

2016

The Abrahamic Pilgrimage Story in Sermons: An Ontological-Narrative Foundation of Asian American Life in Faith

Sunggu Yang

George Fox University, syang@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs>

 Part of the [Asian American Studies Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Yang, Sunggu, "The Abrahamic Pilgrimage Story in Sermons: An Ontological-Narrative Foundation of Asian American Life in Faith" (2016). *Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies*. 234.
<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs/234>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Christian Studies at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

The Abrahamic pilgrimage story in sermons: An ontological-narrative foundation of Asian American life in faith

Sunggu Yang

Wake Forest University School of Divinity, USA

Abstract

Sang Hyun Lee and many other Asian American scholars have found that the Abrahamic pilgrimage story has been an ontological-narrative backbone of Asian American faith constructs. This article further explores their previous research by suggesting three distinct theological narrative styles of the given Abrahamic pilgrimage saga: the allegorical-typological narrative style, the illustrative narrative style, and the eschatological-symbolic narrative style. However, though distinct, the styles are closely associated with one another. I will show sermon excerpts by Asian American preachers that are good examples of the theological-spiritual embodiment of the three styles.

Keywords

Pilgrimage, Abrahamic story, Asian American, liminality, faith, spirituality, narrative, preaching

[Christians] live each in [their] native land[s] but as though they were not really at home there. They share in all duties as citizens and suffer all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland a foreign land . . . They dwell on earth but they are citizens of heaven.

Letter to Diognetus, 5¹

1. Joseph Barber Lightfoot, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956), 18.

Introduction

Stanley Hauerwas contends that a meaningful (Christian) story is the foundation upon which a person or a community develops self-identity, moral virtues, socio-political institutions, and social ethics.² Further, he argues, “the social or political validity of a community” results from its being formed by a truthful story, a story that gives us the means to live without fear of one another.³ Elsewhere, in a similar sense Stephen Crites discusses the fundamental narrative structure of human experience.⁴ For him, story or narrative is of vital importance in both our individual and communal lives. In particular, when a story is truly meaningful to our own life situation, we experience it as the ontological or fundamental ground of our existence. Thus, it is safe to say that every individual or community needs a truthful and meaningful narrative that establishes that individual’s or community’s ontological ground, moral foundation, communal virtues, social relations, and ultimately their spiritual journey in faith.

Sang Hyun Lee sees the Abraham story and other similar Bible narratives, combined together, as the narrative(s) upon which Asian American Christians⁵ have constructed their own version of the “pilgrimage-in-the-wilderness” spirituality.⁶ Perceiving their new socio-geographic location in the States as their own wilderness, the Asian American faith has created its particular bicultural theological and ontological narrative ground. In a spiritual-symbolic sense, they now find the

2. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame, 1981), 36–52.

3. *Ibid.*, 27.

4. Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 65–88.

5. Asian Americans today represent a wide range of Asian North American groups: that is, East Asian Americans (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans), South Asian Americans (e.g., Indian, Nepali, and Pakistani Americans), Southeast Asian Americans (e.g., Filipino, Malaysian, and Vietnamese Americans), and Pacific Islanders as well. This article dare not discuss a broad spectrum of Christian spirituality or practices in faith from all different Asian ethnic groups, yet will focus on East Asian American spirituality and its preaching practice. East Asian Christianity is still a major player in Asian North America when it comes to spiritual influence, theological development, Christian practice, and missional energy. Research on other groups, I hope, shall follow in the future as their presence in and impact on Asian American Christianity continues to grow. Also, when I use the term Asian American in my research, I mainly refer to first-generation Asians who, though still fundamentally Asian by culture, have adopted an Americanized way of life and mostly tend to live in America for good. They are still mother-tongue speaking adults with English as their second language. As is well known, the second- and third-generation Asian Americans—the US-born-and-raised—have their particular cultural and theological perspectives and stories. Investigating this latter group’s socio-ecclesial natures and homiletic practice is simply beyond the scope of this study.

