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**Twelve Influential Early
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Twelve Influential Early Korean Preachers

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Son, Yang-Won (1902-1950)

Soo Kwang Lee¹

Nine Thanks²

I thank the Lord for producing sons of martyrdom from the blood of a sinner like me.

I thank the Lord for choosing me, among so many believers, to have the privilege of caring for these beautiful treasures.

I thank the Lord for letting me offer up my eldest and my second eldest sons, the most beloved of my three boys and three girls.

They say it is precious to have a son who is martyred. Still more, I thank the Lord that my two sons were martyred together.

They say it is blessing [enough] to believe in Jesus and die a peaceful death, but I thank the Lord for letting my sons be shot to death while carrying out the work of evangelism.

My sons were preparing to study abroad in the U.S. but I thank the Lord, because my heart is relieved to know that they went to heaven, a better place than America.

I thank the Lord for giving me a loving heart with which to lead my enemy to repentance and embrace him as my son.

I am thankful, believing that the martyrdom of my two sons will bear countless fruit of heaven.

I thank the Lord for allowing me to recognize God's love even in adversity and for granting me faith to overcome.

Introduction

There were two main events that shaped the life and martyrdom of Rev. Son Yang-Won. The first was living with leprosy patients as a pastor at Aeyangwon. He brought down the wall of social isolation and discrimination against people with leprosy. The second was rejecting Japanese Shinto shrine worship and opposing communism to the end of his life. Indeed, this resulted in his two sons' death in the incident known as the Yeosu Uprising³ in October of 1948

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² Yang-Won Son, Selected by The Korea Institute for Advanced Theological Studies (KIATS), *Son Yang-Won: Essential Writings*, (Seoul Korea: The KIATS press, 2009), 194-95. This was written by Pastor Son Yang-Won after suffering the loss of his two sons during the Yeosu uprising that broke out in October of 1948, while Son was leading a revival meeting at the Aeyangwon church.

³ This incident was basically conflict between the democracy-based faction allied with the U.S. and the communist



while Rev. Lee, In-Jae, who had been in jail together with Son for opposing Shinto worship, was leading a revival meeting at Aeyangwon.⁴ The older son, Dong-In, and the younger son, Dong-Sin, who were attending Suncheon High School and Suncheon Junior High, were killed by a group of left-wing students led by An Jae-Seon.

I believe that Rev. Son's theology expressed in his life has a lot to do with Luke's theology, which can be summarized as two main themes "Resistance to Roman imperial theology"⁵ and "Social gospel" for several reasons. First, both Rev. Son, Yang-Won and Luke's Gospel continually focus on the resistance to imperialism. Rev. Son was consistently resistant to Japanese imperialism and communism, and Luke's Gospel implicitly shows the opposition to Roman imperial theology. Second, both Rev. Son and Luke's Gospel emphasize the social mission of the gospel for minority groups. Third, Rev. Son Yang-Won shows his obedience to God as a martyr as Jesus did in the gospels. In this way, Rev. Son might be the one of the memorable Christians who fully followed Luke's theology though he did not realize it.

Historical Background

Rev. Son, Yang-Won (1902-1950) was born in 1902 and died in 1950, living a short life of only forty eight years. During his lifetime, the social and religious situation of Joseon (the former title of Korea) was such that the strength of the traditions of Confucianism and Buddhism could no longer provide a way out of crisis. In this historical context, Son inherited the Presbyterian faith from Presbyterian missionaries, his grandfather, and father. Moreover, he gained knowledge of eschatological spirituality from Rev. Gil, Seon-Ju, the experience of being born again and the assurance of salvation through Rev. Nakada Juji, and learned the social responsibility of the Christian gospel from Uchimura Ganzo. Furthermore, he modeled the eschatological faith and martyr spirituality of Rev. Ju, Gi-Cheol.⁶

