

## Article

# Exegetical Resistance: The Bible and Protestant Critical Insiders in South Korea

Seung Min Hong

Independent Scholar, Kwang Ju, Kyong Gi, Korea; seung.min.hong2018@gmail.com

Received: 13 September 2018; Accepted: 3 October 2018; Published: 7 October 2018



**Abstract:** South Korean Protestantism has attracted scholars for a number of reasons including its almost unrivaled numeric growth and vibrancy in East Asia. Recent observations, however, have also noticed its negative perceptions among the general public in Korea, including those who profess to be Protestants. This study focuses on movements by Protestant “critical insiders,” namely, those who are committed to their Protestant faiths yet are highly critical of the ways in which the Protestant religion is taught, believed, and practiced in South Korea. Such emphasis on resistance fits well the scholarly agenda of cultural studies. The subjects of observation in this study, however, can take the cultural studies orthodoxy and flip it on its head. In cultural studies, it has been asserted that unintended-creative readings of cultural—and religious—texts on the part of the readers indicate their resistive agency rather than subjugation. Korean Protestant critical insiders’ various activities pertaining to the Bible, however, entail reversing such observations about interpreting cultural texts and empowerment. Instead of turning the signs upside down, as typically celebrated in cultural studies, what they aspire to do is follow more radically the intended meanings/readings of the text. Rescuing the text, so to speak, is paramount for religiously loyal resistance.

**Keywords:** Korea; Protestantism; cultural studies

## 1. The Topic: Religious Critical Insiders—A South Korean Protestant Case

Among scholars of religion, Protestant Christianity in South Korea has been a notable case for various reasons, including (a) its rapid and massive growth that is unparalleled compared to most other parts of Asia, (b) its churches, some of which are the world’s largest Protestant churches—both in terms of building size and number of congregation—and (c) the fact that South Korea is now the second largest overseas missionary sending country in the world. Such facts have all encouraged scholars of religion to look more deeply into Protestantism in South Korea to gain insight into how major religious traditions travel around the world and interact with various social and cultural settings. Nowadays, scholarly literature on South Korean Protestantism abounds in various disciplines.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its highly visible growth in the numeric sense, or perhaps partly because of it, various statistics show that Protestantism, for many years now, has been rated by the general public as the most despised religious tradition believed and practiced in South Korea.<sup>2</sup> The hostility is specifically toward Protestant Christianity, as opposed to Roman Catholicism,<sup>3</sup> but the object of animosity is not further divided into specific denominations (e.g., Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans,

<sup>1</sup> For a most up-to-date English monograph on Korean Protestantism, see Timothy Lee’s *Born Again: Evangelicalism in Korea* (Lee 2010). Also helpful, though less recent, are the various essays found in the edited volume *Christianity in Korea* (Buswell and Lee 2006). There are also other works that focus more on specific issues: for example, Korean Protestant Christianity and gender (Kim 2016; Choi 2009) or North Korean migrants (Jung 2015).

<sup>2</sup> See the various survey results, for example, in Chong 2012; Lee 2010.

<sup>3</sup> The presence of Eastern Orthodoxy and other branches of Christianity is minimal in Korea.

etc.). In other words, when it comes to the general public's negative views against Christianity, they do make the distinction between Protestantism and Catholicism, but generally not between various Protestant groups.<sup>4</sup> Reasons for such negative perceptions are manifold and complicated as is the case with any religion that is the object of animosity and dispute. Some of the major reasons, however, include (a) extreme collusion with the political right (Kim 2016), (b) hostility toward other religions and self-righteous demarcation of the self, which is returned in response from the public by also demarcating Protestant Christianity from all other religions (Park 2005), (c) perceived moral corruption of Protestants, often represented by their religious authorities (Lee 2010, pp. 139–51), and (d) pro-Western attitude of Korean Protestantism often at the risk of alienating Korean traditional customs and culture (Hong 2016b).

While it is in general the non-Protestant population that expresses contempt toward Korean Protestantism most vociferously, there are also those who remain deeply committed to their Protestant faiths yet are highly critical of, and distance themselves from, the dominant and popular ways in which it is institutionalized and followed. I refer to such social actors—who are critical of a particular religion from that very religion's perspective—as religious “critical insiders.” This paper's topic of research is critical insiders of Protestant Christianity in South Korea.

To these critical insiders, the fact that Protestant Christianity is so strongly present and supported by so many believers in Korea and yet so highly despised arouses serious questions about how the Protestant tradition is actually being taught and lived out in the Korean society. In addition to the negative perceptions of Protestant Christianity among the general public in Korea, statistics also show that a small yet noticeably growing number of Protestants are leaving the institutionalized church, not because of their loss of faith but because of the inconsistency they perceive between the way Protestant Christianity ought to be taught, believed, and practiced and the ways in which it is actually embodied in Korea (Chong 2015). Such perceived discrepancies between “true Protestant Christianity” and Korean Protestantism include not only moral aspects—such as financial, political, sexual, and other abuses by pastors—but also doctrinal/theological aspects as can be seen in critical insiders' critiques of popular teachings concerning mandatory tithing or the divinely sanctioned authority of the pastorate. These two aspects can also overlap as is often the case (e.g., the correlation of compulsory tithing to pastors' financial abuses).

