

In Appreciation of Gale Yee
Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature
November 25, 2019
Mary Foskett

I first met Gale Yee at the 1994 annual meeting of the AAR and SBL in Chicago. It was just my second time attending the annual meeting and I was steadily working my way through my doctoral program in New Testament and Christian Origins at Emory University. It was as I was walking by one of the larger meeting rooms at the conference that I literally caught a glimpse of Gale Yee approaching the lectern. I knew neither who she was, nor what the session was about. What I did know was that I was seeing an Asian American woman preparing to speak at AAR/SBL and I wanted to hear what she had to say. As it turned out, Gale was preparing to speak to the AAR session theme, “The Impact of National Histories on the Politics of Identity.”

Twenty five years ago, I simply could not have imagined standing here this afternoon among this panel of colleagues, all sharing our appreciation for Gale Yee and her work at an annual meeting that is honoring her as the first woman of color -- and first Asian American -- to serve as President of the Society of Biblical Literature. In 1994, I didn't know of any other self-identified Asian American women working in biblical studies. But seeing, hearing, and meeting Gale back then made me sense, for the first time, the possibility that biblical studies could be something I hadn't previously envisioned.

Like other graduate students of my generation, my biblical studies training brought me up in the ways of historical criticism. Although I'd certainly read and studied some contextual theology as an MDiv student at Union Theological Seminary, as well as feminist and African American biblical scholarship as a doctoral student (the latter being done only on my “own time,” meaning outside of seminars), I'd effectively been trained to read and engage the Bible as

though I didn't and couldn't inhabit my own skin. I had no idea -- in those early days of doing contextual criticism -- what a consciously Asian American reading of the biblical text could even look like, or that I could legitimately claim the identity and positionality to enact such a reading. As an Asian American adoptee, I was yet in the process of understanding and owning my ethnic identity, and still navigating the way between illegitimacy and legitimacy both as a person and as a biblical scholar.

So as I watched and listened to Gale Yee speaking at that SBL session in 1994, I was uplifted not only by her presence, but also by her words. In those few minutes, it occurred to me that Gale Yee -- a biblical scholar like none I had known before -- was giving me permission and legitimacy to begin rethinking my path in biblical studies and my place in academia. She opened her remarks by noting the following: "Two related issues deeply affect my identity as a Chinese-American. The first is my inculturation and that of my nuclear and extended family into U. S. society. The second is the ethnic and regional diversity of Asian-American inculturation. . . the ethnic and regional diversity of Asian-American women makes me resist generalizing how this inculturation takes place for Asian-American women" (Yee "The 3rd Story" 108). And then, as she continued, my heart leapt at these words: "The construction of an American identity for a Hmong woman growing up in Minnesota, or a Korean woman adopted as a child by a Southern white couple, will be completely different from a Taiwanese woman growing up in San Francisco's or New York's Chinatown" (108). That singular moment in 1994 was the first time in my entire life that I'd ever heard anyone, let alone an Asian American, identify adoptees born in Asian as *Asian Americans* -- and she did so without the equivocation, apology, disdain, or pity that I was used to people associating with adoption. To say it was a turning point in my life is quite an understatement.

It is often said that scholarly work emerges from autobiography, whether consciously or otherwise, and regardless of whether or not we can clearly identify the relationship between who we are, where we have been, and what we see, understand, and write. After articulating her self-understanding as an Asian American in the remarks she offered in 1994, which were later published in the *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology*, Gale confessed with characteristic candor: “How my Asian-American identity affects my scholarship is a difficult question for me at this point. I cannot divide my self, my identity, into compartments . . . I know where my gender identity affects my biblical studies, but I have not yet figured out where my ethnicity affects my biblical scholarship” (112). After noting that she had helped get a new SBL Consultation on Asian and Asian American Biblical Studies off the ground, she concluded her remarks by saying, “Wish me luck in this new adventure and ask me this question in five years” (112).

