify him!” (15:13, 14). Although minjung theologians

97 Ahn, “Yesuwa Oklos [Jesus and Ochlos],” 96; idem, Yoksawa Haesok [History and Interpretation], 231-252.


99 Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 230.

100 Young Jin Min, “Minjung Sinhakui Jonseungsajok Wichiwa Pyongga [Traditional Stance and Evaluation of Minjung Theology],” in Han’guk Minjung Sinhakui Jomyung [A Study on the Minjung Theology in Korea], ed. Young Jin Min et al. (Seoul: Korea Christian Academy, 1983), 48.

idealize and embellish the minjung, in Scripture Jesus does not have any faith in them, because he knew what was in them (John 2:23-25).

Also, the fact that Jesus welcomed tax collectors, the enemies of the minjung, and even accepted one of them as his disciple (Mark 2:14-15), invalidates one of the major premises of minjung theology. Seyoon Kim argues that it is incomprehensible how Ahn accounts for the tax collectors among the ochlos-minjung.\(^{102}\) Although they may have been despised by the religious people, they were nonetheless powerful exploiters of the poor, enemies of the minjung, and targets of the nationalists-liberationist minjung movement of the day—the zealots. In order to circumvent this obvious discrepancy, Ahn argues that Jesus showed affection only to a small group of good part-time tax collectors, while rejecting the rest.\(^{103}\) But this is clearly a poor argument. It is clear that the ochlos-minjung are not innocent and sinless (cf. Rom 3:10, 23).

Thus, the biblical usage and word study of the terms Hebrew and ochlos do not fully support the minjung theologians' class-conscious assertions. Even if Scripture is studied in interaction with the questions of a given historical situation, its spiritual and religious dimensions cannot be interpreted from one particular socio-political agenda. Scripture has a "whole meaning" of its own that meets the needs of every individual in society.\(^{104}\) Therefore, theological reflections must be consistent with the multivalent intent of Scripture.

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\(^{103}\)Ahn, "Yesuwa Oklos [Jesus and Ochlos]," 94.

As noted, the role of the Bible in minjung theology is not normative but secondary or supportive. Minjung theologians argue that the Bible has been used to oppress the minjung and thus they are suspicious of the authority of Scripture. For them, the Bible is not absolute revelation but a point of reference. They actually disavow the authority and inspiration of Scripture. For instance, Byung Mu Ahn does not accept the sixty-six books as Canon and rejects the authority of the Bible. Ahn asserts that since the Canon reflects the decision of ecclesiastical authority rather than the truth, he disagrees with the ecclesiastical authority that allegedly selected the sixty-six books as Canon.

One's view of "the authority of Scripture plays a primary role in shaping our hermeneutical method and our theology." The authority of Scripture has an inseparable connection to the interpretation of Scripture. Gordon R. Lewis states, "If our preunderstandings are the ultimate authority, then exegesis reduces ultimately to ventriloquism." The rejection of the canon of Scripture is a very serious flaw of

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105 Ahn, *Minjung Sinhak Iyaky* [A Story of Minjung Theology], 73, 74, 85.


minjung theology because it allows the minjung theologian to reject the documents from the Bible that do not agree with his or her theological assumptions. The role of Scripture as the normative factor for Christian theology presupposes the continuing authority of the Christian canon.\(^{108}\)

The Hermeneutic Criterion

It is true that every theology is influenced by common human experience as well as biblical principles. The question is, which of the two influences is normative? Is the bottom line biblical authority or human experience? In minjung theology, minjung experience is the governing criterion in biblical interpretation.

In their concern for the minjung, minjung theologians have appropriately called attention to the central biblical teaching of poverty.\(^{109}\) Contrary to traditional theology, which has easily identified poverty as "an attitude of humility limited to inner and spiritual life," minjung theology introduces the minjung situation into the theological category as the hermeneutical key to an understanding of the meaning of the Bible. It contends that one understands the Bible better when one sees matters from the minjung

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\(^{109}\)Clark, "Growth and Limitations of Minjung Christianity," 103.

experience. This is illustrated in Nam Dong Suh's interpretation of *anawim* and *ptochoi* as the correlative to the minjung. Suh interprets the terms *anawim* and *ptochoi* as referring exclusively to the socio-economically exploited.

However, if one's concern is restricted to the socio-economic point of view, then doing theology from the perspective of the oppressed "runs the risk of being transformed into merely another expression of ideological sectarianism."

Contrary to Suh's argument that *anaw* and *ani* exclusively represent the socio-economically oppressed, these words have a more comprehensive meaning than literal economic poverty.

Amin A. Rodor argues that the poverty terminology in the Psalms, which includes the greatest concentration of the words *anaw* and *ani*, refers to a whole range of need and suffering in addition to literal economic poverty. For example, in Ps 88:16, a sick person calls himself or herself poor. A barren woman is counted among the poor in the context of Ps 113:7-9. The Psalmist cries to God that he is poor and needy because of persecution (cf. Pss 22:24; 35:10; 69:29; 70:5; 74:19, 21; 76:9; 109:16, 22; 140:12, etc.). Thus, the poor in the Psalms are not necessarily the economically exploited but may be

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112 Suh, "Du Iyakiu Hamnyu [Confluence of Two Stories]," 240.


115 Rodor, "The Concept of the Poor," 344. The words *anaw* and *ani* refer to illness, loneliness, sin, etc. See Pss 9:13; 15; 35:16, 21; 40:13, 16; 69:4, 18, 21; 86:7; 109:22, etc.
those oppressed by sin, illness, and loneliness. They are qualified to receive God’s help, not because of any class consciousness, but because “only those in need have anything to be saved from.”

The poverty of the anawim in Isa 61:1, 2, quoted in Luke 4:18, 19, is not primarily a question of economic deprivation. As in some of the Psalms, the anawim here are described by the parallel expressions: the “brokenhearted,” “captives,” “prisoners,” “all who mourn,” are “the poor” in a broad sense. Although literal poverty is not excluded, the anawim in this text embrace the poor who know their desperate need for dependence on God’s help. Their helplessness drives them to depend upon God for relief and vindication. Thus, to identify these “poor” exclusively as a socio-political class in the modern sense and then regard them as a basis for social action seems to be “a distortion of the biblical meaning.”

It is true that the exegetical tradition of traditional theology has generally spiritualized the meaning of the term poor in the Bible. It has considered the references to the poor in a figurative sense and thus has minimized the socio-economic dimension of poverty. In its attempt to challenge such an unbalanced emphasis, minjung theology

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tries to equate the poor in the Bible with the minjung. One of the main arguments of minjung theology is that the *ptochoi* referred to in Luke 4:18, 19 are exclusively the economically exploited minjung and the liberation preached to them is a literal liberation from their social situation.120

However, the New Testament usage of the term *ptochoi* has the same connotation as the Hebrew *anawim*. The Septuagint uses *ptochoi* most frequently to translate *anaw* and *ani*. *Ptochoi* is used both literally and figuratively and has both a religious and an economic connotation.121 This usage is clearly seen in Luke 4:18, 19. At his inaugural sermon in Nazareth, Jesus quotes the prophecy of Isa 61:1, 2. Luke 4:18, 19 takes its theological character from an eschatological understanding of Isa 61:1, 2. As Larrimore Crockett examined *ptochos* in Luke 4:18, he determined that it is dependent on the *anawim* of Isa 61:1, 2 for its meaning. *Ptochoi* is the word used to translate the *anawim* of Isa 61:1, the very Hebrew word which lies behind the Greek *ptochoi* in Luke 4:18.122

The poverty of the *anawim* in Isa 61:1, 2, as in the Psalms, is described in a comprehensive sense. Likewise, the *ptochoi* in Luke 4:18, 19 are to be interpreted as the helpless who have a desperate need for God’s mercy. Rodor maintains that with the coming of Jesus, “the last days” have come. The Isaiah passage was a comprehensive vision of Messianic salvation. The release motif of the Isaianic prophecy in Luke 4:18 is recast into the pattern of fulfillment.123 Jesus is the eschatological prophet, and his time

120 Suh, *Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu* [A Study of Minjung Theology], 398-406.

121 Hauck and Bammel, “Ptochos,” 888, 904-907.


is the era of salvation. The poor, the object of the messianic age, are thus described as "the captives," "the blind," and "the oppressed." The "freedom" to be achieved through Jesus' ministry embraces an all-encompassing release from (1) Satan's power (cf. 4:31-44), (2) the power of sin (cf. 5:1-32), and (3) cultic tradition (5:33-6:11).  

Consequently, the usage of human experience as a hermeneutical criterion is a dangerous practice, because human experience "is changeable, ambiguous, and open to self-deception." Thus, one's analysis of social situations or human experiences, however illuminating, should not be the norm for hermeneutics. If the minjung experience becomes the norm of theological reflection, one has to admit that "the experience of the minjung, whether it is moral or immoral, good or evil, is holy and sacred."  

Minjung hermeneutics deliberately reinterprets biblical texts at the expense of their intended meaning. Such an ideologically charged hermeneutic becomes political in nature and allows a particular socio-political agenda to rule over Scripture. Thus,


127See Suh, "Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung," 158.


**The Issues in Minjung Soteriology**

The purpose of this section is to critically analyze the concept of salvation and its relevant themes as they are articulated in minjung theology. An attempt will be made to examine the strengths and weaknesses of these aspects of minjung theology as they relate to the central concepts of salvation in the Bible.

**The Concept of Sin**

Since the doctrine of salvation presupposes the doctrine of sin, it is necessary to examine the concept of sin in minjung theology in order to understand its view of salvation. Minjung theologians insist that throughout its history, Korean Christianity has been concerned with the sins of people, but has largely overlooked the han of the victims. They consider the traditional view of sin as religious and a part of the abstract language of the ruling class. Nam Dong Suh argues that the traditional concept of sin is the basis for the term “sinners,” which has been used as a label attached to the minjung by the ruling people.\footnote{Suh, \textit{Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu} [A Study of Minjung Theology], 106. See also Park, \textit{The Wounded Heart of God}, 69; idem, “Minjung and Process Hermeneutics,” 120; Suh, \textit{Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu} [A Study of Minjung Theology], 107, 165.}
Suh maintains that, historically speaking, the term sin was often used by the ruling class to control the powerless in Korea. Thus, he states, “Let us hold in abeyance discussions on doctrines and theories about sin which are heavily charged with the bias of the ruling class and are often nothing more than the labels the ruling class uses for the deprived.”

The problem of sin in minjung theology is not sin itself but the social conditions that cause one to sin. Since the han of the minjung is the collective, accumulated wrongs committed through imperial colonialism, patriarchal sexism, and hierarchical classism, minjung theology interprets the notion of sin, the collective han of the minjung, in the socio-political and economic situation in Korea. The worst of all sins, Nam Dong Suh states, is structural evil and he pinpoints structural evil as the cause of poverty, social injustice, and even personal sin.

