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Ministries & Theology**

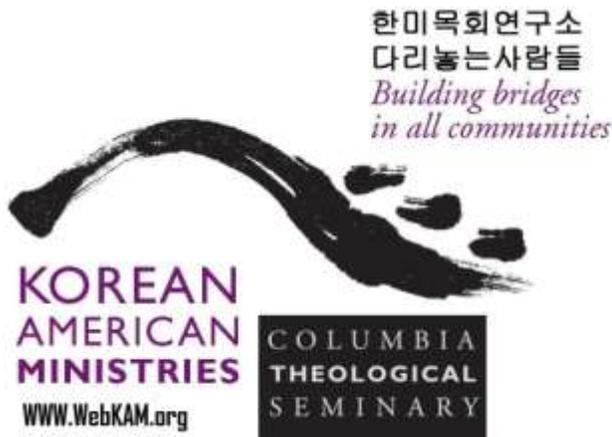
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Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark¹

Byung-Mu Ahn

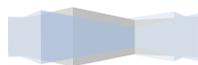
Summary: Unlike most New Testament scholars who mainly focused on the object of Jesus' teaching and its audience, Byung-Mu Ahn's focus in his article, "Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark," is on the social characteristics of the audience, *the people*. Form critics mainly focused on the framework for the word of Jesus to find the kerygma that Jesus is the Christ, and as a consequence the audience of Jesus has been excluded. Redaction critics focused on the changes of sources to find the voice of the author and his theology, and paid little attention to the audience of Jesus. While taking the method of redaction criticism, Ahn focuses on two issues: the reality of *the people*, who they are, and their relationship to Jesus.

The word that Mark uses to call the audience of Jesus is *ochlos*, the people, which occurs thirty six times in his Gospel. While other biblical writers prefer to use *laos* over *ochlos*, as it occurs 2,000 times in Septuagint, Mark never uses *laos* except in a quotation from the Old Testament (Mark 7:6) and in the words of chief priests and lawyers (Mark 14:2). Mark is the first New Testament writer who introduces the word, *ochlos*, because in the epistles of Paul written before Mark's Gospel *ochlos* never occurs, not even once. While Paul focuses on Christology and soteriology to teach the churches faith in Jesus, Mark focuses on presenting the historical Jesus before the resurrection by giving historical facts. Therefore, Byung-Mu Ahn argues that "Such a position made Mark move toward a historical rather than kerygmatic Jesus."²

To find out who *ochlos* is Ahn first investigates the characteristics of *ochlos*. First, they gathered around Jesus and followed him wherever he went. Second, they were sinners condemned in their society. Third, sometimes they were differentiated from the disciples. Unlike the disciples who were rebuked by Jesus, they were never rebuked by

¹ Edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices From the Margin* (NY: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1995), 85-104.

² *Ibid.*, 88.



him. Fourth, they were anti-ruling class, anti-Jerusalem, and pro-Jesus. Therefore, they were an alienated class by the ruling class. Fifth, the rulers feared them. But, they could be manipulated, when the rulers bribed them.

For the next step, Ahn investigates the attitude of Jesus toward the *ochlos*. There are three features found in Mark. First, Jesus had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34; Numbers 27:17). Second, they were Jesus' mother and brothers: "the *ochlos* are the members of a new community (family)."³ Since this statement was so radical, Matthew added *mathetai* (disciples) instead of *ochlos*, and Luke eliminated the *ochlos* in paralleled pericopes (Mark 3:34; Matthew 12:49; Luke 8:21). Third, Jesus taught them, as his custom, and they were fascinated by his teachings. In short, Jesus consistently accepted and supported the *ochlos* without making any conditions.

Then, Ahn investigates the composition of the *ochlos* who followed Jesus. According to Ahn, the call of Levi and Jesus' dinner at his house (Mark 2:13-17) is originally two separate pericopes floating before Mark's gospel is written. But, Mark put those two together for his readers to see what he intended: "When we combine these two, the dinner becomes a joyful feast celebrating the fact that certain types of people were called to be the disciples of Jesus."⁴ They were sinners and tax collectors who followed Jesus (Mark 2:13, 15, 16). They were a part of the *ochlos*. Though prostitutes are mentioned with tax collectors in Matthew (Matthew 21:32) and the sick, the hungry, and the widows are included in *ochlos* in Luke, tax collectors and sinners appear to be a more dominant group of *ochlos* in Mark.

Sinners in Judaism, according to Jeremias, are people who cannot fulfill the duty of the law either because of their crime against the law or because of the condition of their occupation that allows them not to fulfill the duty of the law. The latter are people who cannot rest on the Sabbath like boatmen, shepherds, and prostitutes or handle impure things according to the law like leather-makers and butchers. Ahn even adds the people who could not fulfill the requirements of the law because of sickness and poverty. The sick were regarded as impure or punished by God and, therefore, were not permitted to

³ Ibid., 90.

