

**Brian Wintle and Ken Gnanakan, *Ephesians: A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, Asia Bible Commentary (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2020). 186 pp. \$19.99 paperback.**

The Asia Bible Commentary series intends to produce works addressing “Asian concerns, cultures, and practices” (unnumbered front matter; loc. 87) while drawing upon native scholars and others vested in the Asian context. As Christianity grows globally, the need for scholarship from a uniquely Asian viewpoint increases. This review is written from outside the Asian context, limiting and enhancing the potential assessment. The volume is coauthored by Brian Wintle (PhD University of Manchester), formerly principal of the Union Biblical Seminary and first regional secretary of the Asia Theological Association (India chapter), and currently PhD coordinator at the Centre for Advanced Theological Studies at Sam Higginbotham University of Agriculture, Technology, and Science in Allahabad. The coauthor is Ken Gnanakan (PhD King’s College London), former chancellor of ACTS Group of Institutions in India. One of the significant challenges when writing a commentary for the Asian context is the continent’s diversity, which incorporates a substantial span of cultures. Accordingly, a limitation of this volume is that both authors write primarily from the Indian context. The endorsers both serve from India, and the general editor of this series, Andrew Spurgeon, is an Indian native.

While the front matter reflects the scope and intention of this commentary in terms of the Asian cultural context, the title notes this volume to be “a pastoral and contextual commentary.” Therefore, this review will address the commentary primarily from those perspectives, using chapter one of Ephesians as an example consistent with the scope and methods of the overall work.

The introduction is general and concise, consisting of a brief ten pages of content in which the authors remark on the recipients and purposes of the letter to the Ephesians. Dating receives only short attention, affirmed at an early 60s AD timeframe. In contrast, half of the chapter’s content is dedicated to the question of authorship, providing a helpful survey of issues before taking the traditional view of attesting direct Pauline writing. The footnotes and citations are sparse in this section, limiting its function for researchers but remaining appropriate

for a pastoral reader. Of further note, nothing presented in the background section uniquely confronts any present or past issues in Asian interpretation of any Pauline texts.

The commentary on the first chapter of Ephesians opens with an engaging pastoral treatment of the epistle's greetings. The style is concise and readable, characteristics which remain consistent for the duration of this volume. The work avoids debates often found in western commentaries over the doctrine of election that occurs early in the chapter. Instead, this chapter offers multiple sections that bridge scriptural content with the Asian context.

Several instances in the exposition of 1:1-14 highlight this connection. For example, the "spiritual blessing" in 1:3 is compared with material blessings in some Asian religions (15). In 1:4, the concept of karma in Hinduism and *kismet* in Islam are presented in contrast to Paul's reference to election (14-15). Furthermore, karma is juxtaposed to what is "freely" given in Christ in 1:6 (18). Then, the concept of redemption in 1:7-12 is placed in the cultural framework of slavery and exploited labor in Asia. The authors discuss how the wisdom of 1:8 is not the Gyana Marga or "way of knowledge" as a means toward salvation in Hinduism (20). An additional section in this chapter devotes space to the Indian writer Paul. D. Devanandan, a proponent of "theocentric humanism," who bases some of his thinking on the Pauline concept of new creation (26-27). In addition, a dedicated section after v.14 entitled "Implications in an Asian Context" (28-29) remarks on pluralism in the Asian context as contrasted to the Christocentric message of Paul, as well as the tendency of western individualism to make spirituality into something overly personal.

In 1:15-19, the message to the Ephesians is one of faith, love, and hope. To this, the commentary presents a series of questions relevant to the Asian context concerning unity and love for each other, which translate to the church in any geographic locale (30). The authors then remark on the concern of Christian minorities in some nations and the tendency to "blindly reflect" western ideas that reduce the supernatural (30-31). In 1:18, the authors discuss that the "eyes of the heart may be enlightened," which becomes a segue to remark on the Hindu concept of the "third eye" (34). Furthermore, the authors incorporate Filipino and Chinese cultures into the conversation and some mystical traditions in a paragraph that briefly compares cultural views of the eyes.

This format of the first chapter is relatively consistent with the discussion of the remaining five chapters in Ephesians. This volume interacts lightly with grammatical, linguistic, historical, and literary considerations of the text, even with less academic but essential elements that could serve the pastoral audience. However, in its favor, the authors are exegetically direct and concise in many ways.

The most significant disappointment in this volume is the lack of engagement with scholars from the Asian context. Where uniquely Asian material is articulated, it appeared to stem from personal reflections of the authors rather than from academic or practical research conclusions. This volume would have been better substantiated by further interaction with resources in the broader Asian context. This limitation is also reflected in the selected bibliography, which enumerates 123 sources almost entirely by western authors in western contexts. In addition, in several sections, the authors rely noticeably on the work of Peter O'Brien, who has generally fallen out of use in most recent scholarship.

Another area of concern is that this commentary tends to be very limited to the Indian context among the Asian populace. For example, the excurses on the Indian caste system (62) are of particular interest to an Indian audience. The authors' engagement with Hinduism is disproportionate to their interaction with other religious and philosophical thoughts prominent in the Asian context.

In addition, the authors miss opportunities to expand an Asian perspective in connection to specific portions of Ephesians. For example, in Ephesians 3, when Paul references rulers, an Asian view could be very informative; however, a unique Asian perspective was absent. Similarly, matters of citizenship and Jew and Gentile relations are areas that an Asian perspective might enhance the reading. Instead, disappointingly, the authors widely consult and interact with western writers in that section. A further example of a missed opportunity concerns sexual ethics in 5:30, which again was treated lightly.

Some areas in which the authors offer a discussion in an Asian context beg for further clarification and substantiation. For example, in exploring the relation of wives and husbands (5:21-33), the authors remark on the threat to the family and household in the modern context. The authors believe that two parents working outside the home, leaving children raised by grandparents, threatens Asian society. However, the literature consulted is sparse, leaving the reader uncertain whether this

perspective is personal, or prompted by Indian culture, or is shared by the broader Asian culture and scholarship. Furthermore, the authors reiterate concern about the threat of liberation and feminist theologies to the patriarchy of Asian culture. Again, without substantial engagement, it is difficult to grasp how widespread this perspective is. Regarding slavery and labor ethics, the authors merely assert that the subject is vital to Asia without further developing this position.

Another criticism is that, at times, this commentary reduces its dialogue to oversimplistic contrasting comparisons. To be clear, authors should have the freedom to exhort readers to reject western ideas; however, it is unclear at times when the authors reject westernism, what in detail they are dismissing, and how an indigenous Asian alternative response is beneficial. In this sense, the postcolonial engagement is mild, at best. The benefit for serious students is that those who engage in the field can identify and treat these gaps with a more intentional postcolonial perspective.

Despite its drawbacks, this review acknowledges that limited resources exist in biblical studies from an Asian context. Because of that, the Langham Partnership and Asia Theological Association are commended for producing a needed entry into the field that may serve as a helpful bridge into further scholarship from an Asian perspective.

This commentary meets the goal of being both pastoral and contextual within an Asian framework. Its primary practical limitation is that it best serves those in Hindu settings such as India and Nepal. In contrast, pastors in broader Asian settings will need to adapt some content to fit their paradigm. Having expressed this, pastors with limited time will find that the language and style make this volume accessible. Furthermore, this work provides several homiletical aides for the Asian context within each section. While this work is not a stand-alone for a serious student or pastor, its limitations should not detract from its value and worth as it moves the gauge forward in biblical studies from the Asian perspective.

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