In such a context, Protestant critical insiders in South Korea can be further defined as those who (a) identify themselves as Protestant Christians and hold accordingly to fundamental Protestant beliefs—such as the tenets of the Trinity, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as a historical figure, and the (Protestant) Bible as the divinely inspired word of God—as well as the resulting actions/practices of such beliefs, (b) yet are critical of the actual teachings and beliefs held by, as well as behaviors practiced by, the majority of Protestant institutions (mostly churches) and their adherents in South Korea.

In this paper, I capture a particular aspect of Korean Protestant critical insider resistance to dominant Protestantism in South Korea. The study of resistance in the realm of culture—which certainly includes religion—is most pertinent to the field of cultural studies. Critical insider “resistance,” however, is not anti-religious but religiously loyal. They protest the dominant institutions and offer alternative visions not by negating Protestant beliefs but by relying more radically on them. An important ramification of such religiously loyal resistance, the key argument of this paper, is stated below in Section 3. Before that, however, a brief note on the objects of analysis is in order.

## 2. Objects of Analysis

Some critical insiders of Korean Protestantism go public, and their movements are the bulk of what I analyze in this paper. They include both individual actors as well as organized movements that

---

<sup>4</sup> In South Korea, the number of Protestant denominations are in hundreds.

publically deliver critiques and alternative views. They are the leading individuals and organizations that are more fully and formally committed to the task of challenging the dominant voices. In addition to facilitating gatherings and activities that require physical presence, many of them have been highly reliant upon new media by creating web/mobile content while not completely ignoring traditional “old media” such as broadcast TV, radio, or print magazines and newspapers. Major examples of such Protestant critical insider institutes in South Korea include educational ones such as Nehemiah Institute for Christian Studies, Holywave Academy, and Chunggeoram ARMC, as well as journalistic ones represented by NewsNJoy.

More recently, there were two TV talk shows that were broadcast through CBS (Christian Broadcasting System), a major Protestant TV network, and tried to bring together these critical insiders and collectively disseminate their voices to a wider circle. These two shows are *CBS Christian Now* and *Nancy Lang’s Theology Punch*.<sup>5</sup> In addition to analyzing all of these media texts available on the Internet, I also incorporate into my analysis the interviews I conducted with fourteen individuals who are involved in the production of the two TV shows, most of whom are also involved in other critical insider movements. All of the interviews were carried out during the summer of 2015.

### 3. The Argument: Religion, Cultural Studies, and Exegetical Resistance

As briefly mentioned earlier, critical insider movements in South Korea is a suitable topic for cultural studies—a field that specializes in capturing the struggle between domination and resistance in the realm of culture, which includes religion. Such resistance does not refer to physical violence against the oppressors but mainly revolves around recognizing hegemonic processes in social and cultural discourses and challenging dominant ideologies with alternative voices. Among other contributions, cultural studies has offered an observation that has become an orthodoxy: that unintended-creative readings of cultural texts on the part of the recipients indicate their active agency for resistance. Likewise, the pleasures and practical benefits people get from such readings have also been taken as indications of empowerment rather than subjugation.

As cultural resisters who protest dominant religious institutions and disseminate alternative voices, Protestant critical insiders also have imperatives regarding reading and interpreting a particular cultural text, the central religious text of Protestantism, the Bible. Their view of textual interpretation and resistance, however, flips this cultural studies orthodoxy on its head; resistance to authority here comes not from reading against the grain but from using intended meanings of the text against its abusers. Exegesis, discovering authorial and intended meanings, is not taken as a practice that perpetuates Western Christian imperialism. Instead, it serves as the very foundation for religiously motivated resistance.

### 4. Literature Review: Reading of Cultural Texts and Resistance in Cultural Studies

Concerning the relationship between resistance and cultural texts, including religious texts, the cultural studies tradition has given us the long cherished observation of how such texts can be read in resistive ways. While a number of founders of cultural studies have provided the theoretical groundwork for such an observation, the foundational articulation of resistive reading on the part of the audience/reader is still that of [Hall \(1980\)](#). As a key figure in cultural studies, Hall showed how cultural texts, delivered through mass media, can be read by the recipients in ways not intended by the producers. Even when the intended purposes of popular cultural texts are to inform and shape the audience in ways that perpetuate dominant power structures, Hall argued that such cultural texts are not always interpreted according to authorial intentions. Instead, the readers bring into the process of decoding their own experiences, background, and insight that can modify, twist, or outrightly

---

<sup>5</sup> See [Hong 2016a](#) for an in-depth exploration of this particular TV show.

challenge intended readings.<sup>6</sup> One of Hall's real examples of such resistive interpretation in relation to religion was Rastafarianism, a Jamaican religious movement that re-read Western Christianity, the religion of the dominant Europeans, and reshaped it in ways that advocate for the colonized and the oppressed (Chen 1996, pp. 492–93). Hall's idea of encoding/decoding has since become a prominent theoretical framework and served as a common reference point to debunk what has been caricatured—and exaggerated—as “the hypodermic needle model,” the idea that people in general are passive dupes who just get injected with ideologies by whatever cultural texts that are given to them.

