

[연구논문]

# “Realization of the Promised Land”: Christian Narratives in American Identity Formation Focusing on Filipino and Korean Americans.

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## I. Introduction

Historian Oscar Handlin says: “Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history.”<sup>1)</sup> As Handlin noted, the United States has been founded and developed with an immigration history which includes multiple groups of diverse race, nationality, religion and so on. This diversity has raised a problematic question, “Who is an American?”, and the answers to that question have been controversial.

Throughout American history, diverse immigrant groups have developed their own self-identity as Americans based on their individual racial, national or religious differences as well as an ideology of creating legitimate meanings about “being an American” in the host society. In other words, the characteristics immigrants carry with them when they immigrated to America are transferred into social and

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1) Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Little Brown & Company. 1973), 1.

cultural meanings within American cultural and ideological contexts. Furthermore, the transitional relationships between their homelands and America serve as significant factors in determining their understanding of their immigrant lives. Through these processes, they transplant their roots and are regenerated into “Americans.”

Among various factors contributing to the identity formation of the immigrants, religion has served as a powerful tool for immigrants to understand their lives by providing them a transcendent sacred reality beyond their particular ethnic backgrounds and minority status. This article will discuss how Asian Americans, Filipino and Korean Americans in particular, promote what it means to be Americans through the examination of their Christian narratives. Narratives provide the stories through which they can discover who they are and define their relationship to others in society. Therefore, their “patent fiction”<sup>2)</sup> based on Christian faith reveals their own ways of understanding their transnational movement and immigrant lives in America. Through this reinterpretation, Christian narratives situate them in the status of God’s chosen people who had been called to America which they believe is the Promised Land and who are on their sacred journey into the realization of the promised land.

The idea of God’s chosen people in the Bible is based on the concept that God chooses a particular people or nation for His special mission. In the Old Testament of the Bible, God chose Jews as his people.

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2) Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison : University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 11. “Not of North America, for the prophecies stopped short at the Canadian and Mexican borders, but of a country that, despite its arbitrary territorial limits, could read its destiny in its landscape, and a population that, despite its bewildering mixture of race and creed, could believe in something called an American mission, and could invest that **patent fiction** with all the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual appeal of a religious quest…….”

Through the Bible, God blessed, punished, protected and gave promises for the future. This idea of God's chosen people has constituted the basic faith of Filipino and Korean American Christians. Then, my question is "how does this narrative contribute to the formation of their American identities?" The answers to this question will demonstrate how immigrants promote their identities as Americans without denying their distinctive ethnicity. Each Immigrant group did not come to America to be marginalized, rather they keep seeking ways to construct an ethnic identity that would place them at the very center of American culture.<sup>3)</sup>

## II. Goal of this study

The functions of religious narratives centered on the particular group relating to American national identity have been central issues among American historians. For instance, in the early history of the New England colonies, the Puritan religious leaders created an "errand into Wilderness" as a symbolic destiny for the early Puritan immigrants. John Winthrop's famous sermon and the image of America as a "city on the hill" is a good example of the use of religious language in the construction of American national identity in early history.<sup>4)</sup>

English professor Joanna Brooks analyzed the religious literature of the early African Americans and Native Americans as a way to see

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3) April Schultz, "The Pride of the Race Had Been Touched?: The 1925 Norse-American Immigration Centennial and Ethnic Identity," *The Journal of American History* 77: 4 (Mar., 1991):1281.

4) Conrad Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

how people of color developed their identities using Christian discourses.<sup>5)</sup> Brooks discussed her arguments within the context of the story of Christian redemption and regeneration represented by Lazarus in the Bible. In her research, the sermons and religious literature provided the resources for her discussion.

In addition, in the field of African American studies, scholars have conducted studies of theological interpretations of the slave history and racial oppression experiences of African Americans using Christian discourses for their identity construction.<sup>6)</sup> In particular, Exodus narratives were popularly taken by the marginalized groups. For instance, Historian Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. analyzed how Exodus in the Bible influenced the imagination of African Americans for their construction of racial identity in the early nineteenth century, just before the Civil War.<sup>7)</sup> According to his analysis, a classical storyline of Exodus provides the model of explaining the special history and experience of slavery of African Americans. In addition to African American cases, there is some literature on the examination of the use

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5) Joanna, Brooks, *American Lazarus : religion and the rise of African-American and Native American literatures* (New York: Oxford University Press. 2003).

