

RE-READING EXODUS 1:1-15:21 AMID THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION OF MYANMAR

Context of the Study

This dissertation is going to read Exodus 1:1-15:21 from the perspective of the Myanmar revolutionary movement against the military rule. In 2021, Myanmar military unlawfully launched a coup after they falsely claimed that there was a massive voter fraud in the election, although the independent observers confirmed the election result represented the will of the people.¹ As a reaction, people have protested and peaceful demonstrations had been organized peacefully throughout the country. Yet the military leaders brutally cracked down these peaceful protests, which lead to arresting, torturing, and killing pro-democracy protestors.²

Though the population of Myanmar Christians comprises only about six percent of the predominantly Buddhist country,³ Christian's participation in the revolution is significant. The acting president, the prime minister and one fourth of the cabinet members of National Unity Government (NUG)⁴ are Christians.⁵ Moreover, the leaders of many major ethnic armed organizations (EAO)⁶ as well as those people suffering a lot under the regime belong to a Christian.

The Christian leaders called for peace and release of political prisoners because the church members urged them to do so. Most vocal Christian leaders, such as Cardinal Charles Bo of the Roman-Catholic church and the chief executive officers of Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) called the resistant forces to enter into a dialogue with the military regime, instead of simply condemning the violence performed by the military forces. In general, people do not believe that the "oppressors" are ready for a true dialogue, nor that this will it lead to peace. There is great mistrust between people and the regime.

Research Subject

This challenging political situation (not only for Christians) urges believers to seek orientation and guidance in their faith and in their communities. One way is to re-read biblical texts and to contextualize them. Here, the identified Exodus text plays a major role in the ongoing discussions,⁷ in which God, Moses and the oppressed Israelite people seem to have "worked together" for liberation while the oppressor (Pharaoh) had no intention to listen to the suffering of the enslaved people, nor to stop the injustice.

Exodus has been read by many Latin American liberation theologians as a liberational text of and for the poor. Some political theologies (of the 20th Century) have used Exodus as a key text to demonstrate that God is leading the oppressed people to go against the oppressors. However, Roth argued that the liberationists read the

¹ "Joint Statement: Domestic Election Observer Groups Say 2020 Myanmar Polls Results Credible, Call Support for Peaceful Power Transition," *Asian Network for Free Elections*, January 29, 2021, <https://anfrel.org/joint-statement-domestic-election-observer-groups-say-2020-myanmar-polls-results-credible-call-support-for-peaceful-power-transition/>

"Joint Statement: Myanmar: Stop the Coup, Let Election Tribunals Do Their Job," *Asian Network for Free Elections*, February 3, 2021, <https://anfrel.org/joint-statement-myanmar-stop-the-coup-let-election-tribunals-do-their-job/>

"Myanmar Election: No Evidence Fraud In 2020 Vote, Observers Say," *BBC News*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57144397>

² For updated information, see *Assistance Association for Political Prisoners*, <https://aappb.org>.

³ "The Union Report: Religion," Census Report Volume 2-C, *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census*, Nay Pyi Taw: Department of Population, Ministry of Labor, Immigration and Population, July, 2016.

⁴ The revolutionary government which is formed to represent the people in the revolution against the junta.

⁵ "Heads of Government" and "Ministries," *National Unity Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar*, <https://www.nugmyanmar.org/en/>

⁶ Such as Karen National Union (KNU), Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), Chin National Front (CNF), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), etc.

⁷ See e.g., Cardinal Charles Maung Bo's sermon on Easter Sunday, "Let My Country Awake from the Culture of Death Towards the Culture of Hopeful Resurrection," April 3, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/CBCM.OSC/posts/pfbid02TeJT1xdX2hNdpbyYKz33H5FFqGKL4RGJwwKR2XWwFRCDRHxP167HbHTecec3v51>

text in westernized modes and viewed Yahweh as an ethnocentric Judeo-Christian God.⁸ Similarly, David Moe called liberationism as a ‘canon within canon approach’ and said that liberationists do not think the plights of the native Canaanites colonized by the Israelites after the exodus from Egypt.⁹ This interpretation of exclusive liberation allowed the oppressed people to become violent against their opponents themselves.

Similar to the liberation theologians, the postcolonialists read the text from the perspective of the marginalized. Postcolonialism emerged in the western academy in 20th century. According to Sugirtharajah, postcolonialism aims at rereading colonial elements of the western canonical text and interpretations.¹⁰ Due to their approach to read the whole Bible and being sympathetic with the victimized Canaanites, the postcolonialists are sometimes criticized for their failure to appreciate the conquest narrative of Exodus.¹¹

Therefore, in this dissertation, I would like to recommend a social revolutionary reading of Exodus 1:1-15:21, which will be grounded in a peace-theology searching for possible change of a societal system, and offering new concepts on active non-violent revolution. To do this, I will draw on both liberation and postcolonial criticism, as Roth did, yet this hermeneutic will be contextualized and tested over against the socio-political context of Myanmar. On the one hand, I will interpret Exodus 1:1-15:21 with liberation theologians, on the other hand, with postcolonialists, decolonize the colonial interpretation of an ethnocentric image of God with postcolonialists – moving towards a constructive theological approach towards “just peace.”

Significance of the Study

This research will offer two significant outcomes. First, I am going to analyze the non-violent approach of Myanmar Christian leaders calling for dialogue with the oppressors, who seem to have no interest in listening to the people’s voice, by comparing with the dialogue between Moses and the Pharaoh. Second, in arguing that the book of Exodus encourages the people to go against the injustice of their times, I will propose a postcolonial reading of Exodus to decolonize the colonial portrayal of God while remaining in the liberationist conquest mode.

⁸ Federico A. Roth, *Hyphenating Moses: A Postcolonial Exegesis of Identity in Exodus 1:1-3:15*, Leiden: Brill, 2017, 2-4.

⁹ David Moe, “Postcolonial and Liberation Theologies as Partners in Praxis Against Sin and Suffering: A Hermeneutical Approach in Asian Perspective,” *Exchange* 45, Leiden: Brill, 2016, 322-326.

¹⁰ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University, 2002, 21-23.

¹¹ Roth, *Hyphenating Moses*, 4.