While the idea of audiences as more than passive consumers is celebrated as a major contribution of cultural studies, it actually has an older lineage. As a pioneer of what is called “uses and gratification theory,” Herzog (1941) emphasized the audiences' (listeners of radio broadcast programs in her case) active role in choosing to consume—or not consume—particular texts as well as what they do with them. For Herzog, the fact that audiences discern and use the emotional satisfaction as well as practical help from popular cultural texts to their own benefit points to their active involvement in the process of mass communication. Unlike Hall's and cultural studies' approach, Herzog's perspective on how cultural texts are actually consumed shows that one need not necessarily recognize ideological struggles when looking for the audiences' agency. From a uses-and-gratifications perspective, one does not need to have sophisticated interpretive strategies and discern ideological aspects in popular culture in order to avoid being passive consumers. Instead, even the very pleasure of enjoying cultural products can indicate people's agency.<sup>7</sup> Theories put forth by pioneering scholars such as Hall and Herzog have developed over the years, and it has now become a major trend in cultural studies to emphasize what the audiences can do with given cultural texts as indications of their agency (Fiske 1987; Jenkins 1992).

Religion being an integral part of culture, people's arbitrary interpretation and/or creative appropriation of religious texts can also be seen from these cultural studies perspectives as indications of empowerment. I explore what Protestant critical insider movements in South Korea can bring to the discussion. What might these particular social actors have to say about cultural resistance and textual reading? More specifically, the (Protestant) Bible being the central source for religious thought and practice of both the critical insiders and the dominant Korean Protestant institutions, how do these loyal religious protesters relate reading and interpreting the Christian scripture to resistance?

In what follows, I engage these questions by exploring Korean Protestant critical insiders' view of reading the Bible and religiously loyal resistance. Essentially, what I argue is that, in the particular context of Korean Protestantism, their view of religious resistance and textual reading brings a corrective to the views of unintended reading and uses-and-gratification/pleasure as agency. Quite to the contrary, it is the dominant institutions keeping the laity from discovering “intended” meanings of the Protestant canon and even encouraging Bible-reading for reader-gratification that sap the knowledge and insight crucial for resistance from a genuinely Protestant worldview. And, in light of all this, the critical insider movements' attempts to equip the laity with interpretive capabilities also become a form of resistance: what I call *exegetical* resistance.

## 5. Clarification of Concepts: Exegesis vs. Eisegesis

In biblical studies, the term reserved for the act of discovering biblical authors' communicative intent is *exegesis* (Snodgrass 2005, p. 203), the opposite of which—importing meaning unrelated to the text—is *eisegesis* (p. 203). It is also to be noted that eisegesis is generally a derogatory term in the theological community (Grenz et al. 1999, p. 49). What is important to recognize, then, is that even though actual conclusions of proper exegesis regarding specific biblical passages have always

<sup>6</sup> Hall categorizes different levels of resistive reading into dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional codes of reading (Hall 1980).

<sup>7</sup> It must be noted, however, that Herzog herself was often highly cynical about the audiences she studied. For more information on later scholars who took the more celebratory approach to uses-and-gratification theory, especially in the global media context, see Mirrlees 2013, p. 230.

been debated, the method of exegesis has still been the norm while eisegesis has been taken as a fallacy. In other words, what the biblical authors' intended meanings were have been the points of debate, not whether the endeavor of discovering such intended meanings is the legitimate method in biblical studies.

Notably, the terms exegesis and eisegesis have been borrowed in media/cultural studies. In the context of discussing how Hollywood films enable global audiences to go beyond intended readings and inject their own meanings to the text. Olson (2004) specifically employs the terms and flips them around to argue the positive role of eisegesis (pp. 122–23). Olson's attempt at switching the status of exegesis and eisegesis is in line with cultural studies' celebration of reading cultural texts against the grain as audience agency. Indeed, in Hall (1980), "dominant" reading, which is equivalent to intended reading, is the opposite of "oppositional" reading.

John Storey, however, raises an astute question in relation to the general trend in cultural studies regarding reading cultural texts and resistance: "what happens to the model when the encoded message is 'radical' or 'progressive'?" (Storey 2010, p. 41). Indeed, I argue that, at least from the South Korean Protestant critical insiders' perspective, what Hall and others might call "dominant" reading is precisely the interpretive imperative for resistance when it comes to reading their sacred text.