Byung Mu Ahn also asserts that the basis of the traditional view of sin lies in the social prejudice that considers menial labor, lack of education, and poverty to be evil in character. Ahn understands sin in terms of structural inequality rather than personal sin. For him, sin “is the structural oppression or exploitation of the poor and weak by

131 Suh, “Towards a Theology of Han,” 68.
132 Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 243, 244.
134 Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 202, 350.
135 Ibid., 350.
136 Ahn, Haebangja Yesu [Liberator Jesus], 135. See also Suh, Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology], 106, 243.
137 Ahn, Yoksawa Haesok [History and Interpretation], 202.
the strong” and “the structural conflict." Thus, structural evil caused by unjust social systems is what concerns Ahn the most. He believes that if structural evil disappears, sin will disappear and the salvation of the minjung will be realized.

Since minjung theology views sin from a structural perspective, any and all sin is ascribed to the ruling class, not to the “sinned-against” minjung. Because of the ideological power of the ruling class, the minjung are compelled to commit sins. Just as structural evil dehumanizes the minjung, so salvation is conceived in terms of the dismantling of the unjust social structure. David Suh contends, “This sickness of han can be cured only when the total structure of the oppressed society and culture is changed.” Therefore, minjung theologians argue that changing the social structure of oppression is the way of resolving han and of bringing salvation to the minjung.

The Concept of Salvation

The socio-political orientation of minjung theology results in a redefinition of its

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141 Ibid., 102.


Christology and soteriology. The minjung theology’s view of Jesus is closely related to its concept of salvation. In minjung theology, Jesus is emphasized as an ordinary man of his era. Nam Dong Suh interprets the crucifixion of Jesus as a murder committed because of political injustice. Suh asserts that Jesus was crucified by the ruling class because he challenged them by his political resistance for the human rights of the minjung. Thus, Suh contends that when theologians do not interpret the death and resurrection of Jesus as socio-political events, they lose the power of transforming history. Suh views Jesus as a personification of the minjung and understands the suffering minjung as Savior (Matt 25:31-46). Thus, the minjung play the role of the Messiah. The idea of “the Messianic function of the minjung” or “the Messianic character of the minjung” is Suh’s central theme of theology. For Suh, the salvation of God is the liberation of the minjung which they themselves seek for.

Byung Mu Ahn is concerned with the human Jesus and a man of resistance against the classes of vested rights. Ahn presupposes that the Nazarene Jesus is not a

144 Ahn, *Haebangja Yesu* [Liberator Jesus], 103; Suh, *Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu* [A Study of Minjung Theology], 188-191.

145 Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 159; idem, *Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu* [A Study of Minjung Theology], 193-194, 298-299, 323.

146 Suh, *Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu* [A Study of Minjung Theology], 54, 191.


148 Suh, “Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 179. See also idem, *Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu* [A Study of Minjung Theology], 11, 21, 168.

designation of one person's life, but a collective designation. He states that the story of Jesus in the Gospels "is not a personal biography of an individual but a ‘social biography.'" Ahn understands Jesus as a personification of the minjung. Thus, the death and resurrection of Jesus are regarded as the death and resurrection of the minjung.

Ahn insists that "the Lamb of God" in John 1:29 does not mean Jesus the individual but rather the plural mass of the minjung. For him, "the sins of the world" in the text refers to political and economic inconsistencies and burdens. He maintains that we all have to bear them, but in reality the minjung alone bear these burdens and suffer on of all peoples' behalf. He asserts that "the Lamb of God, who bears the sins of the world" refers to the minjung and thus the suffering minjung are the Messiah. Through their suffering and struggle, the minjung can achieve not only their own salvation but also the salvation of non-minjung. Therefore, the salvation of the world, according to Ahn, is achieved through suffering of the minjung.

The Relationship between Salvation and Social Justice

In minjung theology, the Exodus event in the Old Testament and the Crucifixion

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151 Ahn, Minjung Sinhak Iyaky [A Story of Minjung Theology], 99.

152 Ibid., 19, 96, 105.

153 Ibid., 32-33, 89-98; idem, “Sungyo Baeknyon: Han’guk Kyohoiui Yesusang [The Image of Jesus in the Korean Church: Its Centennial],” 717-757; idem, Haebangja Yesu [Liberator Jesus], 17, 50.

154 Ahn, Haebangja Yesu [Liberator Jesus], 183; idem, Minjung Sinhak Iyaky [A Story of Minjung Theology], 98-99, 125-128. See also Yim, “Reflection on Minjung Theology,” 136.
event in the New Testament, the foundational references for its theology, are the two most important events that speak about the meaning of the concept of salvation. Minjung theology claims that the praxis approach in these events should be applied to the struggle for social justice in Korea today. In contrast to the traditional interpretation of the Exodus event and the crucifixion of Jesus, minjung theologians emphasize the need for social justice and a concern for the oppressed in their reading of these biblical narratives.

Minjung theologians understand that the search for resolution to han is the starting point for God’s liberating work. The stories of the Exodus and the Crucifixion encourage them to see human history as a history of liberation. They use these biblical texts to show that political liberation comes through the participation in struggle. For them, Yahweh who manifested himself in the Exodus and Jesus who demonstrated himself in the Crucifixion can be understood from the perspective of social justice.

For minjung theologians, the Exodus event was a han event because God’s own liberating activity was inaugurated with the han of the Hebrews. Based on this interpretation of the Exodus, they believe that salvation is the liberation from historical

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158 Ibid., 158-159.

They regard the Exodus of the Hebrews as the core event of God’s salvation for the minjung. It was a socio-political event of the Hebrew slaves’ liberation, which took place as they revolted against the Egyptian oppressive ruling regime.

Minjung theologians assert that Jesus was crucified by the Jerusalem religious leaders because Jesus challenged them by his political resistance in behalf of the Galilean minjung’s human rights. Byung Mu Ahn understands the death of Jesus as the death of the minjung murdered by the hands of rulers. Nam Dong Suh argues that Jesus’ resurrection is the political event that demands that the minjung have their human rights restored and thus is considered to be the minjung’s awakening.

Since the struggle for socio-political liberation of the minjung lies at the heart of salvation, minjung theologians are concerned about social justice. On the basis of Matt 25:31-46, they assume that one’s salvation can be determined by one’s attitude toward the oppressed. In other words, salvation is achieved through the struggle for social justice against socio-political oppression. Without social justice, there is no

\[\text{160} Ahn, \textit{Galilee Ui Yesu [Jesus in Galilee]}, 90. See also Ki Deuk Song, “Minjung Sinhakui Jongche [The Identity of Minjung Theology],” in \textit{Chongubaeypsipyondae Han guk Minjung Sinhakui Chongae [The Development of Korean Minjung Theology in the 1980s]}, 59.\]

\[\text{161} Ahn, \textit{Haebangja Yesu [Liberator Jesus]}, 16-17; idem, \textit{Yoksawa Haesok [History and Interpretation]}, 181.\]

\[\text{162} Suh, \textit{Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology]}, 50-51, 54, 184, 191, 194, 298-299.\]

\[\text{163} \text{See Ahn, } \textit{Minjung Sinhak Iyaky [A Story of Minjung Theology]}, 125-127; Suh, } \textit{Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology]}, 50-51, 191-192.\]

\[\text{164} \text{See Ahn, } \textit{Minjung Sinhak Iyaky [A Story of Minjung Theology]}, 98-99; Suh, } \textit{Minjung Sinhakui Tamgu [A Study of Minjung Theology]}, 309-310.\]
Therefore, in minjung theology, salvation is possible, even when Christ has not been confessed as Savior.

Problems of Minjung Soteriology

The aim of this section is to critically evaluate the issues of minjung soteriology that have been previously described.

The Concept of Sin

Minjung theology has rightly found traditional theology guilty of indifference to the social dimension of sin, attempting to correct its one-sided view of the relationship between the individual and the social side of sin. The main concern of traditional theology has been the effects of sin on the individual and humankind’s vertical relationship with God, neglecting the effects of sin on the horizontal relationship with other human beings. Consequently, Korean Christians have become blind to the social dimension of sin. Therefore, minjung theology tends to have a balancing effect on Korean theology by correcting its historical imbalances.

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165 Ahn, Haebangja Yesu [Liberator Jesus], 136; Lee, An Emerging Theology, 10.

166 Na, Minjung Sinhak Pyongga [A Theological Assessment of Minjung Theology], 229. See also Min, “Minjung Sinhakui Jonseungsajok Wichiwa Pyongga [Traditional Stance and Evaluation of Minjung Theology],” 12.


169 Jung Sun Oh, A Korean Theology of Human Nature: With Special Attention to the Works of Robert Cummings Neville and Tu Wei-Ming (Lanham; Boulder; New York; Toronto; Oxford: University Press of America, 2005), 117.
However, minjung theology goes too far when it emphasizes only the socio-political dimensions of sin, locating the root of sin in social structures. It neglects to address the correlation of the personal dimension of sin with the social dimension. Both dimensions of sin are so closely interconnected that one cannot approach them separately. Emphasizing only the social dimension of sin may lead Christians to think that the socio-political dimension of sin is independent of the personal. However, unless one deals with the dimensions of sin as interrelated, salvation remains an incomplete idea. If one adopts the premise of minjung theology, the solution to the problem of sin is to be found in altering the social structures. Thus, minjung theology falls into the same trap as traditional theology’s one-sided view of sin.

In Scripture, sin is considered a deliberate rebellion against God and his law, a seeking of one’s own will rather than God’s. Norman Geisler states, “By the misuse of free will, sin entered the world and vitiated God’s perfect creation. There followed a state of human sinfulness.” Sin results in a broken covenant relationship with God and other human beings and thus has far-reaching effects upon one’s relationships.

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171 Erickson, Christian Theology, 590-592.
Whereas the core of sin is a rebellion against God, the manifestations of it are selfishness, pride, oppression, and alienation. 175

Despite the emphasis on individual choice, Scripture is also concerned with the social and structural dimensions of sin as well. Particularly, the Old Testament demonstrates this fact. The Covenant Code concerns the powerless and oppressed. It includes concern for the poor (Exod 23:10-12), the protection of widows and orphans (Exod 22:22, 23), the care of strangers (Exod 22:21; 23:9), the condition of servants and slaves (Exod 21:2-11), the matter of loans and pledges (Exod 22:24-27), and justice in the court (Exod 23:2, 3, 6-8). 176

When social sins such as oppression, corruption, and bribery dominate society, God acts. 177 The prophets repeatedly pronounced God's judgment upon Israel and Judah for their oppression, exploitation, and discrimination against the poor and the wretched. For example, Micah charges the leaders of Israel for oppressing the people (Mic 3; see also Amos 2:6, 7; 4:1; 5:11; 8:4-8). These scriptural texts highlight that sin can be considered corporately and structurally as well as individually and personally. Israel was


taken into exile because of systemic injustices as well as idolatry. Thus, sin remains in the system as well as in the lives of individuals.