⁴ Ibid., 91.

worship. The poor were also not able to participate in worship on the Sabbath, because they had to work to survive even on the Sabbath. However, not fulfilling religious duty did not simply mean the alienation from worship, but it meant the alienation from the social system. They were marginalized and disregarded in their society.

Tax collectors, unlike sinners who were in a low class doing menial work, are tended to be regarded as rich people working as agents of Roman Empire. However, we need to remember that there were also poor tax collectors who worked part-time as employees under higher tax collectors who received contracts from the Empire. Whatever the case is, however, it is clear that both, rich and poor tax collectors, were regarded as tax collectors and alienated in their society by the nationalists, ruling class, landowners, and merchants. The reason why Mark included tax collectors in the *ochlos* is that there is a tradition that Jesus associated with them. He unconditionally embraced and called (*kalesai*) them who are despised and alienated in their society as his disciples (Mark 2:17).⁵

The sick are another group in the *ochlos*. Since sickness was regarded as punishment for sin in Judaism in Jesus' time and their physical weakness often prevented them from working, they were ritually alienated and economically poor. Because of their impurity, they were even not allowed to go back their home. That is why Jesus said to the paralytic in healing, "Son, your sins are forgiven" and "Stand up, take your mat and go to your home" (Mark 2:5, 11). In other words, through his ministry of healing, Jesus was giving the sick liberation not just from sins but also from the system that alienated them.

After investigating the composition of the *ochlos*, Ahn moves to the next task studying Jesus' sayings in Mark which reveals his attitude toward *ochlos*. 1. 'I came not to call the righteous, but sinners' (Mark 2:17b). From this logion, Ahn concludes that "Jesus never showed what may be called universal love. He loved people with partiality."⁶ Though those sinners are labeled as "sinners" by the society, they can return to the place where they used to belong, when they repent (Luke 5:32, 15:1-32). For Jesus,

⁵ Ibid., 94: "Here it is necessary to note the meaning of *kalesai* (to call) in order to understand Jesus' attitude toward tax collectors. Unlike Mark, Luke speaks of making one repent or the sinner who repents (Luke 15:7-10, 18). This idea is not present in Mark; and he uses the word *kalesai*, which is used to call one as a disciple."

⁶ Ibid., 96.

they are simply victims of the society. 2. ‘There is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him’ (Mark 7:15). Against the Pharisees accusing Jesus’ disciples of eating with unclean hands without washing, he opposes the law of cleanness and the mark of ‘*am ha’aretz*’ which was given to the people who violated the law of cleanness. In doing so, he was liberating them from the heavy burden of the law (Cf. Matthew 11:28). ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:27) is also to liberate the people who are oppressed by the Sabbath law. 3. ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me’ (Mark 9:37). By identifying himself with children and ultimately with God, Jesus asks his disciples to show respect for children who used to be treated poorly in the society. In other words, they are like the *ochlos* in their social position, alienated and marginalized. And Jesus asks respect for those people.

Then, to discover Mark’s understanding of the meaning of ‘*minjung*’, Ahn tries to find the linguistic meaning of *ochlos*. There are two words used interchangeably in the Old and New Testament. First is *laos*. *Laos* is a translation of the Hebrew word, ‘*am*’, and used 2,000 times in the Septuagint. It often indicates the Israelites as a national group, while *ethnos* is used to refer to non-Israelites. Though, *laoi*, plural of *laos*, is used in Septuagint in the meaning of ‘crowd’ or *ochlos*, it only happens 140 times and in this case, there is not substantial meaning of *laos*. *Ochlos*, however, is used only sixty times in Septuagint, and refers to an ignorant crowd or ‘the mass’ under a burden of the ruling class. On the contrary, in the New Testament, *ochlos* is used more often, 174 times, than *laos*, 141 times. *Laos* is used 84 times in Luke with following reasons. First, *ochlos* and *laos* are often used interchangeably to carry the same meaning as *ochlos* in Mark. Second, Luke prefers to use *laos* to refer to the Israelites. Third, they are in opposition to the ruling class with an exception (Luke 22:66). In other words, Luke’s use of *laos* is largely influenced by Mark’s use of *ochlos*.

Second the word for the linguistic approach is the ‘*am ha’aretz*’. Before exile, this word meant the upper class of Israel society. But, during and after exile when the ownership of the land was given to the common people including Samaritans, its meaning changed. It came to mean, after the time of Ezra, the lower class people who are uneducated and ignorant of the law. In Rabbinic Judaism, they were “the poor and the

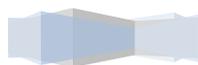
powerless class which was despised and marginalized”⁷ until the time of Jesus. In other words, they were objects of contempt like *ochlos*. Galilee and its people, Galileans, in particular were the *‘am ha’aretz*.