## 6. Evidence of the Argument: Examples of Rescuing the Text as Critical Insiders' Resistance

Upon looking into the materials listed in the Objects of Analysis section above, it becomes clear that one of the core tasks of critical insider activities in Korea is critically examining popular ways in which the biblical text is interpreted and preached. This often takes the form of exploring certain biblical passages with the agenda of critiquing/debunking what is commonly taught out of those passages in Korean churches. This is especially true of educational organizations such as Holy Wave Academy or Chunggeoram ARMC that offer courses on proper interpretations of various books in the Bible. In the case of Nehemiah Institute for Christian Studies, another educational organization, it can be said that one of the core purposes of the institute's alternative seminary courses for the laity is providing skills for proper exegesis. The TV show *CBS Christian Now* was where these and other movements were introduced to a wider viewership via broadcast television. In addition to content provided through such organized movements, some critical insiders also publish individual works, such as Hyung Kook Kim's *Kyohoe anŭi kŏchitmal (Lies in the Church)* (Kim 2013), which focuses on debunking commonly misunderstood/misinterpreted and abused biblical teachings. Another TV show by CBS, *Nancy Lang's Theology Punch*, was aimed at inviting theologians to discuss and debate about a variety of teachings in the church that can be misunderstood, misleading, one-sided, or outright manipulative.

Critical insider resistance via recovering intended meanings of the Bible—what I call "rescuing the text"—can be roughly divided into two categories, both of which revolve around the idea of not reading into the text—eisegesis—but recovering authorial intentions—exegesis. The first is more pertinent to bringing to light the textual abuses of dominant Protestant institutions and authorities, while the second is a response to popular ways in which the Protestant canon is used or appropriated by the laity for their gratification. There are, indeed, overlaps between the two as they are often correlated (e.g., where do popular readings come from? How are dominant teachings perpetuated? etc.). Nevertheless, the two categories are helpful in highlighting different aspects of rescuing the biblical text and promoting proper exegesis.

The examples below represent these aspects of critical insider movements. While there can be many more examples, excluded here are mostly forms of either delivering similar messages via different venues (e.g., appearing both on a TV show and writing an article on a website) or using similar venues with different contents (e.g., a critical insider theologian writing several books to debunk inappropriate interpretations of several biblical passages respectively).



### 6.1. Rescuing the Text from the Authorities

A major approach that critical insiders take with the biblical text is unmistakably debunking unwarranted ways of how dominant Protestant institutions use biblical passages to justify and perpetuate their power at the expense of proper exegesis. One of the best sample passages is Romans 13:1,<sup>8</sup> which is the verse that is used regularly as a proof text for justifying conservative Protestant institutions supporting certain political authorities or parties. NewsNJoy, the most representative critical insider online newspaper, has devoted several articles for critiquing how Protestant churches in Korea use the verse to preach that believers ought not to protest the governmental authorities but obey them as appointed rulers of God. Organizations like Holy Wave Academy held a lecture on the history of the verse's use. *CBS Christian Now*, a TV talk show devoted to the cause of critical insider movements, also had several episodes in which the panels argued about problematic usages of the passage in the context of discussing Korean Protestant church's popular sermons of obedience to the government at the expense of social justice. Likewise, *Nancy Lang's Theology Punch* had an episode that deconstructed the notion of "authorities granted by God" in which Romans 13:1 was also discussed. Yeon Kyung Kwon, a theologian who teaches at Nehemiah Institute for Christian Studies and also appeared in *Theology Punch* regularly, recently published a book that focuses on properly explicating Romans 13 (Kwon 2017).

Common counter arguments in all of these efforts against Korean Protestant churches' use of the passage are actually very simple and are what anyone who reads the biblical text holistically in context can discover. For example, even a cursory reading of the entire chapter of Romans 13 reveals that (a) the author (Paul) is talking about governmental systems that reward good and punish evil, and that (b) his main point in context is that Christians ought to pay tax just like everyone else. The fact that there are so many other passages in the Bible—especially the prophetic writings—that strongly condemn and protest against authoritative institutions, political and/or religious, that ignore justice and side with the rich and the powerful is also noted. Why are those passages against corrupt political powers not evoked even nearly as often as Romans 13:1—interpreted out of context—when the church talks about faith and politics? From the critical insiders' perspective, the fundamental problem of dominant Protestant institutions and their adherents in Korea is *not* that they lack the creativity to use the text in unintended ways. Quite to the contrary, it is failing to grasp the intended meanings, the authorial intentions of the religious text that is called the Bible.<sup>9</sup>

There are a number of similar examples, such as (mis)interpreting passages on gender roles, theodicy, or the antichrist, all of which have been dealt with by many of the critical insider movements. When I conducted interviews during the summer of 2015 with some of the leading figures of these movements, most of the informants—especially the theologians—highlighted such interpretive issues. Instead of elaborating upon problematic readings of specific texts as they did in the TV shows or other mediated venues, they stated more about the problematic modes of reading the Bible during the interviews.

"Protestant Christianity is all about (properly interpreting) scripture, but they (Korean Protestant churches) are not really interested in it. Rather, they only want to use it to their advantage." (Interviewed on 27 July 2015)

"They seem to think that they already have all the answers, and that all they need to do is finding proof texts." (Interviewed on 16 July 2015)

<sup>8</sup> "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (NIV).

<sup>9</sup> Another problem that they point out is the inconsistency of the Protestant institutions appealing to the verse only when the conservative party is ruling; when it is a liberal party, the churches contradict what they preach by "protesting" the government. Since an important part of Romans 13 is the argument that Christians are not exempt from the duty to pay tax as citizens, critical insiders also ask why affluent pastors—mostly in megachurches—refuse to pay tax.