6. Lee, “Pilgrimage and Home in the Wilderness of Marginality: Symbols and Context in Asian American Theology,” *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore*, ed. Ho-Youn Kwon, Kwang Chung Kim, and R. Stephen Warner (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State, 2001), 61.

same wilderness in which Adam and Eve, Abraham, the ancient Israelites, and other faithful Christians would have walked in their pilgrim journey. Lee writes, “The Abrahamic obedience to God’s call has been invoked in the Asian American church. The challenge is to see the Asian immigrants’ de facto uprootedness as an opportunity to embark on a sacred pilgrimage to some God-promised goal, and therefore to believe that life as strangers and exiles can be meaningful.”⁷

Matsuoka Fumitaka well echoes the theme of “pilgrimage-in-the-wilderness” when he acknowledges Asian American Christians as “strangers and sojourners” living in the household of God. In this foreign land, he realizes, Asian Americans have been always “on the way,” not belonging to either Asia or America, but to the liminal space where their Christian faith helps them envision a new reality of America.⁸ Especially, Fumitaka encourages Asian Americans to envision and strive to achieve a new American social reality of racial reconciliation, political equality, and socioeconomic justice, from their “fresh” marginal perspective of the world. In that respect, just as Lee articulates above, Fumitaka perceives the Asian American life in the spiritual wilderness as a positive ontological-communal narrative and highly meaningful in many ways, though fully aware of its limitations as well.⁹

In agreeing with Lee and Fumitaka and so in the similar Abrahamic pilgrimage ethos, a Chinese American pastor and scholar is pleased to state confessionally,

We still are a pursuing church, or the pilgrim of God in the Wilderness . . . [W]e are all on the way, together. But we are not alone, nor helpless. Our fathers crossed over the Pacific for a new life in this land. They found what the life of sojourners was like, and yet, wherever they were, they were not away from the Lord’s field. They met him, and built their churches.¹⁰

-
7. Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 4–11, 61–64. Asian American scholars find that the theological motif of pilgrimage or life as spiritual journey is shared extensively among most Asian American ethnic groups. For detailed discussion, see Paul M. Nagano, “A Japanese American Pilgrimage: Theological Reflections,” *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective*, ed. Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), 63–79; David Ng, ed., *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1996), xv–xxix; Man Singh Das, “Sojourners in the Land of the Free: History of Southern Asian United Methodist Churches,”; and Wilbur W. Y. Choy, “Strangers Called to Mission,” *Churches Aflame: Asian Americans and United Methodism*, ed. Artemio R. Guillermo (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991), 19–34, 65–89.
 8. Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 1, 9, 31.
 9. *Ibid.*, 13–15. Here, Fumitaka points out the “ghetto” phenomenon of the Asian American church, which significantly contributed to Asian Americans being silent or silenced, in the broader culture.
 10. Wesley Woo, “Asians in America: Challenges for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)” (New York: Program Agency, Presbyterian Church [USA], 1987), 20.

Eunjoo Kim, a Korean American pastor and scholar, then shows no hesitation in creatively repeating Woo's confessional statement in her sermon ten years later:

We're pilgrims called by God
to continue struggling
until the day when all immigrant people,
not only Koreans but also other ethnic groups,
fully belong to this new land
and equally inherit this promised land of God.¹¹

In this sermon, Kim literally and metaphorically calls Asian Americans "pilgrims called by none other than God". This statement adamantly affirms and confirms the divine guidance and calling upon the sojourning lives of Asian Americans. Furthermore, she is preaching a new socio-ecclesial identity of Asian Americans rooted in Christian faith that is possible in this new God-promised land. In this promised land, she envisions, Asian Americans will become an agent for racially and culturally harmonious society from their liminal yet hopeful marginal perspective.

Finally, Lee contends that the life of Jesus, the life model of Asian American Christians, can also be interpreted from the same Abrahamic pilgrim perspective and thus applied to the Asian American faith.¹² His argument starts with the moment when Jesus leaves his hometown of Galilee to become an itinerant proclaimer and fulfiller of God's reign for the whole creation. For Lee, by his departure Jesus inevitably becomes marginalized and thus enters into a liminal status. He states,

For Jesus, leaving home, as it would be for any one in his circumstances, was an act with grave consequences. In his day the Galilean household was the primary place of socialization, where a person's social roles and their meanings were both learned and played out. Identity did not exist apart from a person's household, kinship relations, and village. For Jesus to leave his household, therefore, was to be cut off from the place that had given him his identity. *Leaving home meant going out of the structure of one's life. It meant entering a wilderness, a liminal place.*¹³

Thus, for Lee it is very natural that the life of the itinerant and marginalized Jesus can be easily identified with that of Asian American Christians. Both Jesus and Asian Americans belong nowhere but the wilderness where both are always "on the way," envisioning the new reality of life that is already promised and guaranteed by God, the ultimate End of their Abrahamic pilgrim journey.

11. Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Preaching the Presence of God: A Homiletic from an Asian American Perspective* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1999), 158.

12. Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 63–87.

13. *Ibid.*, 64 (emphasis mine).

Although most Asian American churches seem to share this Abrahamic wilderness pilgrimage ethos as one of their most basic faith constructs, undergirded by Jesus' pilgrim identity, they do not all share the same narrative *style* within this ethos. In other words, there are individual style variations in understanding, interpreting, and adopting the Abrahamic pilgrimage narrative theme, depending on the individual local community's theological or cultural understanding. Here, I present three major possible narrative styles in Asian American faith construction, well exemplified in their sermon pieces.

Three narrative styles

The allegorical-typological narrative style

This style is well demonstrated in Rev. Byung-sup Bahn's song below, the first stanza of which goes as follows:

Obeying when he was called,
leaving home by faith,
Abraham made an altar wherever he wandered
We are all Abraham;
let us learn of his faith;
through our faithfulness to God, may God's own purpose fulfill.¹⁴

As Bahn's song shows, the allegorical-typological narrative style pursues a one-to-one allegorical or typological match between the pilgrim life of Abraham and Asian American life. In other words, the Abrahamic biblical narrative becomes a typological story that can be repeated almost in a literal sense in the Asian American immigrant life today. Thus, the people practicing this style are strongly convinced that "[l]ike Abraham, we have been called by God to leave the homeland to live in a wilderness as strangers and exiles."¹⁵ Yet, though strangers and exiles, the people of this style try to live very hopeful lives, because they also take what was promised to Abraham in Scripture as literally their own: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2). Two sermon excerpts below nicely present this optimistic Abrahamic worldview of Asian American Christians:

When God called Abraham, what purpose did God have for him? God told him, "I will bless you. You will be a blessing to the nations." God not only called Abraham, but also all his descendants for the same purpose of blessing all nations.

14. Byung-sup Bahn, *Jil-Geu-Reut-Gat-Un-Na-Eh-Ge-Do* (Even for Me an Earthen Vessel) (Seoul, Korea: Yang-Suh-Kak, 1988), 97.

15. Sang Hyun Lee, "Called to be Pilgrim: Toward a Theology within a Korean Immigrant Context," *The Korean Immigrant in America*, ed. B. Kim and Lee (Montclair, NJ: ACKS, 1980), 37.

... Hence, there are always worldly or spiritual fruits after calling when we obey God's calling to leave. God has called each and every one of you for the same calling ... We will be a source of God's blessing to all people around us.¹⁶

But Abraham was a man of faith and went out, not knowing where he was going. No wonder that he has, during all these centuries, been called the father of the faithful ... Rather, we shall be like Abraham, the mighty migration leader; filled, not with hatred or bitterness, but with faith, hope and love, we shall go wherever God wants us to go, and as we go along we shall bless the people everywhere, as did Abraham of old.¹⁷

What is notable in the above sermon pieces is that Asian Americans living in this typological narrative world often tend to take theological materialism or the so-called prosperity gospel as their vivid faith orientation. They materialistically take what God tells Abraham as their own promise from God, "I will bless you and make your name great." This is one of the reasons why in the Asian American church context, we often witness the strong pursuit of material prosperity as demonstrated in people's pursuit of good cars and homes, higher education for their children, respected social status (e.g., the church eldership), mega-church establishment, and so forth. Yet, there is a balancing pole as well. As the end of the sermon piece states, the ultimate purpose of worldly blessings for Asian Americans is for the sake of others or, symbolically, all nations. Since Abraham became a blessing for all nations, so will Asian Americans.

Another merit of the Abrahamic blessing over Asian American life is that the same idea has helped Asian Americans overcome their marginalized daily lives. In the wilderness, God has been their ultimate hope and shelter, as the sermon below describes:

Just as the Israelites felt hungry and thirsty when they left Egypt and entered into a strange, new land of wilderness, so our hearts too were filled with emptiness and uncertainty ... Since we emigrated from Korea, we had lived only there ... Everything there was familiar to us. But now we found ourselves in a strange land. Were we going to be okay in this wilderness? Would our new jobs be secure? Would our new friends and neighbors be kind to us, minority people? Were we going to find a good church? ... My husband and I were in awe like the Israelites who were amazed when they first saw the manna in the wilderness, the layer of a flaky white substance covering the ground in great abundance. The manna

16. Rev. Seuk Chan Goh's sermon, "Let Your Blessings Flow" (my translation), was delivered on Jan. 1, 2012 with the Scripture reading of Genesis 12:1-3, http://www.sarang.com/srtv_sermon/550/?lan=ko&page=7&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&list_style=webzine&clicked=1&select_arrange=headnum&desc=asc (accessed July 10, 2015).

