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FACING THE FUTURE BY FACING THE PAST

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The Asian Missions Movement faces a mind-boggling array of opportunities, needs, and challenges for the foreseeable future. In terms of religious affiliation, the vast respective majorities of the world's two most populated countries, China and India, have religious convictions other than following Jesus Christ. Three-fourths of the world's unreached peoples (5,625 out of 7,417) are in Asia (Joshua Project 2022a; 2022b). The two countries in the world that have by far the highest number of Muslims, Indonesia and Pakistan, are also in Asia—as are several other countries with major Islamic populations. A few Asian countries have demographically sizable Christian populations, but the norm is that the Christian presence is a minority, and sometimes even miniscule.

An itemized list of other needs and challenges for Asian missions is practically endless: post-pandemic realities; economic disparities between the extravagantly wealthy and those living in abject poverty; human trafficking; migrations and diasporas; political suppression; massive urbanization; traumatized relations between numerous peoples and countries; Christianity's foreignness; geopolitical tensions; ecological alarms and more. Asian Christian approaches to mission and ministry are also manifold: partnerships, megachurches, multiple traditions, missionary care, creative access initiatives, various funding systems and others. Whatever the future of Asian Missions holds, that future will be complex and multifaceted.

This article, while keeping in view the kaleidoscopic set of challenges projected for Christian missions in Asia, offers to Asian mission participants the challenge of re-examining various aspects of the past. Stated differently, this article's seemingly paradoxical focus is to face the future by facing the past. One reason for this focus is to utilize the Hebrew notion of "future events ... coming after us" rather than being "thought

to lie before us" (emphases mine; Boman 1960, 130). That is, rather than trying somehow to stand outside of history—past, present, and future—and scientifically analyze what lies ahead, adopting a more dynamic Hebrew view of historical continuity helps in looking at what has happened in the past, including God's earlier acts of creation and redemption, and expecting the eschatological goal that will come later (Boman 1960, 170). A second reason for facing the past

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is the lack of a consensus Christian understanding of God's relationship with Asian history, whether as a whole or in its component parts. Hence to face future challenges responsibly requires re-examining historical understandings in order to understand adequately what the upcoming challenges—those emerging from what has already occurred—actually are.

The article takes a macro to micro approach in examining God's relationship with Asian history. Surveying the whole of Asian history shifts to focusing on particular components. Accordingly, the connection with what follows—future challenges for Asian missions—comes into somewhat clearer focus.

GOD AND "ASIA"

God is the world's Sovereign Creator and Redeemer. However, God did not create "Asia" per se: initially that continental label—along with "Europe" and "Libya" (later "Africa")—was an ancient Greek construct, likely nautical nomenclature used when sailing the Aegean Sea in reference to the western edge of the Persian Empire (Bugge 2000, 4; West 2014). While "Asia" is not mentioned as such in the Old Testament, New Testament references to "Asia" (e.g., Acts 2:9, Revelation 1:4) refer to what by then was the Roman province of Asia, essentially the western one-fourth of modern day Turkey (BibleVerseStudy.com 2022). Among people classified today as "Asians," the current "Pan-Asian" concept of "Asia" emerged much more recently, namely in the nineteenth century in India and especially in Japan, primarily for political purposes (Milner and Johnson 2002; Mitani 2006). Moreover, the multifaceted concept of "Asia" has by no means enjoyed a fixed consensus, especially among Asians themselves (Milner and Johnson 2002). Even with these several caveats, however, Christians can affirm with confidence that the region and nations that over recent generations has come to be called "Asia" was of course part of the world that God made and has continuously sustained, governed, and acted to redeem.

God the Sovereign Creator

"In the beginning, God created heaven and earth" (Genesis 1:1). On the fourth day of creation, God made the sun, moon, and stars as heavenly witnesses to divine majesty and governance (Genesis 1:14-19; Jennings 2015, 377). Ever since creation, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge" (Psalm 19:1-2). Furthermore, "God made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him" (Acts 17:26-27). Clearly the vast region of Asia and its many

nations have been among the universal recipients of divinely appointed heavenly witnesses (and the rest of "general revelation" through all of creation) and providential guidance.