The second informant was arguing that, instead of discovering the intended meanings of the biblical text, church authorities already have what they want to say and that what they desire to do with the Bible is simply finding passages that look most suitable for their pre-determined arguments. The first comment above, on the other hand, is a most telling example of critiquing the uses-and-gratification approach to the Bible on the part of the readers. It also points out that the dominant Protestant institutions are the ones doing “textual poaching,” to borrow Jenkins’ term (Jenkins 1992), to perpetuate institutional status. In his influential book *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins 1992), Jenkins saw popular culture fans’ various creative uses of film and television texts in ways that are out of contexts of the movies and the TV shows as indications of their active and resistive agency. According to the critical insiders of South Korean Protestantism, however, things are the opposite in their context. Instead of turning the signs upside down, recognizing and challenging the deviations from authorial intentions of the biblical text is the way forward for their religiously motivated resistance.

## 6.2. Rescuing the Text from the Popular

Let the readers be reminded that textual manipulations at the institutional and the popular level are not mutually exclusive. Far from arguing that they are, what I show in this section is how critical insiders’ perspectives on the Bible and popular Protestant beliefs in Korea can inform, and challenge, the idea of seeing a cultural text’s readers’ uses-and-gratification and pleasure as audience agency. The section above was more about how the institutional authorities appropriate the biblical text, from critical insiders’ perspectives, to perpetuate their authorities. This section is more about how “popular” readings of the Bible among the laity may not be indications of resistance but rather co-optation.

While there is much critical insider content on the topic of popular readings of the Bible, one episode of *Nancy Lang’s Theology Punch* really spells out what they have to say about textual reading and interpretation at the popular level. The title of this particular episode is “What is wrong with reading the Bible for QT?” QT is an acronym for Quiet Time and is a widely used term in Korea that basically means devotional reading of the Bible. The Protestant ideal of every single believer having the right—and responsibility—to read and interpret scripture is not what is challenged by the critical insider theologians in this episode. What that Protestant ideal does *not* entail for the theologians in this episode, however, is that any—creative or otherwise—reading goes as long as the reader feels empowered. Quite to the contrary, the critique is that arbitrary interpretations give the illusion of empowerment, while the technical act of exegesis—exploring the biblical authors’ intended meanings—is delegated to the authorities who do not actually perform appropriate exegesis but instead take advantage of the perception that serious biblical exegesis is their privilege. As a response, this episode of *Theology Punch* along with other critical insider programs try to equip the laity by providing them with commonsensical skills for adequately grasping authorial intentions of the biblical books without overly relying on the pastoral authorities. Various sample passages are discussed in the episode to give examples of arbitrary and appropriate biblical interpretation.

This aspect of critical insiders’ view on the relation between textual reading of the Bible and resistance can conflict with how some media/cultural studies scholars might see the same phenomenon with a more positive perspective (i.e., as something that indicates the readers’ agency) in light of the uses-and-gratification approach, or some variations of it. It should be remembered that, for critical insiders of Protestantism, their kind of resistance is not against the Protestant religion altogether. It is not anti-Protestantism that they pursue; it is rather Protestant Christianity that is authentic/real/appropriate (one can come up with numerous terms here) that they are after. From such a religiously loyal perspective, reading into the text (eisegesis) that satisfies the reader is not an act of empowering the reader of the Bible. A popular phrase in Korean churches that the QT episode of *Theology Punch* challenged was “see what the word of God is saying *to you*.” What the theologians in this episode and other similar critical insider programs are saying is “first and foremost, it is

NOT about you.”<sup>10</sup> Popular readings of the Bible often encourage the readers—and thus bring emotional gratification—in ways not intended by the biblical authors, and that often inevitably involves false hopes and promises. In that sense, far from empowering the readers, it might be perceivable that it can actually become something like an opiate of the people.

Some of the episodes of *CBS Christian Now* and *Nancy Lang’s Theology Punch*, as well as content provided by critical insider websites and lecture events, also pinpoint specific beliefs resulting from popular readings. Such readings, they argue, bring gratification to many Protestants in Korea, and deconstructing their hopes deriving from such popular readings can be quite unpleasant to those who think they have benefited from such readings. One example is the belief in there being a “soul mate” for every single believer who did not receive from God “the gift of celibacy” (1 Corinthians 7). Based upon several passages in the Christian Bible that depict male characters meeting female partners (e.g., Genesis 2:20–25, Genesis 24, or the book of Ruth), this popular belief suggests that, except for those whom God destined to live—and gave the ability to cope with—a celibate life, God has already prepared a soul mate to all sincere Christians. Marriage is guaranteed for every single desiring believer. This belief is quite pertinent to contemporary South Korean Protestant churches in which females significantly outnumber males, yet it is taught that Protestants should marry fellow Protestants. *Theology Punch* actually had a separate episode to address this belief. The episode’s title was “did God prepare a soul mate for me?” to which the theologians basically answered “we cannot know that, and that is not what those passages are there for.” They also elaborated upon how such popular beliefs can be taken advantage of by the church in dangerous ways: for example, demanding that believers should not seek “worldly” means, such as blind dates, but spend their time at church so that they can see how God brings their soul mates to them.