The faith that was formed and conditioned in him was preserved as a pragmatic orientation that would never be shaken throughout his life. Indeed, in the span of four generations, Rev. Son's family produced one elder (his father), three ministers (himself, Son Mun-won, and Son Eui-Won) and three martyrs (Son Dong-In, Son Dong-Sin, and himself).⁷ As a student-pastor, Son worked in the capacity of an itinerant external-pastor in affiliation with

faction allied with Russia after the establishment of the Republic of Korea on August 15, 1948. From this time on, the American regime began a military operation against the communists in South Korea. However, this incident occurred when a battalion, consisting predominantly of communist sympathizers, attacked the Yeosu police station, massacred civilians, advanced as far as Suncheon and overtook the Suncheon police station.

⁴ Chong-Soon Cha, *Aeyangwon and Martyr of Love: Son Yang-Won*, (Seoul Korea, The KIATS Press, 2008), 40.

⁵ Roman imperial theology incarnated in Caesar was formed in the sequence of "religion, war, victory, and peace," or "Peace through War," as Crossan summarizes in his article "Roman Imperial Theology." in *In Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*. In other words, the Roman imperial theology can be summarized as "the stronger prey upon the weaker" in the law of the jungle.

⁶ Chong-Soon Cha, *Aeyangwon and Martyr of Love: Son Yang-Won*, 33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

Gyeongnam Presbytery from 1926 to 1932 and served as a minister-in-training at Pyeongyang Neungnado Church from 1935 to 1938. After that, he was appointed as the senior pastor of Aeyangwon Church from July 14, 1939 and had been serving in that capacity for a year and two months when he was arrested by the Yeosu police after a Wednesday night service on September 25, 1940. He was incarcerated there until August 17 of 1945 upon the liberation of Korea from Japan. Following his release, he was reappointed to the pastorate and ordained by Gyeongnam Presbytery in March of 1946. He remained in his pastorate until he was taken into custody by the Yulcheon security office of the Yeosu police station on September 13, 1950.⁸

Rev. Son's theology and Luke's theology

Then, what is the key idea of his life and ministry? I believe that the life of Rev. Son Yang-Won can be categorized in two main themes: the first is "Resistance to Japanese Imperial theology and communism" and the second is "Social responsibility of the Christian gospel." Basically, his resistance to Japanese imperial theology can be found in his anti-Shinto shrine worship, and his opposition to communism could be revealed in his two sons' death and his own death. Interestingly, these two major themes in his life seem to be closely connected with Luke's theology, which also can be summarized as "resistance to Roman imperial theology" and "social gospel."

Resistance to Imperial Theology

First, both Rev. Son, Yang-Won and Luke's Gospel place stress on the resistance to imperial theology, which can be understood as the sequence of "religion, war, victory, and peace," "Peace through War," or "the stronger prey upon the weaker" in the name of emperors. Specifically, Rev. Son, Yang-Won's resistance to Japanese imperialism was explicitly revealed in his opposition to Shinto shrine worship in the 1930s and his anti-communism was shown in his two sons' death and his own death after the independence from Japan. Indeed, Shinto shrine worship was the typical policy concerning imperial theology with regard to the religious issues after the Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s. Interestingly, Japanese imperial theology expressed in Shinto shrine worship seems to be associated with Roman imperial theology incarnated in Caesar with the phrase "Peace through War." Indeed, Rev. Son Yang-Won's theology about Shinto shrine worship was easily found in his various letters during his time in prison and in the police interrogation records, and the record of his trial as follows:⁹

Q: What are your complaints to Japan?

