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**Twelve Influential Early
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Twelve Influential Early Korean Preachers

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Moon, Ik-Hwan (1918-1994)

The Preaching Poet in Wilderness

Jaewoong Jung¹

*...How about a dream like this?
A dream,
Along to the DMZ 155 miles
To the East Sea where the sun rises,
On a peak of mountain toward blue ocean,
Taking a shovel-full of northern soil
Soaked with the blood of National Army soldiers
And a shovel-full of southern soil
Mounded over the flesh of Communist Army soldiers,
Burying both of them in a place.
May the grave be the place of pilgrimage
For our 50 million people...²*

Introduction

Rev. Ik-Hwan Moon is a distinctive figure in that he tried to fulfill a realistic political goal of democratization and reunification not only by political struggles but also by theological and literary inspirations. In other words, he reframed and recreated realistic political problems with theological symbols, literary metaphors, and imageries. The political addresses which remain are few due to his long prisoned life, but his sermons, lectures and articles show his thoughts well. In particular, his sermons contain his theological dialogue with the social context in which he lived. Also, his sermons which are identified with his radical life have inspired many preachers to reconsider their sermons, challenging what is the authentic preaching in this world in which the gospel and evils are coexisting, struggling and having conversation. In this essay, I will briefly explore his life and sermon world.

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² Ik-Hwan Moon, "The Heart Praying a Dream" in *The Heart Praying a Dream* (Seoul: Shilcheon Literature, 1978).



Historical Background

For over 1,000 years, Korea was a unified nation. However, with the demise of the Chosun Dynasty, the Korean people suffered from Japanese colonial rule for 36 years. After World War II, Korea was liberated from Japan, but divided into two Koreas. Consequently, this unstable political situation ignited the Korean War. The war was suspended with the cease-fire agreement but it left over two million casualties and over ten million dispersed people. In North Korea, the rule of the patriarchic dynasty of Kim Il-Sung has continued, and the people in South Korea suffered from a succession of dictatorial regimes. The political situation of division required a strong leadership which could be easily led to an autocracy.

Trampling the short spring of democratization in 1960 which was achieved by struggle against autocracy of the former president, Seung-Man Lee, General Jeong-Hee Park began a military dictatorship. Although he achieved rapid economic development, he was criticized due to his harsh persecution of human rights and his cruel autocracy. Eventually, for the perpetuation of his dictatorship, in 1972, the government announced the Yushin constitution which guaranteed the tenured reign for the president Jeong-Hee Park. It kindled the national anti-dictatorship democratization movement.

Even though this autocracy was ended by the assassination of the president Jeong-Hee Park, a new military dictatorship regime emerged by a military coup in 1979. The new government succeeded in the policy of the former dictator that pursued economic development and political oppression at the same time. In 1987, the military dictatorship eventually ended up by national civil demonstrations requiring the abolition of dictatorship and the execution of democratic direct voting.

His Life Journey

Ik-Hwan Moon was born on June 1, 1918, in Myungdong-chon, Hwaryong-hyun, Manchuria. His father was Rev. Jae-rin Moon and his mother Shin-mook Kim.³ At the time of the demise of the Chosun Dynasty, the ancestors of Rev. Moon who participated in Gab-oh-farmer's revolt⁴ immigrated to national Northeastern frontier, Hamkyung-do. After the collapse of Chosun, they moved to Manchuria and founded a community for the pursuit of independence for Chosun from Japan. There Ik-Hwan Moon learned western knowledge and Christianity and made a decision to become a pastor. In 1938, he studied at the Japanese Theological Seminary in Tokyo and later Korean Theological Seminary (the current Hanshin University). In 1947 he graduated from Korean Theological Seminary and was ordained as a Presbyterian pastor. In 1949, he entered

³ Hee-Dong Chae, "The Life and Thought of Ik-Hwan Moon (Late Spring)," *Minjung and Theology* 3 (2000): 84-103. For his detailed life story, read: Hyung-Soo Kim, *A Critical Biography of Ik-Hwan Moon* (Seoul: Shilcheon Literature, 2004).