Critical insider content also addresses many other issues on popular readings of the biblical text. A common thread in those various critiques, however, as can be found in the one on soul mates, is that the problematic readings are unwarranted interpretations from an exegetical (as opposed to eisegetical) standpoint, yet they bring immediate gratification to the readers. Several articles in *NewsNJoy* as well as two episodes of *Christian Now* specifically targeted popular books sold in millions at Christian bookstores, ones that encourage readers to read meanings into the biblical texts to find promises desired by themselves. Numerous books on “answered prayers” with such a popular approach encourage the readers to also seek what the authors of those books have experienced. According to critical insiders’ assessment, one of the major problems with such books, supported by popular readings of the Christian Bible, is that their promises—disguised as biblical teachings but theologically unfounded—will prove to be wrong/inapplicable/unrealized sooner or later to many of the readers. To speak in religious terms, being confident about what God does not even promise, by means of reading into God’s word, speaks nothing positively about the laity’s agency. Instead, the concern is that such popularized unintended readings of the Bible, which can bring emotional satisfaction to the audience, will actually be detrimental to the agency of lay Protestants who have the right and responsibility to read and interpret authorial intentions/intended meanings of the biblical text made available to them. Critical insiders’ concern is that, when such desired readings are welcome, encouraged, and facilitated by the dominant institutions, what may appear to be empowerment will actually become subservience.

Speaking of critical insiders’ resistance against (propagation and encouragement of) unintended readings of the biblical text and unwarranted promises that bring gratification to the audience, a mention must be made on a too well-known topic in contemporary Protestant Christianity that is all-inclusive of the two categories discussed so far.

---

<sup>10</sup> Keun Ju Kim, a full-time Old Testament faculty member at Nehemiah Institute for Christian Studies, recently published a book on this topic (Kim 2017), the title of which can be translated as “Bible Reading that Looks Beyond One’s Self.”



### 6.3. Prosperity Gospel: The Default Mode of Reading into the Text

During my interviews, it was almost always presupposed—given as a fact that is too obvious—in the conversations that Korean Protestantism pretty much equates to what is known as “prosperity gospel.”

“What we hear from the pulpit is, by default, prosperity gospel.” (Interviewed on 20 July 2015)

“It’s prosperity theology, which, after all, has a lot to do with the influence of Yoido.”<sup>11</sup> (Interviewed on 9 July 2015)

For those who are familiar with criticism of Korean Protestantism, the critique of how prosperity gospel can be detrimental to the laity is perhaps all too common.<sup>12</sup> The prosperity gospel here simply refers to the common understanding of the term as the belief in the positive correlation between one’s financial/social success and God’s blessing/approval.<sup>13</sup> It is hard to trace its singular origin in Korea; as mentioned by the second interviewee cited above, it is seen, on the one hand, as something that was brought from America by a popular charismatic preacher and intensified in the Korean soil; on the other hand, other scholars also find its origin in the syncretization of Christianity and popular folk beliefs in Korea (e.g., [Chang 2007](#)). Regardless of its origin, prosperity gospel is, as a theologian stated in an interview (Interviewed on 27 July 2015), what satisfies both the institutions’ desire for their adherents’ loyalty and the laity’s pleasure of hearing what they desire.

What makes the critique of prosperity gospel important for this essay is its relevance to the problem of biblical exegesis and agency from Protestant critical insiders’ perspectives. So many lectures, episodes, and other content provided by them address it as central to problematic Korean Protestant beliefs. Prosperity gospel is seen as the epitome of both how the institutions secure the congregations’ loyalty and how the laity finds their desired gratification by an unwarranted reading of, or reading into, the biblical text.

From a non-religious outsider perspective, perhaps a theological critique of prosperity gospel is problematic. After all, what is wrong with people finding gratification and expectation for material success and well being? Should they rather be always depressed by the harsh realities? Even when they do not receive what they believe to be promised, would not the message of divinely sanctioned financial success in the future continue to give them hope and a sense of empowerment? Is it not better than the “other-worldly” Christian religion, the one Marx so harshly criticized, that discouraged its believers from engaging with this world and encouraged them to keep their eyes only on heaven? Perhaps so, at least at the individual level, from an outsider perspective. From the (critical) insider view, however, such a gratifying interpretation of the religious text, one that is not in accordance with the authorial intentions, is actually what saps the agency of the laity and secures their institutional loyalty instead. Quite to the contrary of what Marx worried about, it is prosperity gospel’s focus on “worldly” matters—albeit in a different sense—that distracts the laity as potential social agents from appropriate religious knowledge and values that ought to be concerned with social justice and critical examination of unchecked religious authority and institutional domination. It is not my purpose here to weigh on the possible outsider-insider debate. Rather, my purpose has been to show that the critical “insider” perspective on religion, resistance, and textual interpretation can be quite different from conventional views in cultural studies.