Personal sins such as unrighteousness, pride, and selfishness are often exhibited in social sins such as oppression, alienation, and exploitation. But human beings, both as individuals and as a society, cannot extricate themselves by their own resources. Since the predicament of sin, human rebellion against God and his law permeates the core of human existence; sin is the basic cause of poverty, oppression, and all of human problems.

Minjung theology idealizes the minjung, neglecting the minjung's sinfulness and fallibility. It assumes that the minjung are innocent and contends that the basic human problem lies within evil social structures. As a consequence, instead of attempting to cure the corrupted human heart, minjung theology tries to transform the social conditions.

However, Scripture clearly affirms that human nature is radically corrupt and needs transformation through the gospel. All human beings, including the minjung, are sinners before God (Rom 3:10, 23) and, by nature, children of wrath (Eph 2:3) who need

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178 Bacote, “What Is This Life For?” 110.

179 Among the collective forms of sin that exist in the world today are racism, imperialism, and sexism. Bloesch, “Sin,” 1104.

180 Cf. Neville, A Theology Primer, xii.


183 Ahn, “Yesuwa Oklos [Jesus and Ochlos],” 89-95; Suh, “Du Iyakiui Hamnyu [Confluence of Two Stories],” 343-344.
to repent of their sins. Although the minjung are exploited and oppressed, they also suffer the effects of sin within themselves. Their state of victimization does not exempt them from being sinners and needing the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

Consequently, minjung theology fails to recognize that the source of social evils lies in the human heart. In minjung theology, sin is equated with structural evil only, and not as a consequence of sin. Social structures, however, whether they are good or evil, are the product of human projects. Particular social structures can be oppressive because they are made and operated by sinful individuals. Improving the external environment will not change the corrupt inner person.

Since sin is inherent in humanity and people are born with a propensity toward sin (Ps 58:3; cf. 51:5), salvation from sin cannot be achieved by social change alone. Sin is located deeper than external social structures. It resides in the human heart (Gen 6:5; Prov 4:23; Isa 29:13; Jer 17:9; Matt 15:18-20; Mark 7:21-23; Rom 1:28-32; Gal 5:19-21). Carl Henry states: “The depth of sin is so radical and its range so extensive that apart from redemptive regeneration, personal and corporate selfishness frustrate the possibility of social utopia.” Minjung theology treats only the symptoms of sin, failing to recognize its root.

Humans are not only sinners, but they are also “under the power of sin” (Rom 3:9). They are slaves of sin (John 8:34. Cf. Rom 6:17; 2 Pet 2:19). All humans, without

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185 Erickson, Christian Theology, 610, 671, 672.


exception, are subject to the penalty for sin—namely, death (Rom 3:10-11, 23; 6:23; see also Rom 5:12). Because the sinful nature of humanity is unchanging, their essential need of redemption from sin remains the same. Scripture affirms that sin is universal in scope (Gen 6:11; 8:21; Pss 14; 53; 143:2; Prov 20:9; Eccl 7:20; Rom 3:23; 5:17). The cosmic scope of sin requires a cosmic redemption (Isa 45:22; Rom 3:22-23). 188

The remedy for sin lies in what God has done for humanity in Jesus Christ (John 3:16-17; Acts 20:28; Rom 3:21-26; 5:6-10; 2 Cor 5:18, 19; Col 2:13-15; Rev 1:5). Jesus interpreted his own death as a sacrifice (Mark 10:45; cf. Matt 20:28; 26:68). The idea of Christ’s dying for us as a sacrifice appears throughout the Pauline corpus and Johannine epistles (1 Cor 10:11; 2 Cor 5:14-15; Rom 5:6-11; Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2, 25; Col 1:24; 1 Tim 2:5-6; Titus 2:13-14; 1 John 4:10; cf. 2:2). 189 The sacrifice of Jesus is the great redemptive act which frees human beings from their sins and cleanses them from guilt. 190

In his resurrection, Jesus Christ demonstrated his authority over sin’s power. 191 Through his grace, individual conversion and regeneration can transform the person and give hope for a change in society as well. 192 Social change, thus, can be accomplished by the conversion of the sinful hearts of the individuals in it. As sinful individuals are


192 Erickson, Christian Theology, 636, 673.
transformed, there is hope for changing society. Because “the evils of society result from
the fact that it is composed of evil individuals,” God’s alternative to social injustice
comes through individuals who are transformed through the gospel. Therefore, the
understanding of sin in both minjung and traditional theology can be clarified with an
understanding of sin as it is presented in Scripture.

The Concept of Salvation

Minjung theology challenges Korean Christianity to avoid a narrow,
individualistic view of salvation and to seriously consider social realities. It engages with
social problems, such as oppression, exploitation, discrimination, and alienation and this
attitude makes an important contribution to Korean theology.

Minjung Christology and soteriology, however, are problematic. Minjung
theology transforms the Savior of Scripture into a socio-political liberator and substitutes
the individual conflict with sin for class struggle. Minjung theology neglects the
importance of a faith in Jesus that leads to repentance and a relationship with God that
results in salvation. Salvation in minjung theology dispenses with the need of saving
faith and includes no condemnation of those who do not believe (John 3:18, 36). Thus,

193Erickson, Christian Theology, 905.


Theology, ed. Ronald Nash (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1984), 201.
the minjung concept of Jesus Christ and salvation becomes essentially humanistic in character.  

However, Christians are by definition believers in Christ. Thus, Scripture should be the primary source of an understanding of Jesus Christ. A correct understanding of Jesus Christ in Scripture “must be central and determinative of the very character of the Christian faith.” Scripture clearly asserts the deity of Christ. Paul strongly witnesses to the deity of Christ. He declares in Col 2:9 NIV: “For in Christ all the fullness of deity lives in bodily form.” He portrays Jesus in the image of the invisible God (1:15). Jesus is the one in whom, through whom, and for whom all things were created (1:16-17). Thus, Paul affirms that Jesus Christ “is our great God and Savior” (Titus 2:13).

Jesus’ own self-identity suggests the biblical evidence for his deity. In Mark 2:5, Jesus claimed his prerogative to forgive sins: “Son, your sins are forgiven.” The scribes reacted to Jesus’ statement, “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (vs. 7) Robert Stein points out that their reaction shows that they understood Jesus’ word “as the exercising of a divine prerogative, the power to actually forgive sins.”

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197 Yim, Je Iui Jonggyo Kaehyokul Wihan Minjung Sinhak [Minjung Theology for the Second Reformation], 219-220.


199 Erickson, Christian Theology, 678.

200 Robert H. Stein, The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teaching (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 114. In Matt 25:31-46, Jesus claimed another prerogative, namely, the power of judging the world which is a power only God can exercise.
In addition, in his emphatic statement to Martha, Jesus' self-consciousness of his deity is found: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” (John 11:25). Further, in John 8:58, Jesus claimed his pre-existence in his statement: “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.” Leon Morris comments that there is an implied contrast here between “a mode of being which has a definite beginning” and “one which is eternal.”

In the discourse of Jesus’ trial and condemnation, his deity was again confirmed (Matt 26:57-68; Mark 14:53-65). At his trial, the charge was that “he has claimed to be the Son of God” (John 19:7). The high priest said to Jesus, “‘I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have said so’” (Matt 26:63, 64). The witness of the disciples also attested to his divinity. He commended Peter for his answer: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). Jesus accepted Thomas’s statement, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). The name “Son of God” given to Jesus Christ connotes his deity (Mark 1:11; 5:7; 9:7; 15:39). It implies a unity of being one in nature with the Father. This title indicates the uniqueness of origin and pre-existence of Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Heb 1:2). The Son and the Father are one (John 5:19, 30; 16:32) in will (4:34; 6:38; 7:28; 8:42; 13:3), in activity (14:10), and in giving eternal life (10:30). At this point, Jesus is sinless and utterly different from other humans. So Jesus Christ is confessed as “God” (John 1:1, 18;

20:28; 2 Thess 1:12; 1 Tim 3:16; Titus 2:13; 2 Pet 1:1), and is deserving of praise, adoration, and worship, as is the Father (cf. Rev 1:6; 5:9-10, 12, 13-14; 7:10).

Consequently, when the deity of Jesus Christ is neglected, the gospel of Christ's vicarious redemption is annulled, and thus the human race has no Savior. So, an adequate doctrine of salvation must be based upon a correct Christology. If not, the theology is obliged to seek salvation by other means, such as doing good works. This is why minjung theology seeks for a salvation obtained by means of the minjung struggle for their liberation. As David Bosch states, "Since we may never overrate our own or others' capabilities, we have to ask critical questions in respect to all current theories of human self-redemption." David Wells asserts, "Sin and death are so great enemies

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205 Ahn, "Magabokumeso Bon Yoksaiu Juche [Subject of History in Mark's Gospel]." 181ff; Suh, "Du Iyakiiu Hamnyu [Confluence of Two Stories]." 243ff.

that self-salvation is simply ridiculous.\textsuperscript{207} Thus, salvation from sin cannot be obtained by human works.

Since human beings cannot save themselves from sin, their only response must be one of faith in Jesus Christ. Outside the dimension of faith, Jesus remains just an ordinary man from Nazareth. But within the category of faith, he is the Son of God, the Sin-bearer of the world, the Savior of sinners, the Representation of God the Father. Scripture clearly connects salvation with personal faith (John 3:16; Acts 16:31; Eph 2:8-9; etc.). Although God desires that all humans be saved (1 Tim 2:4), it is only through faith in Jesus that they can be saved. Thus, salvation is received exclusively in Christ through faith.\textsuperscript{208} Yet faith does not produce salvation; it only receives salvation in radical gratitude. Conversely, salvation can thus be rejected.\textsuperscript{209} Therefore, faith is the means of accepting the salvation found in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{210}

**Salvation Is the Work of God**

Minjung theology seeks to obtain salvation by means of the minjung struggle, ignoring the atoning grace of Jesus Christ in Scripture. One of the important aspects of the biblical understanding of salvation is that it is the work of God.\textsuperscript{211} This is the main

\textsuperscript{207}David F. Wells, *The Search for Salvation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 55;

\textsuperscript{208}Jocz, *The Covenant*, 121.