⁴ This was the oppressed farmer's revolt against a local governor's corruption and exploits and foreign force's intervention during the Chosun Dynasty, supported by an emerging religion, "Donghak" which literally means "Eastern Studies."

Princeton Theological Seminary, but his studies were suspended because of the Korean War (1950-53). In August 1954, he earned the Master of Theology in the Old Testament Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary and studied further at Union Theological Seminary (New York) in 1965-66. After returning to Korea, he served Hanbit Presbyterian church and taught Old Testament studies at Hanshin University and Yonsei University. In 1968-1976, he participated in the project of the Common Translation of the Bible launched jointly by the Korean Protestant Church and the Korean Catholic Church. Also, he became a poet in order to understand and translate Hebrew poetry in the Old Testament. In other words, he was an intellectual in scholarly society but didn't participate in social activities until 1975.

However, the suicide of Tae-II Jeon who was a young labor leader (1970) and the questionable death of his friend, Dr. Jang Joon-Ha (1975) led him to participate in the democratization movement against dictatorship. Beginning with his arrest due to the "3.1 democratic proclamation for saving nation" (1976), he was imprisoned six times for a total 19 years due to his activity for democratization and the reunification movement. In 1987, as soon as he was released from prison, he went to the funeral ceremony and cried out the names of the killed students in civil demonstration. This event made him as a prophetic figure of the democratization movement.

After 1987, he began to concentrate on the reunification movement. He thought that the strongest cause threatening democracy in Korea was national division and that true democracy could not be fulfilled without solving the problem of national division. Thus, in March 1989, he entered into North Korea, had two conferences with Kim Il-Sung, and announced the joint declaration between the two Koreas with the committee of Peaceful Unification of the Nation belonging to North Korea. After returning to South Korea, even though he was arrested and imprisoned again, his visit shocked society and evoked concerns about reunification movement. For these reasons, he was nominated as a candidate for the Nobel prize for peace. And today his view on the reunification movement is evaluated as the significant contribution to the later unification movement and the unification policy of the progressive government. After being paroled, he preoccupied in the democratization and unification movement and died of a stroke in 1994.

His Works

As a theologian, poet, activist and preacher, he left abundant writings. As a theologian, he wrote many theological articles and books including *The History of the Hebrew People*, and translated several books, including Common Translation of the Bible and *Life Together* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1964). As a poet, he published five collections of poems and many essays. In 1999, his writings including poems, essays, articles, sermons, addresses and other writings were published in an archive having 12 volumes. The 12th volume⁵ in his archive contains the

⁵ Ik-Hwan Moon, *Archive 12: Sermons* (Seoul: Four Season, 1999).



collection of his 88 sermons and the 4th volume⁶ contains 55 partial sermonic writings. When we analyze the titles of his sermons, 26 sermons among a total of 143 sermons deal with political topics directly, including democracy (3), communism (1), human rights (2), justice (3), reunification (2), laws (3), peace (1), liberty (1) and the relationship between Christianity/Church and Politics/Nation (5). In particular, he stresses resurrection as the core issue of how to live in faith in this world. In three sermons about resurrection, he focuses the features of Christian belief and challenges us how to live as a Christian.

In addition to his primary writings, there are significant studies about his life, poems, political activities and theological works. However, there is rarely any study about his preaching, even though he is evaluated as one of the renowned preachers in Korea. As a second resource for studying him, *A Critical Biography of Rev. Moon* written by Hyung-Soo Kim provides an outline of the main episodes in his life. Also, theological, political and literary articles about him contribute to the study of his life and thought in diverse dimensions.