In summary, there are several points worth noting. First, Mark uses *ochlos* rather than *laos* on purpose to refer to the *minjung*, the people, who had been marginalized and abandoned. Second, *ochlos* has floating notions in relation to other groups. The poor is *ochlos* in relation to the rich, but at the same time, tax collector is *ochlos* in relation to Jewish nationalist. Third, the *ochlos* is feared by ruling class, who is powerful but often unjust. Fourth, Jesus sides himself with the *ochlos* without any conditions. Fifth, Jesus does not make them a political force loyal to him. Therefore, they betray him at his death, though they followed him during his ministry. Sixth, Jesus informs them the advent of God’s Kingdom. He is the Messiah suffering with the *minjung*, his people, in the advent of the new age. Seventh, Jesus proclaims the coming of God’s Kingdom. Unlike Yahweh in the Old Testament who shows a tension between love and justice, the God whom Jesus presents is the one who sides completely and unconditionally with the *minjung*, which is God’s will: “God’s will is revealed in the event of Jesus being with them in which he loves the *minjung*.”⁸

Evaluation: The undergirding motivation of Byung-Mu Ahn’s article is to find the identity of the *ochlos* in Mark’s Gospel, whom he calls the *minjung*, people. In doing so, as a pioneer of *minjung* theology, he also finds the identity of Jesus, the one who sides himself with the marginalized in society. If Ahn made the hermeneutical move from the meaning of *ochlos* to the ministry of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel through linguistic studies and redaction criticism, it is worthwhile to make another hermeneutical move from the identity of the *ochlos* and Jesus in relation to *ochlos* to the meaning of the *minjung* theology not only as receivers of a theological tradition but also as followers of Jesus. There are three points worth noting not only for Korean theologians but also for contemporary Christians.

⁷ Ibid., 100.

⁸ Ibid., 102.



The Motivation of Theology: First, Ahn's article shows the motivation of theology: *What God is doing in the lives of people and what God has already said and done in the Bible should be the motivation of theological studies and biblical interpretations.* As Luke Timothy Johnson points out, the New Testament and the early church itself came out of the *experience* of the risen Lord.⁹ This experience changed the way early Christians understood their contexts, first their scripture, the Old Testament, and their social context, the life in the Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Imperial society. They began to see the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies in the life, teaching, and ministry of Jesus, and find hope for God's coming Kingdom in the midst of oppression and discrimination by their religious and political authorities.

In the same token, what motivated Ahn and *minjung* theology is not simply his academic longing to find the meaning of *ochlos* in Mark's Gospel. Rather, it is his experience watching the oppression that takes place in the life of Korean people, *minjung*, in his time and what God was doing in the life of the *minjung*. When Nam-Dong Suh, his teacher, and he were developing *minjung* theology, the people of Korea were under political and economic oppression. In 1970s and 1980s, Korea arose as one of the fastest developing countries in East Asia, through industrialization. However, underneath this glorious economic growth, the *minjung* of Korea greatly suffered. They were mostly low class laborers and excluded in the distribution of the profits as people placed at the bottom of the class pyramid, while a small number of people at the top of the class pyramid took most of the profit. The problem was not only the economic oppression but also the political oppression. Since Korea was under military dictatorship during 1970ties and 1980ties, they could not even express their desire to build the society where economic justice was realized through democracy and politics. Looking at the suffering *minjung*, Nam-Dong Suh and Byung-Mu Ahn realized that they are like the Israelites suffering under the tyranny of Pharaoh in Egypt and the marginalized people suffering under the Jewish religious and regal system and the Roman Imperial system. In other words, they realized that the suffering of God's people was not only *there in the past* but also *here and now*. The suffering of Christ is still taking place. Now, the goal of theology

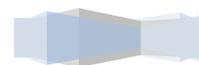
⁹ "The primitive Christian experience consisted in encountering the Other in the risen Jesus. The resurrection faith is the birth of Christianity." Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 110.

became clear: As Jesus came and brought the liberation of God's oppressed people through his suffering, God is also going to bring liberation to God's people, because Christ is suffering again with his people, the *minjung* who received the spirit of Christ.¹⁰ In other words, the motivation of *minjung* theology was to see the movement of God in the life of people, the *minjung*, by looking at their social context. *Minjung* theology was an attempt to tell a story of the suffering of Christ in the lives of his people and the liberation that is to come.