What is particularly important for Christians—in this case especially Christians in Asia—is to integrate the just stated biblical teaching with a general understanding of Asian history acquired through upbringing, formal education, and (in today's digitally interconnected world) the internet. Without intentional integration, Christians can all too easily live and think in bifurcated historical worlds: one informed by biblical accounts and one acquired through other information sources. Asian Christians need to work intentionally to think through the connection between God's creation (and ensuing providence) and the historical periods, figures, and events learned apart from the Bible's explicit contents. One approach for how Christians can further integrate their Asian historical understandings is to note that the majority of events in the Bible actually took place in what today is generally understood to be West Asia, including the Middle East (Asia Society 2022). Even though the relatively small area that the Bible (i.e., the New Testament) calls "Asia" was miniscule compared to the extensive continent of Asia as understood today, the Bible's primary stage of events—while also including references to northeast Africa and to south-central Europe—was in fact what is understood today as West Asia. Coupling the Bible's primary historical stage with the biblical-theological understanding, sketched earlier, of God having "made [and providentially guided] from one man every nation of mankind" (emphasis mine) should aid Christians in Cambodia, Pakistan, Jordan, Mongolia, and elsewhere in today's "Asia" in believing the close relationship between God the Sovereign Creator and the entirety of Asia and its peoples.

God the Redeemer

It was in today's West Asia that God the Sovereign Creator and Redeemer carried out almost all of his biblically-recorded acts of redemption. Apart from Jacob's descendants spending 400 years in Egypt, the West Asian theater for the Old Testament drama was true for the Patriarchs, Judges, Nation of Israel, Prophets, Exile in Assyria and Babylon, Israel's protection through Esther throughout the Persian Empire "from India [now Pakistan] to Cush [now northern Sudan]" (Esther 1:1, 8:9; Webb 2008, 853), and otherwise. West Asian contexts (along with settings in northeast Africa, eastern Mediterranean islands, and southern Europe) were also the case for God's redemptive acts recorded in the New Testament, most especially God's central act of redemption in Jesus Christ (including those "wise men from the east" in Matthew 2:1) and the ensuing growth of churches after Pentecost. Since God's "redemptive process does not end with Acts 28 or indeed with the apostolic age,"

and since “God has been in no hurry over the process of redemption” (Walls 2017, 64), Asian Christians can rest assured of God’s redemptive work throughout all generations of Asia’s complex and varied history.

One related, complex theological/missiological question concerns the godliness or ungodliness of “cultures” (in Asia)—particularly those lacking in gospel input. That question splinters off into numerous other topics, including God’s relationship with human cultures, who the creator is of human cultures (environment? divine? human? satanic?), and the various aspects of cultures. Rather than delve deeply here into this much explored arena of cultural studies, this article acknowledges the following realities:

- As noted earlier regarding what Paul preached to the Athenians, God has providentially governed all peoples and their cultures—including those throughout Asian history—in such ways “that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him” (Acts 17:27).
- All peoples and their cultures—including those throughout Asian history—have borne and reflected God’s image, albeit in varying degrees and marred by self-centered sin and rebellion against God.
- Satan and demons have worked to deceive and enslave all peoples and their cultures—including those throughout Asian history.
- In light of the first two assumptions and despite the third, all peoples and their cultures—including those throughout Asian history—have been capable of receiving God’s special revelation and good news about the entire world’s King and Savior, the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

Accordingly, then, just as the risen Jesus foretold would happen after Pentecost, God’s Spirit has been empowering Jesus’s followers to be his witnesses to peoples “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8)—including many peoples and their cultures spread throughout Asian history. From the earliest generations in Christian history God’s Spirit brought his witnesses eastward to peoples in India, Syria, Persia, Armenia, Central Asia—and soon China. Later Christians from Europe arrived in various parts of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Northeast Asia. Not long afterward, peoples throughout Asia were receiving Western and other Asian Christians that had traversed land and sea. All along—and often despite various types of political, economic, and social hardships, as well as religious, cross-cultural, and linguistic barriers—God the Redeemer was bringing the news of Jesus to Asian peoples and opening their hearts to trust and follow him.

The God of the Bible and the peoples of “Asia” have always been interacting. Moreover, without our “knowing whether we are living in the very last days or still in the days of the early church,” the “unfinished story” of redemption continues through the ongoing “history of every continent and vast numbers of

peoples” (Walls 2017, 64), including of course throughout the peoples and cultures of Asia.