\textsuperscript{210}Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1023.

emphasis of the Old Testament. God is seen as the author of salvation (Jonah 2:9). God
saves his flock (Ezek 34:22) and rescues his people (Hos 1:7). He alone can save (Hos
13:10-14), for there is none other who can do it (Isa 43:11).²¹²

Stephen Holmes states, "In the earliest understanding of God in the life of the
people of Israel was an account of salvation."²¹³ God brought the Israelites out of Egypt
and rescued them from the land of slavery. This theme is in the preamble of the
Decalogue and central to the Psalms. Old Testament texts in particular emphasize God’s
role as Savior (Ps 18:46b; Isa 43:3a; 45:15, 21c; Hab 3:18b).²¹⁴ "God is our salvation.
Our God is a God of salvation" (Ps 68:19-20). This "is the heart of Old Testament
testimony, always with an overtone of undeserved mercy."²¹⁵

The New Testament applies the term "Savior" to God and Jesus Christ (e.g., Luke
1:47; 1 Tim 1:1; Luke 2:11; John 4:42; Acts 13:23; Phil 3:20). No one else is called
"Savior" but always God and Jesus Christ (e.g., Matt 27:43; 2 Cor 1:10; Col 1:13; 2 Pet
2:7; 1 Thess 1:10).²¹⁶ "You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people . . . " (Matt
1:21) is the fundamental announcement of the New Testament.²¹⁷ Although Jesus’ own

²¹²Green, The Meaning of Salvation, 15-16.

²¹³Stephen R. Holmes, "Doctrine of Salvation," Dictionary for Theological
Interpretation of the Bible, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic,
2005), 712.

²¹⁴F. F. Bruce, "Our God and Savior": A Recurring Biblical Pattern," in The
Saviour God: Comparative Studies in the Concept of Salvation Presented to Edwin Oliver


²¹⁷Holmes, "Doctrine of Salvation," 711.
teaching was less about salvation than the coming of the kingdom, the kingdom still is in essence a soteriological category. In his teaching, Jesus inseparably links salvation with the kingdom of God. By mentioning the kingdom of God, the Synoptic Gospels refer to the salvific intervention of God (Mark 1:15; 11:10; Matt 6:10; Luke 17:20; 19:11).

Accordingly, David Wells says, “The Old Testament conviction, for example, that it is God, rather than man himself, who saves is carried over into Jesus’ teaching in the connection he made between salvation (sotēria) and the kingdom, the latter being that spiritual sphere which God establishes and over which he reigns. In the Old Testament, salvation is received and in Jesus’ teaching the kingdom is entered, simply by trust.” Thus, salvation means to enter the kingdom of God (Matt 19:24f.; Mark 10:24-26; Luke 18:25f.).

Green summarizes the relationship of salvation and the kingdom in this way:

[Salvation is] entered on here and now as men enter (Mark 9:47), or receive (Luke 8:17) or inherit (Matt. 25:34) the kingdom. It is to be fulfilled hereafter (Luke 20:34-36). And for the meantime, life in the kingdom is characterized by humility (Luke 6:20), the assurance of answered prayer (Matt. 7:7), the confidence of forgiven sin (Matt. 6:10-12), the experience of God’s power (Luke 11:20), the understanding of God’s plan (Luke 8:10), single-hearted obedience to God’s will (Matt. 6:23, 24) and an implicit trust in his protection (Matt. 6:31-34). It is a foretaste of the life of heaven.

218 Ibid.

219 See Green, The Meaning of Salvation, 102.


221 Green, The Meaning of Salvation, 102.
The New Testament proclaims that this salvation has been fulfilled in Christ’s earthly ministry.\(^{222}\) Hence, the assertion that God brings salvation through Jesus Christ is foundational to a biblical soteriology and, within this overarching premise, other themes take shape.\(^{223}\)

Paul demonstrates the role of God’s salvific work through Christ in human salvation (Rom 5:8-10; 8:1-4; Gal 4:4-5; 1 Tim 2:5-6). Scripture clearly teaches that humans cannot create the kingdom of God through their own effort. Only through the mighty grace of God comes the kingdom of God. According to Scripture, salvation from sin and death comes only through the death of Christ, the redemptive price of sin (Rom 6:12-14).\(^{224}\)

Consequently, both the Old and the New Testaments clearly affirm that God is the author of salvation. Human beings are saved through God’s own grace and not by virtue of their works (2 Tim 1:9). Although it portrays deliverances by human agents, Scripture always affirms that God takes the initiative in raising up these deliverers for the people; thus God’s role is preeminent (e.g., Exod 15:1-21; Judg 2:16, 18; 3:9, 15). Therefore, any self-achieved human salvation without faith in God’s grace is alien to the biblical perspective.\(^{225}\)


\(^{223}\)Holmes, “Doctrine of Salvation,” 714.

\(^{224}\)Ibid., 711-714; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1015-1025.

Salvation Is Both a Personal and Social Reality

In Scripture, salvation presupposes the original sin of humanity that resulted in the broken relationship with God (Rom 3:9-19; Eph 2:3; Gal 5:17-21; etc.). Since sin breaks the covenant relationship with God, salvation is a reinstatement of that relationship. God’s salvation is in the context of the covenant community that trusts in God. The covenant formula is that “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” To be God’s covenant people “means that God has saved and will save them.” Although God accomplishes his will among all nations, including justice for the poor (e.g., Dan 4:27), the Old Testament does not speak of the presence of God’s salvation “except in the context of the covenant community who trust in Yahweh.” Thus, it is the worst sin of pride on Israel’s part to imagine that God saves her because she is righteous (Deut 9:4-6). Israel’s justification is by faith in God alone.

Salvation within a covenant relationship is understood to be both personal and social. Salvation in the Old Testament is both personal and social, including every aspect of life. Many references to salvation in the Old Testament concern not only personal deliverance but also God’s deliverance of his people as a whole (2 Sam 12:7; 22:18, 44, 226

226 Neville, A Theology Primer, 71.


229 Ibid.

God rescues Hagar and Ishmael, guides Ruth to her kinsman-redeemer, and hears the prayers of Hannah. God’s salvation occurs on a national level such as the Exodus event. In addition, God’s provision of spiritual salvation is everywhere present and equally important (Ps 51:14; Jer 17:14; Hos 1:7; Zech 3:13).

The theological interpretation of the Exodus event should be founded on the context of covenant. It discusses not only a socio-political liberation but also redemption from sin. It is true that there was social injustice in Egypt and the Israelites were suffering from political oppression and economic exploitation. They called out to God, and he heard their groaning, remembered the covenant made with their ancestors, and took their side, intervening to liberate them from the bondage of slavery (Exod 2:23-25; 6:1-5). God not only took the side of the oppressed Israelites but also stood against the oppressive Egyptian regime.

Because of his covenant, God vindicates and saves his people, particularly the oppressed. The idea of vindication for the oppressed is closely tied to the covenant

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233 L. Thomas Holdcroft, Soteriology: Good News in Review (Abbotsford, BC, Canada; Sumas, WA: CeeTeC Publishing, 1990), 2; Lochman, Reconciliation and Liberation, 37.


concept. Green states, "God vindicates his own name among the heathen captors of Israel by espousing the cause of this feeble, oppressed nation which trusts him. His salvation is indeed an expression of his righteousness in the sense of faithfulness to his covenant promise."^2^26 Thus, the Exodus event was an act of justice that liberated the oppressed and punished the oppressors. ^2^27 It brought socio-economic and political consequences to Israel.

In addition, the Exodus event had a spiritual purpose. The nation was liberated from Egypt in order to worship God. "Let My son go, that he may worship Me" (Exod 4:23; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3 NIV) was the constant command and became the challenge to Pharaoh. The purpose of the Exodus was to rescue Israel from Egyptian idolatry (Ezek 20:5-9) and to encourage the nation to worship the living God (Deut 4:34-35; Hos 12:9; 13:4). Although the event brought socio-political liberation to Israel, "such salvation was never thought of as the deepest and most fundamental need of man. Salvation from sin that separated him from God, and that cursed him by its corrupting touch, and restoration to the favour and fellowship of God were of greater significance and importance."^2^28

Accordingly, salvation manifested in the Exodus event has to do with spiritual as well as socio-political aspects. Hence, the exclusive emphasis upon the "spiritual" aspect

^2^26 Green, The Meaning of Salvation, 27.


or the "socio-political" aspect of salvation would be a departure from the wholistic view of the Bible.  

In the New Testament, salvation also involves personal and social levels. It not only pertains to deliverance from sin (Luke 15:18), sickness (Luke 8:48; 17:19), deformity (Mark 3:4; Luke 18:42), demonic possession (Mark 1:34), and the threat of death (Matt. 14:30), but also extends to society, aiming at the realization of the kingdom of God. Socio-political deliverance provides "genuine moments of salvation, foretastes of what is to come." However, it can be called salvation only in the context of an acknowledgment of Christ as Savior. Because "nowhere does the New Testament speak of the presence of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus except where Jesus himself is physically present or where people consciously confess him as Messiah, Savior, and Lord." Thus, in Scripture, both the personal and the social aspects of salvation are closely connected in the context of the covenant relationship.

**Salvation Is Both a Historical and an Eschatological Reality**

Minjung theology has positively exposed the traditional concentration on other-worldly salvation and calls attention to this-worldly salvation. It has attempted to understand how salvation might be understood by the minjung in the context of

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243 Ibid., 207.
contemporary socio-political life. However, minjung theology is concerned exclusively with this-worldly salvation, refusing to recognize the eschatological reality of salvation and thus fails to grasp the "wholeness" of salvation.

In Scripture, salvation is both a historical and an eschatological reality. In the Old Testament, salvation "affects past, present, and future." In the past, God delivered the Israelites from Egypt. In the present, God manifests his salvation by freeing his people from every negative situation. In the future, God will save his people for eternity (Isa 43:11-21; 51:1-6; 62:1-12; Jer 46:27; Ezek 36:24-30, 33-38; Zech 8:7, 8, 13; 9:14-17; 10:6, 7). God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt is not only a concrete historical event but also "the promise and warrant of the salvation that shall be in the end time."

The Israelites remembered this historical salvation of God in the feasts of Unleavened Bread (Exod 23:5; 34:18; Lev 23:9; 23:15) and the Weeks of Pentecost (Lev 23:17 and Deut 16:12) and Tabernacles (Lev 23:43). They are reminded at each of these feasts that they are a "saved" people. This historical salvation of God "is the supreme demonstration of his saving action and presages his salvation in the future." In the last days, God will bring full salvation for his people (Isa 43:5ff; Jer 31:7; 46:27; Zech 8:7).