A: It is the coercion of Shinto worship. The Shinto shrine is a place of offering sacrificial rites to Cheonjodaesin, the first ancestor of the royal

⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁹ Ibid., 155.



family, and for that reason, I say it is a form of idolatry...In Christianity, it is unrighteous for Christians to offer sacrificial rites to their own ancestors...We are commanded not to have any other gods...Therefore, the government's policy forces Christians to commit the sin of serving two gods, which Christians regard as unrighteous. It is the single greatest violation of God's will and, for this, the severest judgment of God will fall upon the emperor in the time of God's judgment.¹⁰

Here, Rev. Son explicitly expressed his objection to Shinto shrine worship by saying that the Japanese emperor would receive the severest judgment from God in due time. Also, Rev. Son instructed his son, Dong-In not to participate in Shinto shrine worship even if it meant being expelled from school in his letter to his son.

And make sure that you don't send Dong-In to school on the day of Shinto worship. Don't let him bow before any shrine. And even if the school finds out about this and says they will expel him from school, please ask Dong-In not to bow, for we can never bow to the Shinto shrine. We cannot do this, for this is against the Second Commandment. Please talk this through with my father as well.¹¹

Also, Rev. Son's rejection of communism is closely related to his opposition to imperial theology, because communism also can be defined as "Victory through War," and it denies the Triune God. Rev. Son fasted and held meetings every day so that the patients of Aeyangwon would be infected by God, not by communism.¹² Finally, Rev. Son and his two sons were executed by communists. For Rev. Son, his death meant the fulfillment of the promise he secretly made to his sons upon their deaths. He had been living the last two years of his life looking forward to the realization of that promise. At the same time, his death was the fulfillment of what he preached in his messages throughout the period of Korean War.¹³ His radical opposition to communism can be found by Lady Oh Martha, the wife of Rev. Cha Nam-Jin, senior pastor of Jangcheon Church at the time as follows:

During the Yeosu Incident, a large number of people from Chicken Head Village were taken into custody. Originally, this village was the home of the Choe clan and also contained many communist sympathizers. In other words, the majority of men in this village had been killed during the Bodo League

¹⁰ Son Dong-Hee, *In-Prison Ministry of Rev. Son, Yang-Won, the Martyr of Love*, 184-85.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

¹² Chong-Soon Cha, *Aeyangwon and Martyr of Love: Son Yand-Won*, 196.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 199.

incident, thereby reducing the population to women only. The communist contingents that suffered greatly during the Yeosu incident rose up in violence in the wake of the 6.25 invasion. Rev. Son requested that I come to Aeyangwon, saying, "Let's all die as martyrs. Let's die."¹⁴

Similarly, Luke's Gospel implicitly shows the opposition to Roman imperial theology. Indeed, Jesus' ministry in Luke's Gospel should be understood in the context of the conflict between the Roman Empire and the Galilean and Judean people. This can be shown in several episodes in Luke's narratives: Jesus' birth and infancy stories, Jesus' exorcism, and Jesus' proclamation of kingdom of God. First, the story of Jesus' birth and infancy narratives in Luke reveals the author's intention that Jesus was born to challenge the Roman imperial order. Unlike the other Gospels, the story begins with the mention of Caesar Augustus' decree (Gaius Octavius ruled as *Caesar* or *Emperor* from 31 BCE to 14 CE, and was acclaimed *Augustus* in 27 BCE) that all should be registered. In fact, the author of Luke-Acts is the only person who refers to the Roman emperors by name: Augustus (Luke 2:1), Tiberius (Luke 3:1), and Claudius (Acts 11:28; 18:2). It is worthy to note Ringe's saying, "In occupied Palestine...Peasants and artisans like the carpenter Joseph would have paid more than half of his income consumed by the various levels of Roman taxes, with the yearly tax due to the temple adding to the burden."¹⁵ In this way, the Roman Emperor was oppressing the struggling people, and Joseph was forced to return with his wife to his hometown Bethlehem, which he or his parents probably had left because of hardship to make a living there. In this context, Jesus is born, and Luke describes Jesus as the Messiah, the Lord, and the Savior against the oppressive empire at his birth (2:11).¹⁶ Indeed, given the fact that all the titles "Divine, Son of God, God, Lord, Redeemer, Liberator, and Savior of World" belonged to Caesar the Augustus before Jesus ever existed, as Crossan points out,¹⁷ the expression "Savior (σωτηρ)," only used in Luke's gospel (1:47; 2:11) among the synoptic Gospels, could carry a radical voice. This shows that Luke depicts Jesus as the alternative and real Savior or Lord in opposition to Caesar. In fact, this kind of Luke's intention is also shown in the songs of Mary (1:46-55), Zechariah (1:67-79), and Simeon (2:29-32)