GOD AND CHALLENGES AMONG ASIANS

Throughout the various strands of the Asian historical tapestry, any number of challenges have threatened to tear apart human and environmental life. Of special note are the shifting tectonic plates running all along Asia’s eastern coastlands and underneath many other large regions. These moving plates have made Asia, particularly Asia-Pacific areas, more prone to natural disasters than any other continent. The geological shifts have continually caused volcanoes, earthquakes, and tidal waves, often resulting in great devastations of human, environmental, and economic life. The 1556 Shaanxi Earthquake in Central China, 1976 Tangshan Earthquake in Northeastern China, and 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami are just a few of the more recent geologically-related disasters throughout the history of the Asian continent (Szczepanski 2019). It is also worth noting that the destruction from such catastrophes has become increasingly costly in recent times due to the escalation of massive urbanization in coastal cities (Vokaty 2014; Wood 2018).

Christians may not have adequate answers for why or how God allows such disasters, but we should not thereby totally separate “natural” geological realities from God’s providential governance over all aspects of His world. Redemptively, Christians have joined fellow human beings in both suffering and in bringing relief to those who have suffered from environmental disasters—and seemingly those service opportunities will always present themselves, especially in Asian regions.

Cross-Cultural Interactions

One major religious challenge across the generations has been how the peoples of Asia could hear, then actually believe, the news about an obscure religious figure who reportedly lived in a distant western land (at the continent’s extreme western edge). That “Jesus” undoubtedly has come across as a remote human being geographically, psychologically, historically, and in many other ways. Furthermore, apart from gradual and sporadic influx of Judeo-Christian influences, Gentile Asian peoples have inherited and carried their own religious sensibilities and traditions. Many of those “religions” have been indigenous traditions variously involving shamans, ancestors, reverence for and petitions to awesome parts of creation, a supreme deity, multiple deities, intricate cosmologies, or other aspects. In different parts of China, for example, Confucian or Taoist traditions have been prevalent. Many Asian peoples (including in China) have adopted at various times one or more of the several streams of Buddhism that spread out of northeast India. Across many generations, peoples of West, Central, South, and Southeast Asia experienced

significant growth of Islam. Whatever the resident religious sensibilities or traditions have been, the manifold entrances of Judeo-Christian influences have been cross-cultural.

Clearly the cross-cultural entrances of the news about an obscure, foreign, and reportedly dead-then-risen man-turned-savior named “Jesus” have presented all sorts of communication issues – for both the various witnesses and the various recipients. How, for example, were Chinese to understand Syrian missionary monks, or later Franciscans (of various European backgrounds), who had traversed the Silk Road? Still different Jesuits accompanied Portuguese sea voyagers to China and elsewhere, while yet more Franciscans came with the Spanish to the islands they claimed, and renamed, for their King Philip. Russian emissaries moved overland along China’s northern areas. Other Westerners – in particular Dutch, English, German, and French – also arrived in most parts of Asia. By the time U.S.-Americans started appearing in what Westerners strangely called “the nineteenth century,” any number of “modern” influences, such as those of engineering, industry, economics, and individualistic and Greco-Roman based philosophy, joined the Jesuits’ scientific teachings in the conglomerate packages that included varying forms of Christianity – and that Asian peoples had to disentangle and attempt to decipher.

Of course, for the Western witnesses (as with the earlier Syrians), their encounters with Asian languages, philosophies, customs, religious sensibilities, and myriad other differences made the cross-cultural challenges they faced ominous as well. Furthermore, Asian Christians have served as cross-cultural witnesses among other Asians, too, for example Chinese (and French) Christians serving Koreans in the late eighteenth century (Kim and Ko 2018).

Cross-cultural complications increased during the so-called “nineteenth century” as expanding Western powers increasingly encroached on Asians’ longstanding territories. In a manner correlative to the economically and military invading Europeans (and by then U.S.-Americans), Asian kingdoms and peoples coalesced into “nations” or “countries,” further setting the stage for numerous political and military confrontations. There had, of course, been negotiations and wars within and among Asian kingdoms and peoples across the many generations of Asian history. However, the modern expansion into Asia of Western nations-turned-empires brought increased levels of violence and destruction, not to mention the colonization of whole peoples across most of Asia.