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244 Bacote, "What Is This Life For?" 97, 107.
In the New Testament, salvation also refers to the past, present, and future redeeming activity of God. In Pauline theology, salvation encompasses three stages: the past penalty of sin, the present power of sin, and the future presence of sin. Salvation is the work of God "who rescued . . . who rescues; . . . [and who] will rescue" (2 Cor 1:10). One "who experiences God’s salvation was saved (Rom 8:24; Eph 2:5, 8), is being saved (1 Cor 1:18; 15:2), and will be saved (Rom 5:9, 10)." For Paul, salvation covers the past (Rom 8:24; Eph 2:5, 8; Titus 3:5-8), the present (1 Cor 1:18; 15:2; 2 Cor 2:15; 1 Pet 1:9; 3:21), and the future (Rom 5:9-10; 13:11; 1 Cor 5:5; Phil 1:5-6; 2:12; 1 Thess 5:8; Heb 1:14; 9:28; 1 Pet 2:2).

The redeeming act of Christ on the cross saved us from the past penalty of sin (2 Tim 1:9; Titus 3:5). We are saved from God’s wrath (Rom 5:9) through Jesus’ life (Rom 5:10). Salvation is also a continual process in the present by which God is making us righteous. It is a progressive process, a change of life (Eph 5:8, 9; 1 Thess 4:1). Thus, salvation is a present reality where Jesus the Lord now takes care of his people (see Rom 8:38-39). Furthermore, salvation is the future act of God that happens at the return of Christ. God, who saved humanity from the past penalty of sin and is saving humanity from the power of sin, will complete salvation in the future (Phi. 1:6; Rom 8:18-23; Col 1:19-20; Rev 21:22-22:2).

249Geisler, Systematic Theology, 235.


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Rikk E. Watts describes, “We are indeed saved (Rom 8:15-17; Eph 2:5, 8), but we are also being saved (1 Cor 1:18) and shall yet be saved (Rom 5:9-11).” The key is for us to live the life of the Spirit now (Eph 5:10-20; cf. Isa 59:15b-21; 63:1-6). In this way our salvation can be sure “as we work with God in the restoration of the image-bearer, body and soul, and thus too in the restoration of creation.” Thus, the saving reality of God is already manifested in history, yet salvation in its full and final sense is accomplished on the “day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor 5:5).

Consequently, salvation in Scripture is essentially a historical-eschatological reality and this fundamental historical-eschatological pattern of salvation remains the same in both Testaments. The paradox between the historical “already” and the eschatological “not yet” of salvation, Richardson states, “means that we are saved by reason of God’s coming salvation, which was realized in history in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Christians live in an intermediate state, between this historical and eschatological reality of salvation, where there is a fundamental tension.

This tension is even more strongly emphasized in the New Testament. Jerald Gort argues, “From the tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of the reign of God, from the tension between the salvation indicative (salvation is already a reality!)

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255 Ibid., 180.
and the salvation subjunctive (comprehensive salvation is yet to come!) there emerges the salvation imperative—Get involved in the ministry of salvation!”

Christians should always remember that their destiny is not fulfilled within earth’s history. The idea of salvation for them is centered on a future supernatural consummation. Scripture speaks of this eschatological “age to come” as “the Day of the LORD” in the Old Testament and “the Kingdom of God” in the New Testament.

Thus, the historical and the eschatological dimensions of salvation are portrayed as an inseparable reality. Hence, the one-sided emphasis on the historical dimension or eschatological dimension of salvation is alien to the biblical view. As Paul Tillich noticed, the term salvation has many connotations. The biblical concept of salvation is all-embracing and comprehensive, showing that salvation is individual and social, historical as well as eschatological, both spiritual and temporal.

The Relationship between Salvation and Social Justice

Minjung theology is a socio-ethical theology that grew out of a social awareness and a desire to combat oppression. Challenging Korean Christianity’s concept of social

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256 Jerald Gort, “Heil, onheil en bemiddeling,” in Oecumenische inleiding, 214; quoted in Bosch, Transforming Mission, 400. See also Lochman, Reconciliation and Liberation, 41.


259 Cf. Bloesch, “Soteriology in Contemporary Christian Thought,” 138. Bosch asserts, “The integral character of salvation demands that the scope of the church’s mission be more comprehensive than has traditionally been the case” (Transforming Mission, 400).
justice, minjung theology claims that struggle for social justice is synonymous with salvation. However, minjung theology fails to grasp the comprehensive, biblical picture of social justice. Justice is one of the central themes in the Bible—the major Hebrew and Greek words for justice occur over 1,000 times. Based on relationships, the biblical concept of justice relates to every aspect of life.

The Old Testament uses two basic words to express social justice: *tsedaqah* ("righteousness") and *mishpat* ("justice" or "judgment"). These two biblical terms for social justice are often used together, occurring as the most common word-pair with synonymous meanings (Amos 5:24; Isa 32:1; Pss 72:1-2; 99:4). When the two words are linked together, they represent the ideals of social justice (e.g., Isa 1:27; 5:16; 9:7; 32:16; 56:1; Pss 72:2; 89:14). The word-pair constitutes a single concept referring to "social justice."
The basic word used in the New Testament to express social justice is *dikaiosynē*, translated as “righteousness” and “justice.” The meaning of *dikaiosynē* is found in two related sources. The major one is the *tsdq* word group of the Old Testament, which locates the meaning of justice within the sphere of God’s covenantal relation to his people and the fidelity of the covenant partners (God and Israel) toward each other. The other is the regular Greek usage in New Testament times, which refers to conformity to a legal norm. The New Testament defines the concept of social justice in terms of righteousness through the word *dikaiosynē* and its cognates. Hence, the words *tsedaqah*, *mishpat*, and *dikaiosynē* reflect significant aspects of the biblical concept of social justice.

**The Concept of Justice Is Used in Covenant Context**

The concept of justice is used in covenant context in both Testaments. *Tsedaqah* and *mishpat* in the Old Testament are used in the context of a covenant relationship. *Tsedaqah* refers to a covenant relationship between two parties and implies behavior which fulfills the claims arising from such an involvement. Hermann Cremer affirms that *tsedaqah* is best understood as a concept of “relationship” and regards “relationship” as the main orientation of *tsedaqah*. When the individual responds to the demands of

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Yahweh’s tsedaqah, it is generally in the form of “trust.” Von Rad, who believes tsedaqah should be understood in the context of communal relationship, remarks: “This communal relationship may be a civil or social one but more often in the Old Testament refers to that relationship with Israel, which Yahweh has enshrined in his covenant. When Yahweh is said to be ‘righteous’ it means that he is faithful to this covenant relationship which he has condescended to establish. Israel is ‘righteous’ in so far as the nation assents to this covenant relationship and submits to its cultic and legal ordinances.”

Mowinckel states, “As long as he remains within the fellowship of covenant and cult, and has done nothing to exclude himself from this fellowship, he is tsaddiq and belongs to the tsaddiqim.” Fulfilling the demands of tsedaqah “is intricately connected with the particular relationship in which individuals and Yahweh are involved.” In other words, “the practice of tsedaqah cannot be understood outside relationship, and as a result, it involves each individual within his or her station in life.”

Mishpat is also seen in the context of the covenant relationship, in particular, it refers to the claims and expectations of that relationship. H. W. McAvoy notes, “Yahweh’s ordinances [mishpatim] are never arbitrary because the basis of them is a


268Achtemeir, “Righteousness in the OT,” 80.


270Mowinckel, The Psalms in Israel’s Worship, 1:209.
covenant which unites Yahweh to Israel." Mishpat "is a direct result of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel" and thus "has to do with covenant relationship."

Hemtrich observes, "Because this relationship is always the basis when the Old Testament refers to mishpat and mishpatim, the reference is never to a binding norm of a general morality."

Even though mishpat is often used in a judicial context, "the fundamental question reverts to the concept of relationship, and inevitably it involves the healing of a broken relationship and the restoration of a hurt party." Therefore, the concept of covenant relationship in terms of tsedaqah and mishpat "is fundamental to a correct understanding of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel on the one hand, and between members of the Israelite community on the other." Both of these terms place interest in "the restoration of the people's broken relationship with Yahweh and with each other."

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273 Ibid., 186.


276 Ibid., 310.

277 Ibid., 311.
The use of dikaiosynē in the New Testament “presumes a covenant relationship.” God is righteous because God remains faithful to the covenant relationship with Israel, even when Israel proves unfaithful to this relationship (Rom 3). In Rom 3 and 8, Paul affirms God’s undying commitment to a covenant relationship with his people and giving his Son to die with a view toward restoring the broken relationship. For the New Testament writers, dikaiosynē is centered in Christ. Christ’s death on the cross pardons sin, the same sin that broke the covenant relationship with God. Christ’s death on the cross “is the decisive ‘revelation of God’s justice’ (Rom. 1:16-17; 3:21-26).”

God, in Christ, restores the covenant relationship with sinful humans. Human beings can be declared righteous by their trusting acceptance of Christ’s saving act (Rom 5:19). Trust in God and obedience to his will are “the two elements necessary to uphold the covenant.” By his obedient, sacrificial death, Jesus brings humans into a new relationship to God (Luke 19:10; 1 Pet 3:18). Thus, Jesus is righteousness (1 Cor 1:30).

Dikaiosynē assumes a righteous relationship not only with God (by repentance, faith, and obedience) but also with people (acting unselfishly). Christ taught these two

279 Marshall, Biblical Justice, 36.
280 Ibid., 9.
281 Achtemeir, “Righteousness in the NT,” 94.
282 Ibid., 99.
aspects of righteousness in his summary of the Law (Matt 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31). The concept of *dikaiosynē* in the New Testament is used to designate both the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with people. The demand of the former is faith, and that of the latter is unselfish action to benefit others.\(^2^8^4\)

Those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, and done other acts of mercy (Matt 25:34ff.) will be deemed righteous in the Last Judgment, because their actions were for the benefit of others. To act unselfishly for the benefit of others is to participate in the covenant relationship, and thus it is considered righteous. This is because the nature of the horizontal relationship between human beings is determined by the nature of the vertical relationship between God and humans.\(^2^8^5\)

Meanwhile, the problem of minjung theology is that it has focused mainly on the horizontal dimension of justice neglecting the vertical dimension. Biblical justice, however, embraces both the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with others. Justice is a restoration of the people’s broken relationship with God as well as with other human beings, evidenced not only in love for one’s neighbors but also in an obedient relationship with God by faith.

When love for others is emphasized, rather than one’s love for God, “one tends to stress a social gospel.”\(^2^8^6\) Without the change of heart that comes through faith in God, social action “points in the wrong direction”\(^2^8^7\) and “is religiously hollow.”\(^2^8^8\) It may

\(^2^8^4\) Achtemeir, “Righteousness in the NT,” 91-99.

\(^2^8^5\) Ibid., 97.


\(^2^8^7\) Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor: Sharing the Gospel through Social Involvement* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 65.
also convey the message that "salvation is achieved by good works." In order to construct a more authentic theology, minjung theology must build its theology on biblical premise about justice and embrace the scriptural concept of social justice. 