Next, the episode of Jesus' healing of the Gerasene demoniac (8:26-39) is the biggest example where exorcism might symbolize the defeat of general demonic forces such as the Roman troops. Here, the name of the demonic forces is revealed by Jesus (8:30), "Legion," which was the Roman army unit of approximately six thousand soldiers and an equal number of support-troops. Ringe says it might symbolize the occupying forces whose presence meant the loss of control over every dimension of the society to residents of the Roman Empire.¹⁸ In

¹⁴ Ibid., 196.

¹⁵ Ringe, *Luke*, 41.

¹⁶ "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord (NRSV)."

¹⁷ Dominic Crossan, "Roman Imperial Theology." in *In Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, Edited by Richard Horsley, 73.

¹⁸ Ringe, *Luke*, 120.

addition, the herd of swine rushing down the steep bank into the lake and being drowned is strongly reminiscent of the Exodus destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. Interestingly, the name of the demons in exorcism cults among East African people were usually from foreign forces, such as "Lord Cromer (the British general)" or "Kijesu (symbolizing the overall force of the Christian mission)" according to Horsley.¹⁹

Also, Jesus' proclamation of the "kingdom of God" in Jesus' saying should be understood in the socio-political and economic context. The most notable passage about this issue might be the so-called Beelzebul controversy (Luke 11:14-23; cf. Matthew 12:22-30; Mark 3:22-27). Here, the treatment of Jesus' exorcism is closely linked with the presence of the kingdom of God, and it might further imply the liberation of the people of God from oppressive imperial rule. The notable expression is in verse 20, "But if it is *by the finger of God* (*ἐν δακτυλῷ θεοῦ*) that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you." Given that Matthew's version of the story in 12:28 says 'But if it is *by the Spirit of God* (*ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ*),' Luke's expression 'the finger of God' looks unexpected because Luke usually tends to focus on the Spirit. Yamazaki-Ransom claims that the expression "by the finger of God (*ἐν δακτυλῷ θεοῦ*)" is an allusion to Exodus 8:15 (NRSV v. 19), where Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh's magicians by producing gnats.²⁰ Here, the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God!" This is where the expression "the finger of God" is first used in the Old Testament and Moses overpowers the Egyptian magicians for the first time, for in the previous plagues they imitate Moses' miracle. In this way, Luke's use of the expression 'the finger of God' in the Beelzebul controversy adds a political voice to the cosmic conflict between God and Satan, as Yamazaki-Ransom points out.²¹ Also, the following parable (Luke 21:22) concerning the strong man (parallels in Matthew 12:29 and Mark 3:27) strengthens Luke's political voice. The meaning of the parable seems clear: the strong man refers to Satan, and the stronger one is God/Jesus. However, Luke seems to connect intentionally the conflict between God/Jesus and Satan with the military and political context by using words such as palace (*αὐλή*), conquer (*νικᾶω*), full armor of heavy-armed soldier (*πανοπλία*), and booty (*σκυλον*) while the Markan and Matthean parallels have domestic household imagery. From this context, I agree with Horsley's argument that for Luke the conflict between two kingdoms is not just a spiritual battle, but connotes the earthly political context under Roman imperial domination.²²

Focusing on Social Mission for the Oppressed

Second, both Luke's theology and Rev. Son's theology focus on social mission for minority group. Rev. Son's concern for the minority group was continually expressed in his ministry for

¹⁹ Richard A. Horsley, "Jesus and Empire." in *Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, Edited by Richard Horsley, 85.