17. Rev. Sohei Kowta's sermon, "Abraham, the Migration Leader," in *The Sunday Before Collection*, GTU 97-5-02. Graduate Theological Union Archives, Berkeley, CA, 38.

from heaven, the divine gift!...Feeling the divine presence through the snow, I whispered to God “Thank you! Thank you, Lord! You are with us even in this wilderness!”¹⁸

In this sermon excerpt, two practical theological ideas are prominent. First, God has special concerns or so-called preferential options for the poor and marginalized. In this case, they are Asian immigrants or confessing pilgrims. In their wilderness-life God will be the One who cares for them. Second, God is the God of everyday care and protection. When the matters of job security, community blending, and psychological breakdown haunt the Asian American mind on a daily basis, God shows up as the One who will deal with those issues on behalf of the marginalized Asian pilgrims. God cared for Abraham’s and the Israelites’ everyday troubles in their wilderness, and so will God care for Asian American pilgrims.

In sum, the people living through this typological Abrahamic narrative often tend to “glorify” the people’s immigrant status as God’s special calling. Most likely, therefore, their faithful proclamation will be to pray for the people’s earthly blessings and encourage them to become respected resident aliens among other ethnic groups as God’s chosen Abrahamic children, in order to eventually become blessings for all other nations.

The eschatological-symbolic narrative style

Asian Americans living in this narrative style are also convinced that they, just like Abraham, left their homeland to settle in the promised land of God, but eschatologically or symbolically rather than literally. As in John S. McClure’s transitional use of Scripture, they do not tend to receive the Abrahamic story in a literal sense, but often pursue and practice the author’s original or spiritual meaning “behind the text.”¹⁹ Thus, Abraham’s journey to a new land becomes a model for people’s faith journey to a better, other-worldly reality. People do not focus on what Abraham would enjoy in the new land as a successful stranger-settler, but more on his growth in faith itself as he embarked upon God’s special spiritual calling. For instance, just like the pilgrim’s journey in John Bunyan’s novel, Abraham’s wilderness journey can be interpreted as a departure from an idol-worshipping, unjust secular culture to a God-prepared blissful realm.²⁰ This theme of a symbolic faith journey in a strange land culminates when people read

18. Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Preaching in an Age of Globalization* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 125.

19. John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 25.

20. John Bunyan *The Pilgrim’s Progress: From This World to That Which Is to Come*, ed. Craig John Lovik (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

and receive Heb. 11:8–16, almost in a literal sense:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God . . . But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. (Heb. 11:8–10, 16)

Asian American Christians, based on the reading of the text above, perceive their pilgrimage in the American wilderness as the spiritual discipline which guides their continuing faith journey on earth toward the eternal “heavenly home” where there will be no more living in a foreign land as a stranger. Indeed, this spiritual or eschatological perception of their pilgrim life has been a socio-theological strategy by which Asian Americans can put up with the harsh social reality of marginalization. They have always kept the ultimate, eschatological hope against the unbearable status quo. Thus, it is no wonder that we find sermons like the one below.

Abraham of old amassed a fortune. There in the land of Canaan, he could have become a settled citizen and builded [*sic*] a walled city for his and his clan’s permanent residence, there to enjoy the rest of his life in abundance and supposed security. But he did not do that. He did not become dominant in heathen Canaan. He, with Isaac and Jacob and their families, passed their days in Canaan as pilgrims passing through the city of Vanity Fair, but the goal and end of their journey was the City with foundations, whose builder and maker was God. The pilgrims [today also] must leave many worldly possessions behind.²¹

It should be noted that while the Asian Americans living through this eschatological-symbolic style have set their eyes on the other world, they do not (or almost never, in any case) like or practice the idea of total seclusion from society. Rather, as in the case of Augustine’s pilgrim idea, they try to live in both the secular and heavenly worlds, yet with their eyes focused on the latter. Definitely, their first priority is the Heavenly Kingdom. However, they know, just as Augustine did, that they have to live as citizens of this world, especially being morally and ethically good examples of the holy pilgrim people who belong to another reality. In the local community, Asian American Christians of this style will present themselves as good model American residents, while confessing their ultimate, eschatological hope in the Kingdom of God yet to come.