<sup>11</sup> This is a reference to the charismatic Yoido Full Gospel Church, which has been known as the world’s largest Protestant church and also seen by many critics as the key propagator of prosperity gospel in Korea.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, [Kim 2011](#), pp. 126–30, p. 171 or [Kim 2012](#), pp. 61–106.

<sup>13</sup> For a succinct history and development of prosperity gospel/theology, see [Prothero 2007](#), p. 183.

## 7. A Caveat: Rescuing the Text without Guarantees

One more subject must be addressed for the discussion of intended readings of the Bible as resistance. My argument in this paper has been that, in the particular context of critical insiders in South Korean Protestantism, it is not unintended interpretation/appropriation of the religious text—the Christian Bible—that counts as what cultural studies advocates like to see: resistance and agency. Instead, to them, it is proper exegesis, discovering authorial intentions and intended meanings of the sacred text that enables religious resistance. But one might be troubled at this point. If discovering intended meanings is the key here, that entails that not all interpretations are equally legitimate. How can one (or who can) decide which interpretation is right and which is wrong? Is, for instance, Stuart Hall's example of Rastafarianism a faithful reading, or is it closer to what critical insiders are critiquing?

Three responses can be given to this legitimate and important question. First, this paper is not about advocating particular schools of theological interpretation over others. Indeed, theological literature abounds in the disciplines' methodologies as well as the topic of bibliology, not to mention different schools of interpretation critiquing each other. Instead, this paper's aim is more modest in that it simply shows how the act of exegesis—contrary to a key theoretical view in cultural studies—can be seen as cultural resistance. The complication brought by the resultant multiplicity of exegetical conclusions in Protestantism is another matter, which has been dealt with by theologians from various perspectives (e.g., [Vanhoozer 2016](#)).

Second, the fact that there is a multiplicity of *competing* exegeses shows that such multiplicity is not an endorsement of relativism but rather an indication of Protestant theological communities' efforts for appropriate interpretations while at the same time betraying its difficulties. On the flipside, it is also a refutation of the notion that there are always obvious meanings that can be easily discovered as long as the readers' religious commitments are secured. Far from insisting upon simple literal interpretations of the Christian canon all the time, what the interpretive imperative that critical insiders' resistance entails is *literary* readings,<sup>14</sup> which includes the process of judging whether certain statements are meant to be taken literally or not. It is rather the suppression of literary interpretation that my informants challenged. There are meanings to be discovered, yet the discovery is not guaranteed. That is why it is dangerous for interpretation to be dictated by church authorities. To put a check on such interpretive dictatorship, Protestants are to examine and take part in the uneasy process of literary engagement. Protestantism's interpretive imperative on its sacred text just might be the most demanding enjoinder for its lay followers!

Third, and in a similar vein, one must not confuse the idea of *contextualization* with the notion of any-reading-goes. Many non-Western theologies that are resistive to Western colonialism are *not* attempts at ascribing unintended meanings into the text. Rather, they aspire to ask legitimate questions of the text, questions that the oppressors/rulers do not wish to address, and discover (divinely) intended answers to those questions.<sup>15</sup> For instance, they may ask “what did biblical authors intend to say about oppressive economic structures such as ones we see in capitalism?” or “what does the Bible say about ancestors?”<sup>16</sup> Far from reading into the text with wishful thinking, such contextualized theologies are more akin to the critical insider movements in South Korea in that they seek to resist with religious aspirations coupled with uninhibited exegesis.

## 8. Conclusions

“It seems like they (Korean Protestants) lost their ability to simply read the bible as a written document.” (Interviewed on 29 July 2015)

<sup>14</sup> For an argument for literary, as opposed to literal, reading, see [Vanhoozer 2013](#).

<sup>15</sup> For more insight on non-Western theologies, see [Tennent 2007](#).

<sup>16</sup> For an example of a non-Western theological engagement with this question, see [Hong 2017](#).

In this paper, I argued that cultural studies' traditional approach of seeing unintended and creative readings of cultural texts as resistance and agency may need reconsideration in certain religious contexts. Unlike circumstances in which the oppressed protests against the dominant's religious tradition, Protestants protesting against dominant and popular institutionalized Protestantism renders a situation in which manipulative/creative/unintended readings of the Christian Bible becomes the very means through which the dominant actually perpetuate their status. In such contexts, it is the act of rescuing the text—endeavoring to discover authorial intentions—and asking “is there a meaning in this text” (Vanhoozer 1998) that opens the door for agency and becomes the mode of resistance.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## References