Insofar as the good news of Jesus had become largely indistinguishable for many Asians from “Western Christianity” and Western nations’ oppressive political-military power, cross-cultural gospel communication became all the more complicated. Thankfully, God has always been present and at work

among all the world’s peoples, including before he brought human gospel emissaries. The Holy Spirit is the Master Translator, even when he has re-scrambled the gospel from non-Asian settings across significant barriers into various cultural contexts.

Conflicts

The mid-twentieth-century breakup of the Japanese and various European empires, and the corresponding independence of modern nations throughout much of Asia, was not accompanied by a cessation of painful and destructive conflicts. In Northeast Asia, Japan’s oppressive 1910-1945 colonization of Korea and 1930s military aggressions in China had caused too much trauma for those two relationships to heal after Japan’s 1945 defeat and imperial dismantling. In Southeast Asia, liberation from brief Japanese control, which had followed much longer Western imperial periods, exposed conflicting territorial claims between peoples (and their new political leaders) in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines – correlating with who had been influenced earlier by either Islam or Western Christianity. In South Asia, India’s and Pakistan’s 1947 independence led to ongoing conflicts between the two countries, including the eventual 1971 independence of East Pakistan (Bangladesh). Also, as of 1948 the new British dominion Ceylon eventually became the independent republic Sri Lanka in 1972, only to see festering Tamil-Sinhalese tensions erupt into the protracted 1983-2009 civil war. West Asia saw intensified conflicts emerge, perhaps most especially, out of the last vestige of European migration – the 1948 creation of the state of Israel – and the creation of the new modern state of Iraq (Walls 2023, Ch. 13).

The capitalist-communist US-USSR/China Cold War spawned new conflicts, particularly on the Korean Peninsula (and its division into North and South) and in Indochina. China’s disputed and resisted assertion of control over Tibet has been one of several recent examples of larger powers seeking to expand their economic, political, and military influence over smaller nations. As for Central Asia, the twentieth century saw incorporation of nations into either the Soviet Union or the People’s Republic of China, with Afghanistan remaining relatively independent until the 1978 Saur Revolution (Byrikhin 2021) and ensuing conflicts involving the USSR and then the USA.

All of these conflicts continue to challenge Asian Christian mission efforts. The conflicts also present opportunities for gospel reconciliation to occur despite deep historical cleavages, for example Korean-Japanese, “Manilan-Mindanaon,” Indian-Pakistani, Tamil-Sinhalese, and Jewish-Arab. As Jesus’s fellow followers, considering together the trauma inherited from the past can be daunting – but can also lead to the beauty of the gospel’s power to heal and reconcile.

GOD AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ASIA

Cross-cultural interactions and conflicts are just two of the many challenges among Asian peoples that God has providentially allowed, used, and worked through. Since God is the Redeemer, Christians can face the past and see how God has turned challenges into gospel opportunities, a few of which are sampled next.

Migrations and Diasporas

The Stalinist Soviet Union's en masse deportations of Koreans (who had migrated to eastern Russia) to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in the 1930s (World Directory of Minorities 2008) is only one example of how migrations, as well as diasporas, have offered both challenges and opportunities to Asian missions. One result of the injustice and cruelty of the Stalinist deportations in particular has been the development of international people—Korean-Uzbek, for example—who are specially equipped to serve multiple peoples in gospel ministry. For whatever reasons Asian peoples have migrated elsewhere, God's superintendence has included working in peoples both to "feel their way toward him and find him" (Acts 17:27) and to initiate missions efforts in all sorts of creative ways—in their new residences, back to where they were earlier, and otherwise.

Within continental Asia, various peoples have undergone migrations across the generations. One of the earliest involved nomadic Scythians moving in West Asia and into central Asia; the Apostle Paul's mention of Scythians (Colossians 3:11) points to their early proximity to Christian witness (along with being viewed as barbaric by Paul's Greco-Roman readers). The more recent mid-nineteenth-to-mid-twentieth-century migrations of "around 20 million people from China and 30 million Indians ... to the growing cities and plantations of southeast Asia" deeply affected demographic (and religious) landscapes throughout southeast Asia countries—particularly after several countries' independence led to many immigrants ceasing their mainly circular migratory movements and choosing citizenship in their new homelands (Amrith 2014). Imperial Japan's forced emigration of thousands of Korean laborers to Japan, millions of Chinese migrating to Manchuria from the 1890s to the 1930s, and the post-1947-independence transfers of millions of Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India and millions of Muslims from India to Pakistan are among the most significant backdrops against which the ensuing accelerated migrations of Asian peoples to other Asian countries (including Brunei, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan) offering economic advancement have taken place (Castles and Miller 2009).