The Ethical Dimension of Social Justice

*Tsedaqah* is expected of those who are placed in a position to execute justice, such as kings, rulers, and judges. For example, "the righteousness of the judge is most clearly manifested when he or she vindicates the powerless: the orphan, the widow, the poor, the oppressed, and the sojourner." \(^{291}\) *Tsedaqah* correlates to ethical and moral conduct. When oppression, corruption, and bribery dominate society, *tsedaqah* is necessary to counteract these elements. \(^{292}\)

In order to restore Israel "in the right" before Yahweh, what is needed "is quite clearly ethical and moral reform of such a kind as would produce the principles of right community order (justice, equality, sincerity, etc.), and to ensure the maintenance of the covenant." \(^{293}\) *Tsedaqah* has to do with compassion for the poor and the oppressed; thus

\(^{288}\)Neville, *A Theology Primer*, 117.

\(^{289}\)Chester, *Good News to the Poor*, 169.

\(^{290}\)Neville, *A Theology Primer*, 117.


\(^{292}\)Ibid., 69.

covenant relationship can be maintained. Consequently, tsedaqah “is the most important ethical concept regarding the special and legal life of the people of God.”

*Mishpat* also has a forensic, ethical dimension. Fundamentally, mishpat is understood as the restoration of a situation or environment which promoted equity and harmony (*shalom*) in a community. God is regarded as the source and guardian of mishpat. The distinctive understandings of mishpat are revealed in the Covenant Code (Exod 20:22-23:33). The Code concerns the powerless and contains a series of laws on the proper administration of mishpat. It is a valuable source of the Hebrew Bible’s teaching on social justice to the poor.

The prophetic books give the most striking statements on mishpat in society. The prophets’ portrayal of Israel’s social injustice is overwhelming. For instance, Isaiah speaks of them when he says that God “expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!” (5:7). Amos demands: “Let justice roll down like waters,

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297 See Achtemeir, “Righteousness in the OT,” 82.


and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (5:24). Illustrations of the statements on mishpat in the prophetic books include (1) concern for the poor (Isa 3:13-15; 32:6; Ezek 16:49; 18:7, 16; Amos 5:11; 6:4-6, 11; Mic 2:8-9); (2) the matter of loans and pledges (Amos 2:8; Ezek 18:7, 8, 16, 17; cf. Exod 22:25, 26; Deut 24:17; Lev 25:35-37); (3) justice in the court (Isa 1:23; 5:23; 10:1-2; 29:21; Zeph 3:3; Zech 7:9-10; Amos 5:12; Mic 3:9-11); and (4) just measurements (Hos 12:8; Mic 6:10-11; Amos 8:4-5). Thus, the prophets strongly appeal for justice (Isa 56:1; Hos 12:6; Amos 5:15; Mic 6:8).301

The wisdom literature frequently refers to mishpat. Psalms 106:3 and 146:7 point to the need for mishpat toward the poor and oppressed. Many passages in the Psalms describe social injustice in Israel. Psalm 10 speaks of the greed of the oppressors (vs. 3) and Ps 72 emphasizes the ruler as the deliverer of the poor. This prayer acknowledges the existence of oppression in the country and asks that the king request divine justice to judge the poor. The wisdom literature portrays their problems in detail and appeals for their resolution through mishpat. The book of Proverbs begins with a statement of its purpose. Included is the aim that readers will know “righteousness (tsedeq), justice (mishpat), and equity (meshrim)” (1:3). Proverbs regards instruction in justice as a primary purpose of the book. In fact, the entire biblical wisdom literature addresses mishpat for the oppressed and is an important source of information on this subject.302

Concern for the oppressed is an important element of the covenant. Justice is considered obligatory for all human beings. Even Sodom was condemned because it

301 Ibid., 36-48.

neglected the poor (Ezek 16:49). Israel's motivation for moral action for the oppressed was deeply rooted in its covenant relationship with God and others. When Israel failed to keep the covenant and became an oppressor of the poor, God turned against Israel as he had turned against pagan nations. Old Testament prophets from the eighth-century prophet Amos to the fifth-century Malachi pronounced God's judgment upon Israel and Judah for their oppression, inhumanity, and injustice for the poor as well as their apostasy from God.

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*Dikaiosynē,* as in the Old Testament, is concerned with love for the oppressed. Jesus' reproach against the Pharisees in Matt 23:23 and Luke 11:42 is “not that they neglect judgment, but that they are indifferent to the rights of the poor.” In these texts, the term *krisis,* used in the LXX to translate *mishpat,* carries the sense of the right, especially the right of the oppressed, which is vindicated by the judge. Paul also uses *dikaiosynē* in an ethical sense. With the inheritance from the Old Testament usage of *tsedaqah,* Paul employs the term *dikaiosynē* “in an ethical sense” when he uses it “in connection with the Law” and “to stand for one of the results of faith.”

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305 Dupertuis, *Liberation Theology,* 270.


In the parable of the eschatological kingdom at the end of the age, those who have shown love for the hungry, the afflicted, and the lonely are called the righteous who enter eternal life (Matt 25:46).\footnote{Kuyper, "Righteousness and Salvation," 244.} Righteousness before God is the fulfillment of his will by doing actions that please him (Matt 3:15; 5:10, 20; Luke 1:75; John 16:8, 10; Acts 13:10; 24:25; Heb 1:9; 1 Pet 2:24; 3:14; 2 Pet 2:5; 1 John 2:29; 3:7, 10; Rev 22:11). Donald Bloesch comments that humanity will be judged according to its works, which are the evidence of a grace already poured out, “but we are saved despite our works.” Therefore, “the final judgment is the confirmation of the validity of a justification already accomplished in Jesus Christ.”\footnote{Bloesch, Essentials of Evangelical Theology, 1:184.}

Justice Is Closely Linked with God’s Salvation

The biblical concept of justice is closely linked with salvation. The notion of tsed\textsuperscript{a}q\textsuperscript{ah} in the Old Testament is often mentioned in conjunction with salvation.\footnote{Ringgren and Johnson, “Tsadaq,” 243.} L. Diestel’s work, the first modern study of the Old Testament understanding of tsdq, affirms that God’s tsed\textsuperscript{a}q\textsuperscript{ah} is his salvific intervention on behalf of his people, the children of Israel, and the helpless individual—the poor, the oppressed, the widow, the orphan (especially in the Psalms and Isaiah).\footnote{Diestel, “Kie Idee der Gerechtigkeit, vorzüglich im AT, biblisch-theologisch dargestellt,” Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie 5 (1860): 173-253; quoted in Ringgren and Johnson, “Tsadaq,” 244, 246. For example, eight times the noun righteousness (tsed\textsuperscript{a}q\textsuperscript{ah}) is used synonymously with “salvation” (Pss 71:15; 98:2; Isa 46:13; 51:6, 8; 56:1; 59:16; 61:10). The Psalmists give tsed\textsuperscript{a}q\textsuperscript{ah} the sense of salvation and deliverance, using covenantal language such as salvation, mercy, faithfulness, and steadfast love (Pss 35:24, 28; 40:10f [9f.]; 69:28 [27]; 71:15f.; 19, 24; 85:11f [10f.]). Isaiah also relates tsed\textsuperscript{a}q\textsuperscript{ah} to the restoration of the covenant people.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{309}Kuyper, “Righteousness and Salvation,” 244.} \footnotesize{\textsuperscript{310}Bloesch, Essentials of Evangelical Theology, 1:184.} \footnotesize{\textsuperscript{311}Ringgren and Johnson, “Tsadaq,” 243.} \footnotesize{\textsuperscript{312}L. Diestel, “Kie Idee der Gerechtigkeit, vorzüglich im AT, biblisch-theologisch dargestellt,” Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie 5 (1860): 173-253; quoted in Ringgren and Johnson, “Tsadaq,” 244, 246. For example, eight times the noun righteousness (tsed\textsuperscript{a}q\textsuperscript{ah}) is used synonymously with “salvation” (Pss 71:15; 98:2; Isa 46:13; 51:6, 8; 56:1; 59:16; 61:10). The Psalmists give tsed\textsuperscript{a}q\textsuperscript{ah} the sense of salvation and deliverance, using covenantal language such as salvation, mercy, faithfulness, and steadfast love (Pss 35:24, 28; 40:10f [9f.]; 69:28 [27]; 71:15f.; 19, 24; 85:11f [10f.]). Isaiah also relates tsed\textsuperscript{a}q\textsuperscript{ah} to the restoration of the covenant people.}
God’s *tsedaqah* consists in his salvation of his covenant people (1 Sam 12:7-12). In other words, God’s salvation of Israel is his righteousness, his fulfillment of the demands of his covenant. Thus, Isaiah speaks of Yahweh as a “righteous God and a Savior” (Isa 45:21). God’s saving intervention is an expression of his righteousness (Isa 45:8, 21; 51:5ff.; 56:1; 61:10; 63:1; cf. also Pss 65:6[5]; 71:2; 98:2; 116:5-6; 118:15; 119:123). In this way, “covenantal language, such as steadfast love, faithfulness, and, salvation, is identified with righteousness to describe the acts of the LORD who is about to deliver Israel from her wearisome exile: ‘My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation has gone forth . . . my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be ended’ (Isa. 51:5f.).”

The Old Testament also demonstrates the close relationship between the *mishpat* of God and salvation (Pss 11:7; 37:39, 40; 72:4). Mishpat in the Old Testament is closely related to salvation and implies an act of deliverance. I. L. Seeligmann understands that the original meaning of *shapat* is to save the oppressed from the oppressor, or the enslaved from his enslaver. The term mishpat focuses on “God’s saving action to restore shalom by making things right (Isa. 1:17, 21; Jer. 22:3; Zech. 7:9; Mic. 6:8; Hos. 6:6).” This is especially seen in the Prophets and the Psalms, where

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"mishpat" is most often viewed as an act whereby God delivers, restores, and brings relief to the oppressed (e.g., Pss. 7:9; 9:6-9; 33:5; 76:9; 96:10; 97:2; 116:5; 146:7; Isa. 16:5; 28:6, 17; 51:4; Jer. 9:24)."^317

When God executes mishpat for the righteous and the oppressed and God’s mishpat strikes the enemy, mishpat means salvation and deliverance. God’s saving action can be called God’s mishpat (Deut 32:4; Ps 105:5-9; 111). Thus, as Gallardo states, “the fulfillment of God’s justice will be the salvation of his people. And, in that salvation God will finally establish justice.”^318 The prophecies concerning the Messiah stress this relationship between justice and the salvation of God. The Messiah will exercise justice and bring salvation and thus the righteous and oppressed will put their hope in his justice and seek his salvation. The world will recognize that “the Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations” (Ps 98:2).^319 Thus, the term mishpat refers to salvation (Pss 96:11-12; 98:7-8; cf. also 76:10).^320

Consequently, to the Hebraic mind-set, the tsedaqah and mishpat of God is that which seeks to accomplish his salvation (see Ps 40:9-11; cf. Num 35:24-25; Judg 2:16-18; 5:11; 1 Sam 24:15; 2 Sam 18:19, 31; Pss 7:17; 35:23; 71:15; 103:17; Isa 33:22; 46:13; 51:5; 59:11; Jer 21:12; 22:3). In Israel, therefore, tsedaqah and mishpat are used in the sense of salvation (1 Sam 12:7; cf. Judg 5:11; Mic 6:5; Isa 63:1).^321

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317Ibid.
320Weinfeld, Social Justice in Ancient Israel, 40.
Dikaiosynē in the New Testament is also closely linked with the concept of salvation (e.g., Rom 3:24; 10:10; 1 Cor 1:30; cf. Matt 13:49; 25:46; Titus 3:7). This idea is rooted in the Old Testament, “where the righteousness of God is a salvation concept in the sense of God’s covenant faithfulness.” Snaith states that dikaiosynē, equivalent to tsedaqah in the Old Testament, “is primarily a salvation word.” He argues that the meaning of dikaiosynē is governed almost entirely by the meaning of the tsedaqah in the Old Testament and it is better to commence the study of dikaiosynē from the Hebrew tsedaqah, and then to carry over into the Septuagint the meaning of tsedaqah.