21. Rev. Kenzon Tajima’s sermon, “New Pilgrims,” *The Sunday Before Collection*, GTU 97-5-02. Graduate Theological Union Archives, Berkeley, CA, 41.

The sermon preached in this theological spirituality often emphasizes the great faith in which Abraham courageously begins his spiritual journey, not knowing what is ahead of him yet following what God has told him. Since that great faith itself is so important, the sermon eventually encourages the people's spiritual discipline rather than their material success, higher education, or respected social status. These latter concerns are only secondary to the greater spiritual purpose of the immigrant life, which is approaching the heavenly home.

The illustrative narrative style

According to Ted A. Smith, when an illustration is used in a sermon in a utilitarian or pragmatic way, the illustration itself does not necessarily convey in itself the truthful points, illustrations may appear in the sermon often as mere rhetorical tools of persuasion, and thus, at times, it does not matter whether those illustrations are real or really happened.²² In light of Smith's articulation, the illustrative narrative style can be acknowledged as one that pragmatically utilizes the Abrahamic pilgrim story in the promotion of other key faith lessons. Asian Americans familiar with this style know the ontological-narrative power of the Abrahamic story and effectively use the story as a key illustrative material to strengthen their spiritual, social, or political agendas. In the sermon pieces below, Rev. Seok Chan Goh and Rev. Kekapa P. K. Lee use the wilderness pilgrimage theme exactly in this utilitarian sense:

Just as Abraham left his home and old habits and pagan thoughts in pursuit of God's blessings and God's vision for the whole world, we, at the beginning of this new year, need to leave behind the old things and thoughts for the same purpose. I encourage you to transform your narrow, self-centered worldview to a broader one. Then, God will bless you so much (materially), that you have abundance to share with all the people in need around you.²³

The story of the tale of Abraham and Sarah invites us to be risk takers willing to go forth with only a dream to guide us toward God's far horizons. This elderly couple gives up everything secure to follow a promise... Our faith makes us able to step outside of ourselves and do things we would never do!²⁴

In Rev. Goh's sermon, Asian American Christians are not pictured either as real pilgrims in a literal sense or as symbolic pilgrims in a spiritual sense. Rather, he

22. Ted A. Smith, *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice* (New York: Cambridge, 2007), 233.

23. Rev. Goh, "Let Your Blessings Flow" (my translation).

24. Rev. Kekapa P.K. Lee's sermon, "To Have Faith Means to Live a Radically Different Way," was delivered on Aug. 11, 2013 with the Scripture reading of Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40 at the First Chinese Church of Christ in Hawaii, http://www.firstchinese.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Sermon_130811.pdf (accessed Sept. 25, 2015).

uses the pilgrim metaphor in support of his socio-spiritual lesson, “Go and share your blessings with all others.” Hence, the Abrahamic story here functions as a critical illustrative or metaphoric narrative for a spiritual point, but not necessarily as a typological or symbolic narrative. In a similar utilitarian vein, Rev. Lee adopts the pilgrim story of Abraham and Sarah in order to bolster his contemporary message of risk-taking or stepping outside of ourselves in faith. McClure calls this kind of Scripture use “trajectional,” by which the old familiar story and meaning take a totally novel narrative meaning, depending on each new situation.²⁵

Lee provides another good example of this illustrative-trajectional use of the pilgrim metaphor when arguing for the transformational potential and power of Asian American pilgrims. Uniquely, Lee encourages Asian Americans to embrace the Abrahamic narrative as the society-transforming narrative identity of the immigrant self. He realizes that Asian immigrants, living through a liminal experience, have the three creative potentials of “openness to the new,” “the generation of *communitas*,” and “the transformative power of prophetic action.”²⁶ Lee believes that these three social potentials are already implied in the Abrahamic story and insists that we fulfill them in the American wilderness. He writes,

Abraham’s story is particularly pertinent to Asian immigrants who may be wondering what the meaning of their existence in this country is. Abraham’s story can be interpreted as saying that now that the Asian immigrants have left home and are here in America, it is an opportunity to take up the pilgrimage toward a “better America” and work to make America a country that is more according to God’s will. Their situation can be seen as a calling to live as the creative minority in America. Moreover, if Asian Christians appropriate Abraham’s story as their own, they might see their life’s goal as being to continue to live here “as strangers and foreigners” and work to build a “better America,” “whose architect and builder is God.” In this way, their Christian faith would have something to do with their identity and their life as marginalized and liminal people in America.²⁷

Of course, in most Asian American ecclesial contexts, this kind of sociopolitical or prophetic understanding of the Abrahamic story is rare.²⁸ Yet, the sociopolitical dimension of the Asian American church’s life is a recent arrival which is gaining a gradual acceptance in its ecclesial context. When Asian American Christians adopt

25. McClure, *The Four Codes*, 42.

26. Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 7–11.