His Sermons and Theology

Minjung theology

In studying the characteristics in his sermons and theology, firstly, we find that his sermons are based on minjung theology. Minjung theology is a contextual theology emerged in responding to the Korean social-political environment in the 1970s. To be specific, minjung literally means the mass of the people, but in particular those people who are politically oppressed, socially alienated, economically exploited, and culturally and intellectually underprivileged.⁷ He was one of core members in the Minjung theology movement with Byung-Moo Ahn and Nam-Dong Suh. However, different from other minjung theologians, Ik-Hwan Moon didn't leave many academic writings about minjung theology. This is because the time during which minjung theology emerged as academic theological systematic studies is identified with his active time as a social activist during which he was imprisoned over 10 years from 1975-1994. Thus, his lack of writings on minjung theology is not because of his shortage of attention to it, but because of the limitation of his environment. However, his minjung theological thought is fully expressed in his sermons and other writings. In particular, his sermons reflect his minjung theological thought well. In his sermon, "Living before the Resurrection," he identified the resurrection of Jesus with the resurrection of minjung, and the church with the minjung in this way:

I assert that the Church began with the event in which the resurrection of Jesus became the resurrection of People (Minjung). The Church is People who are born again with burning soul of Jesus, burning mind, burning sense of justice and burning love. The Church is People who were dead with Jesus

⁶ Ik-Hwan Moon, *Archive 4: Unification 2* (Seoul: Four Season, 1999).

⁷ Sangyil Park, *Korean Preaching, Han, and Narrative* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 15.

*and risen again with Jesus, the body of Jesus which was dead with People and have risen again with People. Jesus is the risen People and the risen Jesus with People.*⁸

That is to say, he interprets the church as minjung and the rise of church as the resurrection of minjung. Also, in his other sermon, “Thanksgiving and Hymn,” he identified the Hebrew people under the Egyptians with the Black people who lived under the oppression of White people and the Korean people under the oppression of Japanese imperialism.⁹ This understanding is similar with Byung-Moo Ahn’s understanding of minjung and *οκλος* in Gospels. In other words, he regards the main members of early Christianity as the lower class-oppressed people who can be called “minjung” in application to Korean context. Rev. Moon shares this similar hermeneutic frame each on the biblical world and reality, and applies the context of biblical people to the current audience in his pew.

Prophetic sermons

Secondly, Rev. Moon employs diverse resources of the prophets in the Old Testament in order to criticize current evils and inspire listeners to imagine a new utopian world instead of current society. This thought had developed throughout his academic and sermonic life. He published a sequence of seven articles on the prophet Jeremiah (1959) and the Israelite prophetic movement (1962-63) in the theological magazine, *Christian Thought*. These writings show his academic understanding of the prophets in the Old Testament. He employs diverse prophets’ stories and imageries in his sermons, such as Nathan, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezechiel, Amos, Micah, Jonah, and Habakkuk. In his sermons, prophets are the protectors and advocates for minjung and the accuser against unjust oppressors. This prophetic paradigm is applied in interpreting and responding to reality in his sermons. He preaches to his audience and urges them to reconsider reality in the perspective of the prophets and to dream of a new age like the prophets suggested.

To be specific, his thoughts are reflected in his theological writings and sermons. In his book, *The History of Hebrew People*, he understands the Exodus as a liberating war for Canaan peasants and Hebrew people to come out of Egypt and Canaan peasants as the oppressed people by the Egyptians. Despite, this Israel then royal regimes led them to forget their identity as *Habiru* and to become oppressors. Thus, the prophetic movement in the Old Testament was a reaction or resistance against this historical regression in which liberators became oppressors. And Jesus was the successor of the prophetic movement which pursues the ideal community of oppressed people.¹⁰ Therefore, he thinks that a preacher as a successor of Jesus’ movement should have a prophetic insight which watches reality thoroughly and a prophetic courage which speaks out against injustice and corruption. These prophetic qualities are to serve a new world

⁸ Ik-Hwan Moon, “Living before the Resurrection,” the Sermon of the Easter service in 1983 at EYC, not published.

⁹ Ik-Hwan Moon, *Archive* 12, 87-88.

¹⁰ Ik-Hwan Moon, *The History of Hebrew People* (Seoul: Sammin-sa, 1990), 44, 70. recited in Tae-Soo Yim, “Minjung theological interpretation on the Old Testament,” *Minjung and Theology* 6 (2001): 20-21.



which fulfills the biblical view of justice and peace. In his sermon, “Toward Tomorrow Breakthrough Today,” he claims this thought in this way:

Israel's prophets who flowered again in Jesus, stood up with the mission for people to prepare for the rising new morning, they had sharp eyes which watch through a dreadful reality. The prophets struggled for upright attitude of life to draw a new age.¹¹

This understanding of the prophet's task culminates in a prophetic utopian imagery as an alternative for overcoming realistic suffering and evils.