Accordingly, the dikaiosynē of God “is a salvation concept.” Achtemeir states that, in the New Testament, dikaiosynē and salvation cannot be separated because “to participate in the covenant relationship (righteousness) is to participate in God’s fulfillment of this covenant (salvation, or eternal life).”

Salvation presupposes the Fall of mankind that resulted in the broken relationship with God, physical and spiritual death (Rom 3:9-19; Eph 2:3; Gal 5:17-21). Humanity can be righteous only through faith in God’s salvific grace. Christ’s death is the


324Ibid., 167, 168.


326Achtemeir, “Righteousness in the NT,” 97.
demonstration of God's saving and forgiving justice. The righteousness of God centers in the cross of Christ (Rom 3:25f.; 5:9f.; cf. 2 Cor 5:18; Gal 3:13). Thus, "because 'righteousness,' like 'salvation,' is a gift of God's grace in Christ, the two are often closely linked (Rom. 3:24; 10:10; 1 Cor. 1:30; cf. Matt. 13:49; 25:46; Titus 3:7)."  

Since "faith" has reference to the grace of God contained within faith in Christ, righteousness then "becomes decidedly a salvation concept, a gift of salvation."  

Minjung theology argues that praxis for social justice for the minjung constitutes salvation. It is certain that a true knowledge of God must manifest itself in love and justice to our neighbors, but to change this order and make the knowledge of God the consequence of doing justice, and even to equate the two, is to displace the salvation that comes by God's grace. This is simply a doctrine of salvation by good works.

Robert Neville refers to the Wesleyan heritage as follows: "Wesley recognized that humanitarian social action itself can be hollow and self-seeking, even if reasonably effective. Social action therefore ought not [to] be uncoupled from the life of prayer and meditation: social action ought to be undertaken as a form of holiness. The transformation of the heart by an encounter with the love and holiness of God is the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{327}}\text{Ibid.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{328}}\text{Achtemeir, "Righteousness in the NT," 97. See also Kunst, "The Kingdom of God and Social Justice," 112; Marshall, \textit{Biblical Justice}, 67; Nebe, "Righteousness in Paul," 147.}\]


center that needs to develop in both personal holiness and social sanctification." With reference to struggling against social injustice, Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden comment that the resulting social "transformation is not salvation. . . . Those who do not confess Christ are not saved by the kingdom in this world; only obedience to and faith in the King can provide salvation."332

It is evident that the world in which Jesus lived was in many ways very similar to ours: The government was corrupt and oppressive; there was poverty, extortion, and intolerance; the people eagerly longed for political liberation from the Roman power. The situation in countries governed by dictatorial regimes is similar to that in the first century, when more than half of the population of the Roman Empire were exploited slaves taken by force from conquered lands. 333

However, Jesus did not attack the corruption of the Roman government over the Jews, nor did he condemn the national enemies. He did not interfere with the administration of those in power of an earthly kingdom. He did not empty the prisons of Palestine. On the contrary, he allowed John the Baptist to be left in prison and executed


332 Vinay Samuel and Christopher Sugden, eds., The Church in Response to Human Need (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 142. C. René Padilla states, "We cannot accept the equation of salvation with the satisfaction of bodily needs, social amelioration, or political liberation" (Mission between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985], 41).

(Mark 1:14; 6:14-29). Jesus apparently had no interest in organizing a group of people to struggle with Rome and establish justice in the Empire.\(^\text{334}\)

Instead, Jesus fed the hungry and the needy and urged people to repent and escape the wrath to come (Luke 21:34-36). He knew that the root of social evils is ultimately in the human heart instead of the socio-political structures. He knew that the true remedy for oppression and misery does not come from human and external measures but from the heart that has been regenerated by the grace of God.\(^\text{335}\) In order to cure social problems, the human heart must first be changed.\(^\text{336}\) Thus, Jesus rejected the way of the sword; liberation would come through his own death, as the Lamb of God, to bring redemption to the human race (Matt 26:51-53).\(^\text{337}\)

It is also evident that neither John the Baptist nor Paul attempted to overturn arbitrarily or suddenly the established order of society. Instead, they preached the gospel of Jesus Christ and taught principles which struck at the very foundation of social evils. The New Testament teachings support paying taxes and submitting to the authority of the rulers, though the state be unjust (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Tim 2:1-2; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13-17; etc.). Although all wickedness must be exposed if it is practiced in the church (cf. Gal 2:1-21; 2 Pet 2; Jude and the seven letters in Rev 2-3), “suffering for the right at the

\(^{334}\)Ibid.

\(^{335}\)See Kunst, “The Kingdom of God and Social Justice,” 114.


hands of the secular power is blessed.”

Therefore, Jesus' non-violent, inner regenerative approach “is a concrete strategy for resisting oppression, one that seeks to eliminate the basis of oppression at its root.”

At the same time, one must keep in mind that although Jesus gave priority to humanity’s eternal welfare, he did not neglect the present human situation. The vertical and horizontal dimensions of the gospel are not interchangeable, yet they are inseparable. They are integral aspects of Christ's calling for Christians and the Church. God does not command his people to overturn the established order of society, but rather to reflect his concern for justice by living for the benefit of others, especially for the disadvantaged and the oppressed of the family of God.

Bosch concludes: “Those who know that God will one day wipe away all tears will not accept with resignation the tears of those who suffer and are oppressed now. Anyone who knows that one day there will be no more disease can and must actively anticipate the conquest of disease in individuals and society now. And anyone who


339 Gonzalez, The Gospel of Faith and Justice, 167. Some minjung theologians’ advocacy of violence appears to conflict with Jesus’ teaching and attitude regarding violence (e.g., Matt 5:39, 44; Luke 6:27, 29, 35; 1 Pet 2:21-23). Nam Dong Suh states that in order to break “the vicious circle of violence caused by han,” “the church must accept limited violence to do so” (“Historical References for a Theology of the Minjung,” 179). However, this element of minjung hermeneutics should be dismissed as faulty. Jesus never suggested a political revolution or appealed to violence in order to promote his kingdom. He rejected any kind of violence (see Matt 26:52; John 18:11).


believes that the enemy of God and humans will be vanquished will already oppose him now in his machinations in family and society.”

Summary

The hermeneutics and soteriology of two representative minjung theologians, Suh and Ahn, are analyzed from the Christian evangelical perspective. Minjung theology proposes the reading of Scripture from the perspective of the minjung, interpreting the Bible from the class-conscious socio-economic perspectives. Although its emphasis on the socio-political aspect of the biblical interpretation is a welcome corrective to excessive privatizing and spiritualizing tendencies in traditional Korean Christianity, it seems that minjung theology privileges one particular reading of Scripture, namely, the plight of those who are socio-economically oppressed.

As a result, minjung theology distorts the meaning of the Bible. It elevates the minjung experience above Scripture as a norm of theological reflection. Consequently, minjung theology employs selective usage of the Bible and leads to a reductionist reading, losing sight of the multivalent meaning of Scripture. Such an ideological move, which allows a particular socio-political agenda to dominate Scripture, is represented in its interpretation of the biblical terms, “Hebrew,” ochlos, anawim, and ptochoi. However, the biblical usage and word study of these terms do not support such a narrow interpretation.

While the broadening of the concept of sin to include the social dimension is a significant challenge to Korean Christianity’s individualistic and other-worldly bias, the minjung view of sin remains, nevertheless, superficial. No justice is done to the breadth

342 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 400. Italics his.
of the biblical perspective of the human condition. According to the Bible, sin is also rebellious revolt against God and the state of a corrupted heart. Thus, the elimination of oppression, discrimination, and exploitation alone would not achieve complete salvation from sin.

In addition, because of its failure to grasp the biblical concept of sin, minjung theology fails to accurately represent the comprehensive, scriptural picture of salvation. Salvation in the biblical witness is the work of God in a covenant context. Salvation within a covenant relationship is understood as multi-dimensional, including the individual, society, history and eternity. Thus, the exclusive one-sided emphasis would be a departure from the biblical understanding of salvation. Korean Christianity should develop the wholistic, biblical concept of salvation in order to integrate personal salvation and Christian social responsibility.

Raising its voice against Korean Christianity for having neglected the lack of concern for social justice, minjung theology identifies social justice for the minjung with salvation. Yet, biblical salvation also includes a restoration of the broken covenant relationship with God and other humans, which is experienced by faith in God and by self-sacrificial love for others. Both the vertical and horizontal relationships belong indivisibly together.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The development of a comprehensive biblical view of salvation is an ongoing task in Christian theology. Although Korean Protestantism is over one hundred years old, Korean Christianity still fails to construct a wholistic scriptural understanding of salvation. Jung Sun Oh states, "Although Korean theology has interpreted various theological issues and has classified various types of indigenous theology over the past four decades, it has failed to construct a Korean Christian notion of human salvation." In order to develop a contemporary Korean Christian notion of salvation, this study has critically analyzed the relationship between salvation and social justice in the works of two representative minjung theologians, Nam Dong Suh and Byung Mu Ahn. The Christian evangelical perspective, which I share, is the basis of the analyses of their works.

Traditional Korean theology has mainly emphasized the spiritual dimension in biblical interpretation at the expense of the material dimension. This has led to a strong tendency to understand salvation as an individualistic and other-worldly reality. As a reaction to traditional theology, minjung theology proposes a different paradigm of hermeneutics. It regards the minjung experience as the governing criterion in biblical

\footnote{Oh, A Korean Theology of Human Nature, 1.}
interpretation and puts strong emphasis on the social dimension of salvation, attempting to transform society by “liberating the oppressed and realizing social justice.”