27. *Ibid.*, 122.

28. Several authors acknowledge that the social prophetic role has remained among the weakest, and nearly ignored, ministry areas in the Asian American ecclesial context. For instance, Young Lee Hertig realizes that for the Korean immigrant church this phenomenon happens because of the church’s intentional making of itself “an island of *usness* within the sea of the mainstream otherness.” Young Lee Hertig, “The Korean Immigrant Church and Naked Public Square,” *Realizing the America of Our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans*, ed. Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar S. Fernandez (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2003), 140. Also, see Lee’s *From a Liminal Place*, 132–38.

the sociopolitical dimension of the Abrahamic narrative, they often emphasize the constructive prophetic role that Asian Americans can take in and out of the church boundaries as the heirs of the Abrahamic vision of a “great nation.” The underlying premise is that the vision itself has been given by the biblical God who initially called out the Asian immigrants to the promised land of America. The sermon excerpt below aptly summarizes this point:

Pioneers are people who don't go back to their homeland when they face problems and troubles in the new land. Pioneers are those who have made up their minds to stay for good in the new land. They have the faith of Abraham. They are not conformists but cultivators of a new land. We have to cultivate the wilderness if we are pioneers. Our wilderness is a society of injustice and prejudice, like a desert that is hot in the day but cold in the night. Just as the California desert was transformed into a rich soil, where many fruit trees and vegetables grow, we can and must cultivate this society to be a truly loving and caring place to live.²⁹

As such, the sermon emphasizes the active transformative social role of Asian Americans as spiritual heirs of Abraham. Elsewhere, Fumitaka Matsuoka hopes that this transformative conception of the Asian American life helps Asians to get out of their enclosed ethnic enclave or ghetto and contribute to the betterment of American society as active and responsible citizens.³⁰

Conclusion

The wilderness pilgrimage spirituality grows out of the biblical self-understanding of the Asian American immigrant. According to Lee, this Abrahamic biblical-narrative understanding of the Asian American life is a key contextual-hermeneutical perspective through which Asian Christians come to interpret not only their own lives in the foreign land, but also the surrounding social circumstances. They have even, through the same socio-ecclesial hermeneutic, attempted cosmic explanations for how and why God performs things in this world.³¹ Since many Asian Americans tend to understand the Bible in a fundamentalist sense (e.g., the word-by-word inspiration of the biblical text) and venerate the book greatly,³² it is very likely that this biblical understanding of self-identity grants Asian American Christians a sense of sacredness over their immigrant lives and also a God-guaranteed *raison d'être* for their lives in this foreign, yet promised land. Finally, we had

29. Rev. Jung Young Lee's sermon, "Our Thanksgiving Day" (unpublished), quoted in his book, *Korean Preaching*, 119.

30. Matsuoka, *Out of Silence*, 13–15.

31. Lee, "Pilgrimage and Home," 61.

32. For instance, Jung Young Lee recognizes that for Korean Americans the Bible as a sole authority of faith "symbolizes Christian identity." *Korean Preaching: An Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 57.

better keep in mind that each style found in this pilgrimage theme serves the Asian American spiritual life, especially its preaching practice, by way of complicated combinations of multiple aspects found in the same theme. For instance, we might see the preaching practice of the allegorical-typological narrative style to be in close association with the eschatological-symbolic style. All this aptly warns us away from any single style application of the pilgrimage theme when it comes to Asian American faith construction or analysis.

Author biography

Sunggu Yang, completed his doctorate in Homiletics and Liturgics with the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University, along with a minor in Worship, Arts, and Contemporary Culture. He currently teaches as Louisville Institute Postdoctoral Fellow at Wake Forest University School of Divinity. He is the founder and general editor of the online journal, *Asian American Theological Forum* (www.aatfweb.org), and is writing his second book, *Arts and Preaching: An Aesthetic Homiletic for the 21st Century*.