The large-scale migrations of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) over recent years are well documented. Approximately 84% of the currently

estimated 1.77 million OFWs, 60% of whom are women, are scattered throughout Asia—including in oil-rich and low Christian-populated countries such as Saudi Arabia (Mapa 2022). The missions-strategic roles of OFWs have long been recognized (Tira 2004). So have mission obligations toward the many trafficked Asians enslaved in poverty-stricken Asian cities (Lausanne Movement n.d.).

One recent focal point for many mission leaders is that of "movements." Significant movements ("Church Planting Movements," "Disciple Making Movements," "Kingdom Movements") to Christ have been reported in parts of Asia over the past few generations (Garrison 2004, 35-83). Have such movements taken place earlier in Asian history?

The missions opportunities beyond Asia involving international Asian diasporas have been manifold. In modern times (beginning in the sixteenth century), several Asian diasporas resulted from Dutch, then British, forcibly transferring laborers to trading-then-colonial centers in Africa and the Americas (Sell 2017; South African History Online n.d.). As just one example among many results, resentment toward South Asians for their advantageous positions granted by British authorities has kept East Africa's burgeoning Christian communities from reaching out to resident Indians and Pakistanis—until recently with the advent of such cross-cultural ministries as New City Fellowship in Nairobi (New City Fellowship - Nairobi 2021). Moreover, along with the development over the past several generations of various Asian diasporas, many of them worldwide, have come international, diaspora-focused Asian church and mission networks, perhaps most substantially Korean and (especially for the foreseeable future) Chinese (Gospel Operation International 2022; Kim 2019). Challenges and hardships, as well as opportunities and manifold ministries, will undoubtedly continue to accompany ongoing Asian migrations and diasporas (George, ed. 2021-2022).

Movements

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One recent issue of the missiological journal *Mission Frontiers* carries the theme, "Movements: God's Way of Reaching Entire Peoples" (*Mission Frontiers* 2020). The issue's editorial claims, "Movements to Christ have always been the way that God has reached entire peoples.... They have been a continual reality for two millennia" (Wood 2020). Even so, none of that issue's three articles that include general historical summaries of movements make a single mention of an Asian movement (Addison 2020; Higgins 2020; Lewis 2020). Perhaps our question about earlier Asian movements should simply subside and be content with the suggestion, "movements have become much more frequent in our day" (Wood 2020).

However, more specific studies suggest that earlier Asian movements to Christ—even if few in number—have in fact occurred. Examples include Hakka and Miao minorities in South China between 1845 and 1910 (Hibbert 2012); an "Insider Movement" to Christ in China in the wake of Alopen and other Syrian missionaries arriving in the seventh century (Cashin 2016); the conversion of over 300,000 Japanese by the early 1600s in Japan's so-called "Christian Century" (Renaissance Japan n.d.). The scarcity of reported earlier movements in Asia should give pause before quickly concluding that somehow Asian movements to Christ have accelerated in recent years, although neither should reports of many such recent movements be summarily dismissed.

GOD'S MISSION CONTINUES

As God has worked throughout Asian history, so can he be expected to continue to work among Asian peoples. This article's quick summary has touched on just some of the ways God's Asian mission has been evident. No mention has been made of the vast number of technological advances in Asia—for example, China's "Four Great Inventions" of the compass, gunpowder, papermaking, and printing; automated water clock, movable metal printing type, and Hangul in Korea; terraced rice paddies and shipbuilding in Southeast Asia—that have evidenced God's image at work through Asian peoples. Recent accelerations in urbanization that have enabled the growth of megachurches and their international networks are also significant developments. Asian missions can face a multifaceted future by facing the past of God's work among Asian people. Seeing what has occurred beforehand gives a clearer vision of what comes afterward.

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