Furthermore, what motivated Ahn and *minjung* theology is his reading of the Bible. He found liberating work of God not only in the lives of people but also in the ministry of Jesus which was revealed in the Gospel stories. In other words, problems are found in the lives of people, but answers should be found in or at least generated from the Bible. That is what makes theology possible – we are talking about God in our lives. This is what early Christians did with their experience of the risen Lord. They went back to their scripture, Old Testament, and began to understand it in a new way. After seeing the suffering of people, the *minjung*, Ahn also went back to the Bible and studied. Then, he began to see the scripture, Old Testament, and New Testament, and especially Mark's Gospel, in a different way. He began to develop *minjung* theology. In this sense, reading of the Bible is necessary not only for interpreters of the Bible but also for theologians and for all Christians not to gain more knowledge about Bible but to see God at work. In other words, what should motivate theology is not human endeavor to pioneer a new area of theology but to see where God is and what God is doing now. And the answers for this quest will be found almost always in what God has already said and done in the Bible.

The Process of Theology: Second, Byung-Mu Ahn's article shows the process of theology: *exploring who God is and who we are*. Theology has two sides. First, it is knowledge about God, because the object of investigation and subject of explanation is God. But, second, it is knowledge about human beings, because it is still *humans'* explanation of who God is. Although it is based on the sacred scripture, the scripture is limited by human knowledge, understanding, language and experience, how they heard

¹⁰ For more detail see, <http://ko.m.wikipedia.org> (민중신학)



and encountered the Ultimate. Therefore, it is necessary to understand not only who God is, how God revealed God-self and related God-self to humans, but also who we are, how humans experienced God, in developing theology. When these two go together, theology becomes neither abstract explanation on God nor another area of humanities merely finding and solving problems of humans. Rather, it advocates constant conversation between God and humans based on their experience and the Bible, and it ultimately seeks the will of God in human lives.

In this sense, Ahn's article is a good example showing what the process of theology should be like. First, he investigates the identity of the *ochlos* in Mark's gospel – who they are, their characteristics and their composition. They are sinners, tax collectors, and the sick. They are the condemned and marginalized in the Jewish society under the Roman Imperial system. Then, second, he investigates Jesus' attitude toward the *ochlos* based on his sayings. He has compassion on them and accepts them as members of the new family of God. In other words, they had encounters with the Ultimate through the ministry and teaching of Jesus. This relationship and experience is the very essence of theology. Now, the task of theologians and interpreters of the Bible is to explain what has taken place, how God related God-self to people, and ultimately find who God is. Ahn's conclusion which he drew from characteristics of God based on Jesus' attitude to *ochlos* is this. Jesus (God) loved them over against the rich and the privileged, valued human life more than Jewish cult, and respected them like he respected little children.

However, it is necessary to note that there are also limits in this process of finding the characteristics of God, because human experience is limited per se. For example, Ahn argues that "Jesus never showed what may be called universal love. He loved people with partiality. He always stood on the side of the oppressed, the aggrieved, and the weak."¹¹ If so, how can we understand this partial love of God? Does having more material wealth dictate how God loves people, even if they earned their wealth by working hard? That is why we need to be in constant conversation with other areas of theology, human experience, and the Bible knowing that a theology is an explanation of human encounter

¹¹ Edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices From the Margin* (NY: Orbis Books: Maryknoll, 1995), 96.

with the Ultimate. In doing so, we will be able to find how God reveals God-self and relates God's self to humans.

The Goal of Theology: Lastly, Ahn Byung-Mu shows what theology should do: *to change the human condition through the revelation of God*. Knowing who God is – characteristics and attributes of God – and even God's revelation mean nothing, when it remains as mere knowledge about God. After knowing God's vision of human life, humans need to change their way of life. In other words, theologians, as knowers of God's will, have a calling for their time, as prophets of the Old Testament had God-given calling in their own time. *Minjung* theology in this sense knew its calling and carried its mission by identifying the suffering of the *minjung* with the suffering of Christ and proclaiming the liberation of the oppressed for God's people, the *minjung*. It was not theoretical theology but a doing of theology. The goal of theology is not what it thinks but what it does.

In this sense, it is necessary to apply the learning from Ahn's article to our immigrant church context as receivers of *minjung* theology. For example, we need to create a welcoming place in the immigrant church. Though there are different classes and groups with different social occupations, the majority of Korean immigrants in the United States are low class doing menial work in the social stratum. They are still socially discriminated against and marginalized. In other words, they are the modern *minjung* of Galilee. The church, therefore, has to welcome those marginalized people as Jesus accepted them as members of his family. In doing so, the church can fulfill its calling: being called out to realize God's kingdom, here on earth, where the love of God who pursues the lost sheep of the flock is truly realized.