- Buswell, Robert E., and Timothy S. Lee, eds. 2006. *Christianity in Korea*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. ISBN-13: 978-0-8248-2912-4.
- Chang, Nam Hyuk. 2007. *Kyohoesoküi Shamanism (Shamanism in the Church)*. Paju: Chipmundang. ISBN 89-303-0942-9.
- Chen, Kuan Hsing. 1996. The formation of a diasporic intellectual: An interview with Stuart Hall by Kuan-Hsing Chen. In *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. Edited by David Morley and Kuan Hsing Chen. New York: Routledge, pp. 486–505. ISBN 0-415-08804-6.
- Choi, Hyaeweol. 2009. *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea: New Women, Old Ways*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. ISBN 978-0-520-09869-5.
- Chong, Chae Yong. 2012. *Han'guk kyohoe üi chongkyo sahoehakchöik ihae (Understanding the Korean Church through the Sociology of Religion)*. Seoul: Yöllin ch'ulp'ansa. ISBN 978-89-87548-98-2.
- Chong, Chae Yong. 2015. *Kyohoe annakanün kürisütöin: Kanaan söngtorül öttöke\* ihaehal kötinka (Churchless Christians: How to Understand Canaanite Believers)*. Seoul: InterVarsity Press. ISBN 978-89-328-1422-3.
- Fiske, John. 1987. *Television Culture*. New York: Routledge. ISBN 0-415-03934-7.
- Grenz, Stanley J., David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling. 1999. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. ISBN 0-8308-1448-3.
- Hall, Stuart. 1980. Encoding/decoding. In *Culture, Media, Language*. Edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis. London: Hutchinson, pp. 128–38. ISBN 0-415-07906-3.
- Herzog, Herta. 1941. On borrowed experience: An analysis of listening to daytime sketches. *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 11: 65–95. [CrossRef]
- Hong, Seung Min. 2016a. Punching Korean Protestantism: Challenging from within through a televised theological roundtable. *Journal of Korean Religions* 7: 99–121. [CrossRef]
- Hong, Seung Min. 2016b. Uncomfortable proximity: Perception of Christianity as a cultural villain in South Korea. *International Journal of Communication* 10: 4532–4549.
- Hong, Seung Min. 2017. Toward Korean Contextualization: An Evangelical Perspective. *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 41: 18–28. [CrossRef]
- Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge. ISBN 0-415-90571-0.
- Jung, Jin Heon. 2015. *Migration and Religion in East Asia: North Korean Migrants' Evangelical Encounters*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-1-349-56673-0.
- Kim, Sung Gun. 2011. *Han'guk kyohoe üi hyönsil kwa chaengjöim (Realities and Issues of the Korean Protestant Church)*. Yongin: Preaching Academy. ISBN 978-89-6640-000-3.
- Kim, Jin Ho. 2012. *Simin K kyohoerül nakata (Citizen K Goes to—Or leaves—Church)*. Seoul: Hyönamsa. ISBN 978-89-323-1617-8.
- Kim, Hyung Kook. 2013. *Kyohoe anüi köchitmal (Lies in the Church)*. Seoul: Poiema. ISBN 978-89-977-6041-1.
- Kim, Nami. 2016. *The Gendered Politics of the Korean Protestant Right: Hegemonic Masculinity*. Cham: Springer. ISBN 978-3-319-39977-5.
- Kim, Keun Ju. 2017. *Narül nömöösönün söngkyöng ilki (Bible Reading That Looks beyond One's Self)*. Seoul: Scripture Union Korea. ISBN 978-89-325-2122-0.
- Kwon, Yeon Kyung. 2017. *Romasö sipsamchang tasi ilki (Understanding Romans 13)*. Seoul: NewsNJoy. ISBN 978-89-909-2839-9.
- Lee, Timothy. 2010. *Born Again: Evangelicalism in Korea*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. ISBN 978-0-8248-3375-6.

- Lee, Won Kyu. 2010. *Chongkyosahoehakchöök kwanchömesö pon hankukkyohoeüi wikiwa hüimang (Crisis and Hope of the Korean Church: From the Perspective of Sociology of Religion)*. Seoul: The KMC Press. ISBN 978-89-8430-454-3.
- Mirrlees, Tanner. 2013. *Global Entertainment Media: Between Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Globalization*. New York: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-51982-3.
- Olson, Scott Robert. 2004. Hollywood planet: Global media and the competitive advantage of narrative transparency. In *The Television Studies Reader*. Edited by Robert Clyde Allen and Annette Hill. New York: Routledge, pp. 111–29. ISBN 0-415-28324-8.
- Park, Jin Kyu. 2005. “Are you Christian? I’m the other”: The demarcation of Christianity and the other in popular Korean television. *Studies in World Christianity* 11: 106–24. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Prothero, Stephen. 2007. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn’t*. New York: HarperCollins. ISBN 978-0-06-085952-7.
- Snodgrass, Klyne. 2005. Exegesis. In *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. Edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, pp. 203–6. ISBN 978-0-8010-2694-2.
- Storey, John. 2010. *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*, 3rd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. ISBN 978-0-7486-4038-6.
- Tennent, Timothy C. 2007. *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. ISBN 13:978-0-310-27511-4.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J. 1998. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan. ISBN 0-310-21156-5.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J. 2013. Augustinian inerrancy: Literary meaning, literal truth, and literate interpretation in the economy of biblical discourse. In *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*. Edited by James Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, pp. 199–235. ISBN 978-0-310-33136-0.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J. 2016. *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press. ISBN 978-1-5874-3393-1.



© 2018 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).