Just recently, Gale identified that moment in Chicago – when I first felt included as an Asian American -- as the time when she herself “ ‘came out’ as an Asian American woman, politically and intellectually” (Yee “Negotiating Shifts” 107). In her essay in the SBL’s newly-published volume, *Women and the Society of Biblical Literature* (2019), she writes that over time, “ ‘Asian American’ became the name that I gave to my specific positioning *by* the narratives of the past -- and *within* the narratives past in the United States and in my professional guild” (107). The key question shaping her work thus became “ what are the personal, interpersonal, cultural, and systemic influences that allow, trigger, or compel one of Asian descent in the United States to become an Asian American and appropriate this nomenclature intentionally...?” (107). In a career that she describes as “one of flux,” Gale Yee has navigated her way from work focused on historical and literary criticism to work that takes on “context-

specific gender, racial/ethnic readings, and beyond” (108). And all of us saw that “beyond” powerfully articulated as “intersectionality” in her stellar SBL Presidential Address this past Saturday night.

Now, twenty-five years after Gale “came out” as Asian American at the annual meeting of the AAR/SBL and twenty-five years after I felt, as a graduate student member of her audience, invited to join her, I cannot contemplate Gale Yee’s work without thinking of two things: first, that Gale Yee has pioneered Asian American feminist biblical interpretation; and second, that her work has inspired and helped make possible much of the work in Asian American biblical hermeneutics that has followed since.

From among her many published articles and two co-edited volumes that take up Asian American hermeneutics, I will comment this afternoon on two essays in particular, chosen because they illustrate Gale’s navigation of new waters in biblical studies and her establishment of what I see as the central paradigm for Asian American biblical interpretation. Hers is a hermeneutic that displays transparency in its investment in both biblical interpretation and Asian American perspectives and concerns. The first essay on which I will comment, published in 2006, signaled Gale’s first published foray into Asian American biblical hermeneutics. The second, published in 2007, illustrates a key principle that has guided Gale’s approach, one which I have found especially helpful in my own work.

In her essay, titled “Yin/Yang is Not Me: An Exploration into an Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics,” Gale picked up right where she left off at the AAR session in 1994. She opened her essay by writing, “I am grateful for this opportunity to explore the contours and seams of Asian American biblical interpretation, something I have wanted to do since delving into the politics of national identity as an Asian American woman for an AAR Women and

Religion session back in 1994” (152). She adds, and this is what I want especially to underscore, that “what follows is a very personal account of my efforts to theorize and problematize Asian American biblical hermeneutics since then” (152). As she then recounts two personal anecdotes, Gale exhibits and exemplifies a model of interpreting biblical texts that is transparent, intentional, ethically and politically engaged, and which holds to the standard of acknowledging the multi-dimensionality of biblical literature that she established in an important essay, “The Author/Text/Reader and Power: Suggestions for a Critical Framework for Biblical Studies” in Fernando Segovia’s and Mary Ann Tolbert’s, *Reading From this Place*, Volume 1, published in 1995.

Gale’s essay recounts how she had been asked to perform her ethnicity in job interviews and how, as an Asian American, she had been forced to choose between identifying herself as *either* “Asian” *or* “American” when she applied for the Hong Kong ID card she needed for her year-long appointment as a visiting professor at Chinese University of Hong Kong (which is now one of the frontlines for the protests in that city). In reflecting on these experiences, she draws on Rey Chow and Gish Jen to help her articulate the tensions that shaped these encounters and what they reveal about the construction of ethnicity and racism in the US., on one hand, and the “slippage” that occurs in moving across borders, on the other. She concludes that these experiences revealed the degree to which she was perceived as an ethnic foreigner in both contexts, leading her Gale to wonder, “So in what consists my Asian Americanness, and does this identity affect my biblical interpretation? Does ‘Asian American’ refer to *my ethnicity as a biblical scholar* or to the *thematic content* of my biblical interpretation?”(156). The questions that Gale raised in this piece, published in 2006, have not gone away. As she noted then, and as she illustrates in her ongoing work, Asian American biblical interpretation shifts the question

from “Who is an Asian American?” to “What are the different ways of becoming Asian American, and of claiming such an identity, with all its fluidity, in the process of engaging biblical texts and their interpretation?” Thus, in Gale’s view, “Asian American biblical hermeneutics demands that interpretation be *near us*,” and carried out “from a specific and *interested* position” (163).