Doesn't justice stem from a not-deceitful and honest mind? ...In ever-fresh, innocent and honest beauty, back to the source of life, there is a dream and fantasy. There is an imagination which nobody conceived. The prophet Isaiah imagines a peaceful world which will be fulfilled with justice by the messiah, "sprout" and "fresh bud" of humankind. Wolves play with sheep and leopards roll with goats and lions feed on grass with calves...¹²

As a result of his employing prophetic imageries into his sermon, his sermons become a living prophecy inviting the contemporary audience in his pew to experience struggles and dreams of prophets in reflecting their reality.

Poetic Political Sermon

The final feature of his sermons is that he tries for listeners to accept his political ideas as Christian thought by means of poetic rhetorical devices. Although his pursuing political goals, democratization and reunification are a too sensitive political agenda to deal with in the pulpit, he reinterprets his political agenda into an issue of Christian faith. To be specific, he suggests that the political agenda is not only a secular political issue but also the core issue strongly relevant to Christian profound thought. In his early sermon, “Christian and Democracy,” he claims that democratic thought is rooted in Christian thought and that the fundamental thought of democracy is human dignity and connects it with the biblical message in this way:

Where did the thought that one's individual dignity is as valuable as 99 people's come from? Who was the figure who taught that individual life is as

¹¹ Moon, *Archive* 12, 102.

¹² *Ibid.*, 142.

*valuable as the whole world? You already have the answer. This is the Word of the Lord. Thus, democracy which is based on individual dignity is result from the Christian church.*¹³

Furthermore, he reframes the political norms with theological concepts. In his sermon of “Resurrection,” he says that “If we say that democracy is a making minjung the lord of history, the resurrection of minjung is the democracy which we are experiencing right now.”¹⁴ In the same step with it, he asserts that “If we say that democratization is the resurrection of minjung and ethnic community, democratization is beyond the political dimension. It is in the dimension of faith and morality. For me, democratization is... the way of faith to live the resurrection in the earth.”¹⁵ He repeats this idea in his sermons and writings as the conjunction point of biblical message and his political agenda. Thus, in this way, for him, the political ideals and religious vision became intermingled and inseparable.

More interesting is that he expresses this political-theological idea by poetic metaphors and imagies in his sermons and writings. For example, in his sermon, “Living after Resurrection,” he describes eating a meal of rice as a kind of Eucharistic behavior. He depicts rice as the results of farmers’ blood, and states that the participation in the Eucharist is the eating flesh and blood of farmers, because the materials of the Eucharist are the fruits of farmers’ bloody labor. His re-imagination of the Eucharist image identified with farmer’s suffering inspires listeners to identify themselves with the oppressed people under a brutal government.

Also, this Eucharist image is found in his poem, “The Heart of Praying a Dream.” He pictures the act of burying both “body of northern soil soaked with the blood of National Army soldiers” and “southern soil mounded over the flesh of Communist Army soldiers” in a place. This image is similar with the action putting bread into the cup in the Eucharist. This Eucharist imagery employed in his sermons and poems functions to identify democratization and unification as a sacred action. This poetic imagination on political issue is very effective in delivering his claim that the Christian message can overcome political controversy.

Conclusion

Most Korean preachers have thought that non-political preaching is the most authentic preaching, because preachers should deliver the Word of God, not human political opinions in pulpit. However, the Word of God is not proclaimed in a vacuum, but in a particular social-political environment. When the Word is delivered to listeners, it encourages them to reconsider and to reevaluate current reality in the criteria of biblical justice. Thus, preachers have a responsibility to respond to the world in reflection on the Bible. In this sense, the sermons of Rev. Ik-Han

¹³ Ibid., 196.

¹⁴ Moon, *Archive* 4, 314.

¹⁵ Ibid., 319.



Moon challenge contemporary preachers to proclaim the justice of God in the modern world. In particular, his literary rhetoric in delivering the prophetic message could be great reference for preachers to build an effective and authentic prophetic preaching.

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