Minjung theology is the first attempt in the history of Korean theology to interpret Scripture from the socio-economic perspective, emphasizing the relevance of the relationship between theology and historical situations. Minjung theology’s emphasis on the socio-economic and political dimensions of biblical interpretation as a significant correction has challenged traditional theology to call attention to the contemporary socio-political and economic dimensions of sin and salvation. Its recognition of the wretchedness of the poor and the oppressed in the society is an important contribution to Korean theology.

Korean Christian theology has not paid much attention to the social imperative of the gospel, emphasizing what we are “saved from” rather than what we are “saved for.” Korean theology needs to rediscover the social imperatives found in Scripture. The Lausanne Covenant, evangelical Christian statements of belief, expresses the need for evangelicals to acknowledge social responsibility: “We express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. . . . The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to

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2Jin Kwan Kwon, “Hangwa Danui Jungchi Yunrijok Songchal [Politico-Ethical Introspection on Han and Dan],” in Minjung Sinhak Immun [Introduction to Minjung Theology], 68.

denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist. . . . The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities.\textsuperscript{4}

Hence, Korean theology should search for ways to actualize the Christian truth in the socio-political and economic dimensions. As long as Korean Christianity does not express concern for the suffering of the victims of the oppressive social structures, a theology of the minjung will continue to have an effective pull on all who suffer from injustice.

Minjung theology, however, distorts the Bible because it privileges one particular reading of Scripture. Minjung theology locates the root of sin exclusively in class-conscious social structures and fails to broadly engage the causes of social evils. In addition, it emphasizes a high degree of social determinism and neglects the importance of individual autonomy. Thus, minjung theology represents a one-sided view of theological issues, reducing salvation only to the bounds of the contemporary. In Scripture, Jesus explains that the root of social evils is ultimately in the selfish heart instead of socio-political structures (Matt 7:17-20; 12:33-39).\textsuperscript{5} From the heart come all evils: rebellion, greed, injustice, etc. (Matt 12:34-37; cf. Rom 1:18-32).\textsuperscript{6} Jesus knows


\textsuperscript{5}So, when the apostle Paul worked in Corinth, that wicked city, polluted by the nameless vices of heathenism, he did not attempt to arbitrarily overturn the established order of society. Instead, he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ and taught principles which struck at the very foundation of social evils. Paul said, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2; see also 1 Cor 1; 4; 6:11; 2 Cor 3:17). Cf. Shedd, “Social Justice,” 209.

that the true remedy for oppression and injustice does not come from human and external measures, but from the heart that has been regenerated by the grace of God. Without a change of heart through the gospel of Christ’s grace, social problems cannot be cured. As Gonzalez states, “without this change it is impossible to realize justice (Ezek. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26).”\(^7\)

In order to improve the one-dimensional view of sin and salvation, Korean theology should seek a wholistic biblical concept of sin and salvation. In Scripture, sin is “both personal and social, individual and collective.”\(^8\) Sin remains not only in the lives of individuals but also in the systems constructed to oppress, exploit, and marginalize people. Accordingly, the solution to sin should come by means of the social as well as the individual nature of salvation.\(^9\)

The biblical concept of salvation is multi-dimensional, embracing the “spiritual and physical, individual and communal, objective and subjective, eternal and historical dimensions.”\(^10\) It has to do not only with eternal destiny but also with life in the here and now. It challenges Christians to be concerned with social justice as well as with personal


\(^{8}\) Bloesch, “Sin,” 1104. See also Bacote, “What Is This Life For?” 110.

\(^{9}\) Bacote, “What Is This Life For?” 110.

holiness. Consequently, the exclusive one-sided emphasis upon “spiritual” or “physical,” “personal” or “social,” “historical” or “eternal” dimension of salvation is a departure from the wholistic view of the Bible. The comprehensive, scriptural character of salvation must be respected both in the dogmatics and in the ethics of Korean theology.

Salvation in Scripture is a restoration of the broken covenant relationship with God and other human beings. Love for God and love for human beings “are neither confused nor separated, but constitute an indissoluble unity.” Wilhem A. Visser t’Hooft puts it well: “A Christianity which has lost its vertical dimension has lost its salt and is not only insipid in itself, but useless for the world. But a Christianity which would use the vertical preoccupation as a means to escape its responsibility for and in the common life of man is a denial of the incarnation of God’s love for the world manifested in Christ.”

As Richard Mouw states, “Personal salvation and social justice presuppose each other.” The ministry of Jesus embraced both the vertical and horizontal dimensions, and his concern was not one-sided. The Gospels “are full of stories about Jesus’ feeding the hungry and his teachings about the spiritual food of God, his healing the sick and his offer of personal salvation.” Thus, Christians who are secure in their eternal destiny

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11Cf. Neville, A Theology Primer, 75-88.
12Lochman, Reconciliation and Liberation, 5.
cannot assume that their “saved” status carries no social responsibility in this life. They must live horizontally, relating to those around them, as well as vertically in communion with Jesus.

The Word of God is a model for how the individual and the church should interact with society. Salvation in Scripture goes beyond individual hearts to social manifestations. The biblical inclusion of the physical and historical world in salvation should remind Christians that they must speak of salvation with actions as well as words, testifying to God’s love and care of this world through their love and care.

Evangelicals in the eighteenth and nineteenth century regarded the gospel as inherently social as well as individual, and understood that the gospel demanded comprehensive interest. Their concern was broader than soul saving, not only in terms of the poor but also in terms of the transformation of society. The early evangelical causes such as abolition of slavery and enforcement of temperance “are noteworthy examples of


the attempts to save both souls and society.”19 They were among the leading advocates of major changes in England and the United States.20 John Wesley believed that personal faith is essential, but the evidence of faith should be social and outward witness. Albert C. Outler says, “For Wesley, the essence of faith was personal and inward, but the evidence of faith was public and social. . . . The Christian Community must be committed to social reform. . . . The Word made audible must become the Word made visible.”21 Thus, Wesley’s theology had a tremendous impact on social transformation in the eighteenth century in England. Wesleyanism not

19Bacote, “What Is This Life For?” 98. See also Donald Dayton, Discovering an Evangelical Heritage (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Smith, Transforming the World?

20Between 1900 and 1930, however, evangelical Christians retreated from their earlier social reform interests into an emphasis upon personal evangelism. Some scholars have labeled this shift as a “great reversal” which led to a distinct de-emphasis on matters of social concern. This change was a reaction to the social gospel of liberalism and the result of a rise of dispensational premillennialism. Focusing on revivalistic conversion as their major ministry, fundamentalists and evangelicals directed their soteriological concern toward the inner life and eternal matters. See David O. Moberg, The Great Reversal: Evangelicalism Versus Social Concern (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972); Ed Dobson, Jerry Falwell, and Edward E. Hindson, The Fundamentalist Phenomenon: The Resurgence of Conservative Christianity (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981); Robert Webber, The Secular Saint: A Case for Evangelical Social Responsibility (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979).

21Albert Cook Outler, Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1996), 22. Italics his. Moreover, Wesley demonstrated “a sociology of mission” that recognized that the gospel was proclaimed in society normally from the least to the greatest, not from the greatest to the least: “And in every nation under heaven we may reasonably believe God will observe the same order which he had done from the beginning of Christianity. ‘They shall all know me,’ saith the Lord, not from the greatest to the least . . . but, ‘from the least to the greatest.’” John Wesley, Sermon 63, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” § 19, Sermon II, ed. Albert C. Outler, Works, 493-494; quoted in D. Bruce Hindmarsh, “‘Let Us See Thy Salvation’: What Did It Mean to Be Saved for the Early Evangelicals?” in What Does It Mean to Be Saved? 49.
only contributed to the anti-slavery issue\textsuperscript{22} but also saved England from the crisis of a revolution similar to the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{23}

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, one of the most widespread Protestant churches, has also revealed a concern not only for the soul but also for the body.\textsuperscript{24} Seventh-day Adventists believe that God's salvific concern extends to those who suffer in mind, body, or spirit.\textsuperscript{25} As a result, the Adventist ministry includes outreach as a part of sharing the gospel. Thus, the importance of proper health habits and temperance work has been stressed for more than a century.\textsuperscript{26} In addition, systematic evils are recognized, and there is a concern for social ethics. For example, the Adventist pioneers "railed

\textsuperscript{22}Wesley and other evangelicals were opponents of slavery. With the conversion of elites such as William Wilberforce and other members of the so-called Clapham Sect, they acted in an organized way to effect change. Thus, the Abolition of Slavery Bill finally passed in 1807. Hindmarsh, "Let Us See Thy Salvation," 60.


\textsuperscript{25}Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, \textit{Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines}, 2d ed. (Silver Spring, MD; Boise, ID: Ministerial Association General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists; Pacific Press, 2005), 311-328.

against slavery as a great evil in the United States." They took a part in both the religious liberty and abolitionist movements in the middle of the nineteenth century when the nation was preoccupied with the divisive issues of slavery and the Civil War.28

More than thirty years have passed since minjung theology was born in Korea. As a theological development from the desperate situation of the minjung in South Korea, it has helped Korean Christianity to recognize its oppressed brothers and sisters crying for a resolution to their han. The strength of minjung theology lies in its conviction that Christians should not remain indifferent to the plight of the oppressed. It has stimulated Korean Christians to read the Scriptures anew in order to find what God has to say regarding their suffering neighbors.

27Trevor O’Reggio, “Slavery, Prophecy, and the American Nation as Seen by the Adventist Pioneers, 1854-1865,” Journal of the Adventist Theological Society 17, no. 2 (Autumn 2006): 135. O’Reggio maintains that although the early leaders of the Adventist Church held strong anti-slavery sentiments and wrote numerous articles on denouncing slavery, their ethics and reasons were quite different from other evangelical abolitionists. The unique Adventist position was based on their understanding of the prophecy of Rev 13. They interpreted the two-homed beast in Rev 13 as America and slavery as an example of the dragon-like quality of this beast. It was clear to them that slavery was a central sign of the end of the world. Ibid., 135-144.

Hence, in spite of the explicit flaws and limitations of minjung theology, one should not underestimate its contribution to the development of Korean Christian theology today. As Martin Heidegger once said, “Our experience of the present and expectations of the future can be constructed only from the materials of the past.” By integrating traditional theology and minjung theology, Korean Christian theology can construct a richer, more adequate, and more biblical soteriology.

Therefore, Korean theology must develop a comprehensive, scriptural soteriology with an expansion of the horizons of the traditional doctrine of salvation. When Korean Christianity is faithful to sustain the expanded soteriology, it will not only proclaim personal salvation but also seek justice for the han of those who suffer from the injustice of the unfair socio-political and economic systems.

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