In her essay, “She Stood in Tears amid the Alien Corn: Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority,” the “specific and *interested* position” from which she chose to read the book of Ruth, reflects less her personal history and more the history and story of Chinese in America. Most importantly, she states near the opening of her essay, that as she “looked for a biblical text to explore through Asian American eyes,” she found in Ruth a text that “readily lent itself to such a reading” (45). In other words, she did not assume that every text functions as good soil for cultivating an Asian American hermeneutic. She chose a text that resonated with her positionality and perspective as an Asian American interpreter. As she noted, Ruth “conjoins issues of gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, immigration, nationality, assimilation, and class in tantalizing ways that allow different folk to read their own stories into the multivalent narrative of Ruth and Naomi” (45). In her particular reading, Gale shows that the biblical depiction “of Ruth as the ‘model émigré’ is similar to the construction of Asian Americans as the model minority. Their depictions in both cases are used for propagandistic purposes, casting them simultaneously as the perpetual foreigner in the lands in which they live” (46). Thus she reads Ruth and the Asian American experience together, showing how each throws more light on the other, so that her analysis illumines how in each instance these two tropes -- flip sides of the same coin -- are reinforced, promoted, and perpetuated in biblical and dominant cultural narratives. Gale’s reading is effective because she has chosen her texts – the biblical and the

Asian American – carefully in order to place them in conversation with one another. She conducts an Asian American reading of a biblical text by posing a hermeneutic suited to her primary interests, convictions, and task. In Gale’s hands, Asian American interpretation is not a meta-hermeneutic. It is a hermeneutical multi-tool, with the questions put to each reading selected intentionally and used with exceeding skill and laser focus precision.

What has always grabbed me about Gale’s work is its deep and profound integrity. She articulates clearly who she is reading near or with, why she reads the texts she does, and how she reads them. The integrity of her work is what makes it so powerful and compelling. It is also why she is able not only to trace the shifts in her work through the years but to suggest that such movement will likely continue. Only a scholar of the highest caliber is comfortable making such a claim.

Gale’s work has not only paved the way for other Asian American interpreters, it has gone a long way to making such work even possible. As my opening anecdote illustrated, it is Gale to whom I owe heartfelt thanks for uttering words -- before we even had the opportunity to meet -- that affected me profoundly and helped me find a place within biblical studies. Three recent and different examples, drawn from the work of other scholars, will serve to illustrate the point I want to make about the impact of Gale’s work. In 2015, New Testament scholar Jin Young Choi published a study of the Gospel of Mark that examines Markan discipleship from the context of her position as “a woman outsider to and in, the West” (Choi 2). She employs a “hermeneutics of *phronesis*,” one that takes up the sociohistorical context of Mark, “not to reconstruct history but to engage, or have a singular relationship with Jesus whose body was crucified by the imperial authority” (47). In her reading of Mark 6-7, for example, Choi is able “not only to interpret the passages . . . with respect to the body in its sociohistorical context but

also to connect to the present postcolonial and transnational context in which the bodies of Asian descendants are displaced and replaced” (3). As Gale Yee does in her work, Choi identifies her “specific and *interested* position”, adding emphatically, “My social location is not merely a material reality separated from (her) body; it is an embodied place, because my body engage in meaning creation by moving and interacting with people in this material, discursive, and relational space” (36). Reading from the perspective gained through the bodily experiences of migration and what she identifies as pre-Christian religious practice, Choi performs an embodied and political reading of Mark. Engaging in historical inquiry refracted through a postcolonial optic has profound theological consequences for Choi, who describes herself as “haunted” by Jesus’ broken body and standing in solidarity with all those whose bodies have been broken by the oppression of empire (47). She brings forward a reading that is powerful because her clearly articulated commitment to embodied particularity enables her to speak with precision to that which has global implications.