²⁰ Kazuhiko Yamazaki-Ransom, *The Roman Empire in Luke's Narrative* (New York: T&T Clark International. 2010), 99.

²¹ Kazuhiko Yamazaki-Ransom, *The Roman Empire in Luke's Narrative*, 99.

²² Richard A. Horsley, "Jesus and Empire." in *In Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, Edited by Richard Horsley, 86.

leprosy patients at Aeyangwon. Especially, he was honored by the patients at Aeyangwon because of his integrity as a person of both faith and action. This episode might be the good example for this:

At that time, Aeyangwon was divided by barbed-wire into two sectors and the public had to get permission from the patient sector in order to enter. In addition, even the session conference room for Aeyangwon Church, which was located in patient sector, was divided...When Son was newly appointed, however, not only was the partition screen removed, but he also freely moved about in and out of patients' living quarters. At the time, there were individuals among patients who functioned as nurses, and due to the stench, even they were reluctant to go in and out of the rooms of those patients in intensive care units. Impervious to the risk of infection or stench, Son moved in and out of patients' rooms. From time to time, he would tell the story of Father Damien and say, "Honestly, I wish I could live with you all." He did not worry about getting infected by the disease.²³

In this way, of eleven years and two months as the senior pastor at Yeosu Aeyangwon, Rev. Son spent about five years in prison and six years and two months pasturing his patients as its shepherd.

As for Luke's Gospel, the concerns for the poor, disease, children and women in Luke's Gospel are explicitly revealed in Luke's narratives. First, in the first speech of Q material (Luke 6:20-26 and Matthew 5:1-11), both Luke and Matthew begin Jesus' saying with a series of blessings or "beatitudes." Here, it is interesting that Luke's first and second blessings focus more on people's physical issues than Matthew does, as I mentioned above. Luke says that the kingdom of God belongs to "the poor," whereas Matthew refers to "the poor in spirit" and in the second blessing Luke maintains "Blessed are those who are hungry now (Luke 6:21)" while Matthew mentions "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6)." Despite the differences between the two speeches, however, it seems clear that poverty under the Roman Empire underlies the theme of the kingdom of God in this speech. Further, the concern for the people's economic needs can also be found in Jesus' teaching on prayer (Q/Luke 11:1-4). The Lord's Prayer is basically for the kingdom that focuses on people's needs of sufficient food and a cancellation of debts due to the demands for taxes, tribute, and tithes of the Roman Empire.

Conclusion

Overall, it has become clear that Luke's narratives are carefully located in the context of Roman imperial domination. Rome's role is not merely to provide historical credibility to the Lucan

²³ Chong-Soon Cha, *Aeyangwon and Martyr of Love: Son Yang-Won*, 39.



gospel. Rather, Luke is intentionally presenting Jesus as a rival to the Roman Emperor as the true Lord of the world. In this context, Rev. Son Yang-Won seemed to be the representative Christian, who expressed Luke's theology throughout his life by rejecting Japanese imperial theology and communism, and by showing God's love to the minority groups.

I believe that the theology found in Rev. Son is also significant for Christians today, especially to my Korean church community. This is because social, political, and economic polarization has become more serious nowadays in Korea. As a result, big companies are getting bigger and small businesses are getting smaller. This kind of social phenomenon is now spreading in many areas, even in the church. The Korean church now has a tendency to increase the church members and to expand the size of the church buildings to win the competition with other churches, following the free-market economy which is similar to the Roman imperial theology of "Peace through War." Also, idolatry has been pervasive in Korean churches in the forms of mammonism and sexual immorality. Many Christians including famous pastors are now involved in a series of sex and money scandals. In this context, I believe that the Korean church should learn Rev. Son's theology which rejects imperial theology and lifts up the social minorities and social justice.

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