Currently, Yii-Jan Lin is working on a book for Yale University Press, titled *Immigration and Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation and U.S. Immigration*. Examining the influence of Revelation on American discourses of immigration, the book takes up, in part, discourse pertaining to the Angel Island immigration station in San Francisco Bay. As Lin argues, those coming to live in the U.S. often conceived of their destination in utopian terms. Thus in one section of her study, she highlights the apocalyptic hopes of Chinese immigrants – those who called San Francisco “Gold Mountain (*jing san* in Mandarin) and America “island of the immortals” (*xian dao*). These hopes sometimes come to bitter ends. One poem composed during detention into the walls of the Chinese men’s barracks of Angel Island reads:

“This place is called an island of immortals,

When in fact this mountain wilderness
Is a prison” (Lin)

As it was her work on Angel Island that led to the idea for a larger monograph, Lin’s project, too, belongs to the trajectory of Asian American biblical criticism that Gale’s work has largely shaped. Lin’s engagement with the biblical text began with the questioning, recording, and exclusion of Chinese attempting entry into the U.S. The discourses she examines interrogates the positioning of Chinese Americans “by the narratives of the past and *within* the narratives past in the United States” and in biblical studies.

Finally, the 2019 publication of the *T & T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*, edited by Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang, underscore the breadth and depth of the trajectory on Asian American biblical scholarship that has paralleled and been, in part, fueled by Gale’s scholarship. The handbook, which is organized in three parts focusing on contexts, methods, and texts, opens with an essay by Tamara C. Ho, titled “The Complex Heterogeneity of Asian American Identity,” and features no less that 37 essays in total. The understanding of what constitutes “Asian American” that Gale observed in 1994, is more fully and richly on display in this volume.

In that volume’s essay on postcolonial method, Uriah Kim argues that “Postcolonial method is more than a strategy or criticism that offers different perspectives from that of the normative critical study and interpretation of the Bible. It is an opportunity to establish a different epistemological (back)ground from which to reassess” former scholarship (Kim 187). For Kim, this is about much more than establishing subjectivity or identifying the social location from which one interprets the Bible. For the “(h)istories and experiences of minoritized individuals and groups attest to the *objective reality* of society in which we live and explain

social relations that are in place. That is, subjective experiences can be analyzed as objective knowledge about the world” (189). For Kim, it is very important to identify and examine “the correlation between subjective experience and objective social conditions” (194). Here Kim’s work resonates with Gale’s turn to intersectionality and the relationship between the lived experience and social realities.

These recent and current studies illustrate the space for Asian American biblical studies that Gale Yee did much to help create. From publishing in what was a new area of biblical studies research, to co-founding the Asian and Asian American Hermeneutics Consultation for SBL, serving on and chairing the Committee for Underrepresented Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession, being an early member of and then President of the Ethnic Chinese Biblical Colloquium, and mentoring countless students and young scholars, Gale’s contributions to SBL and to biblical studies have been immense. We all owe her a debt of gratitude. So congratulations to you, my friend, for all you have achieved, and deepest thanks for all the inspiration you have provided and the intellectual doors you have opened for so many of us.

I close these brief remarks with a few questions for Gale to consider, as time allows. Given your reflections on the multiplicity of Asian American identities and seeing now how the field of Asian American biblical interpretation is growing — where do you see Asian American biblical interpretation heading? How is it distinguished from intersectional interpretation, more generally? And are there gaps in Asian American interpretation that we need to address or new questions that are currently emerging for you?

Works Cited

Choi, Jin Young. *Postcolonial Discipleship of Embodiment: An Asian and Asian American Feminist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

- Kim, Uriah Y. "More than an Interpretation from a Different Perspective: A Postcolonial Reading from a Different Epistemological (Back)Ground." *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*, edited by Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang. T&T Clark, 2019, 186-195.
- and Seung Ai Yang, *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*. T & T Clark, 2019.
- Lin, Yii-Jan. *Immigration and Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation and U.S. Immigration*. Yale University Press (forthcoming).
- Yee, Gale A. "'She Stood in Tears Amid the Alien Corn': Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority." *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology*, edited by Rita Nakashima Brock, et al. Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, 45-65.
- "Special Edition: The 3rd Story." *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology* 2 no. 1 (1997) 108-112.
- "Negotiating Shifts in Life's Paradigms." *Women in the Society of Biblical Literature*, edited by Nicole L. Tilford. SBL Press, 2019, 103-112.
- "Yin/Yang is Not Me: An Exploration into an Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics." *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan. Chalice Press, 2006, 152-163.