6) Voluminous research on African American Christianity and theological interpretations of African American history includes, Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. *Exodus! : Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2000 ; Lincoln, C. Eric & Lawrence Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press. 1990) ; Eric Lincoln, *The Negro Pilgrimage in America: The Coming of Age of the Black Americans* (New York: Bantam Books. 1969) ; Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. "Myth and African American Self-Identity." in *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity: An Introduction*, ed. Craig R. Prentiss (New York: New York University Press. 2003), 28-42 ; Robert Joseph Taylor et al., "Black Americans' Perceptions of the Sociohistorical Role of the Church," *Journal of Black Studies* 18:2 (Dec., 1987), 123-138.; Anthony B. Pinn ed. *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering: A History of Theodicy in African-American Religious Thought*, (University Press of Florida. 2002).

7) Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. 2000, 2003. Op. Cit.

of Exodus by other groups including Mormons and Native Americans.<sup>8)</sup>

However, in America which has strong Christian backgrounds, Asian religions have remained as elements supplementing foreign images of Asian-Americans. For example, Oliver Stone's movie *Heaven and Earth*<sup>9)</sup> illustrates the popular use of Asian-American religion. In this movie, the images of the religion of Le Ly, who is a Vietnamese immigrant in the U.S., are vividly represented by portraying her Buddhist worship scenes. Also throughout the movie, her life in the U.S. is strongly influenced by the advice of a Buddhist monk. Through these representations of Le Ly, this movie shows how Buddhism, a common Asian religion, is used as a popular strategy to symbolize the differences of Asian Americans.

Therefore, the goal of this article is to avoid essentializing Asian American ethnic characteristics which are regarded as non-Christian based on a popular stereotypical description of Asian-Americans. Religious scholar Laurence Moore argued in his book that "Religious Outsiders" from various religions have been absorbed into American society which is growing more multicultural.<sup>10)</sup> According to him, Asian Americans establish their American identities by practicing and maintaining their Asian heritage. In other words, he proposes that under a multicultural society, to be ethnic means to be an American.

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8) John Newton, "Analysis of Programmatic Texts of Exodus Movements," in *Exodus-A Lasting Paradigm*. Bas van Israel and Anton Weiler, ed. Marcus Lefebure, trans. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd. 1987) ; R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed. *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995).

9) *Heaven and Earth* (1993) is Oliver Stone's movie which is made based on the two volumes of autobiography, *Heaven and Earth Changed Places and Child or War, Woman of Peace*, written by a Vietnamese woman named Le Ly Hayslip. She met an American GI during the Vietnam War and immigrated to America.

10) R. Laurence, Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press. 1986), 21.

In addition, recently, there is research overcoming Asian religious stereotypes, examining the adoption of American evangelical Christianity by Asian American Christians as a way to negotiate their racial identity and American identity.<sup>11)</sup> Religious sociologist Rudy Busto argued that the increasing participation in Christian missions by Asian-American college students functioned to create Asian-American identities. Furthermore, their increasing membership in Christian college ministries implied the actual increase in the number of Asian-American students on college campus, one of the phenomena relating to the model minority myth.<sup>12)</sup> Therefore, Asian-American college students could establish their identities as a model minority through Christian evangelical activities.

As in Busto's research, historian Alumkal Anthony also investigated the influence of American evangelical Christians in the identity formation of Asian American second generations. Alumkal argues that for the second generation Asian Americans, American mainstream evangelical Christian identity plays a crucial role in their identity

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11) Rudy V. Busto, "The Gospel According to the Model Minority?: Hazarding an Interpretation of Asian-American Evangelical College Students," *Amerasia Journal*, 22:1 (1996); Antony W. Alumkal, *Asian American Evangelical Churches: Race, Ethnicity, and Assimilation in the Second Generation* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC; 2003); Elaine Howard. Ecklund, Models of Civic Responsibility: Korean Americans in Congregations with Different Ethnic Compositions, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44:1 (2005): 15-28. Her forthcoming book discusses more about this theme. *Korean American Religion: Race, Ethnicity, and Civic Life* (Oxford University Press. 2006).

12) Model minority myth is a conservative popular image of Asian-Americans as a successful minority who can be a model to other minorities, especially blacks. This discourse was initiated by the two articles which praised the successes of Japanese and Chinese immigrants in America. They are William Peterson, "Success story, Japanese-American Style." *New York Times Magazines*. January 9, 1966, 20-21, 33, 36, 38, 40-41. 43 and "Success story of One Minority in America" *U.S. News and World Report*. December 26, 1966, 73-78.

formation. Sociologist Elaine Ecklund also showed how evangelical Christian resources are used for the Korean American second generation to create their racial and ethnic identities and boundaries between themselves and non-Korean ethnic groups. For this purpose, Ecklund analyzed the interpretations of civic responsibility of the second generation Korean American college students who attend Protestant churches.

This research is dealing with one or two particular Asian groups individually and each group is developing its own Christianity influenced by the mainstream American evangelical Christianity rather than establishing a pan-Asian version of Christianity. For Asian-Americans, Christianity has been represented as a dominant cultural agency of the U.S. and is engaged in the "acculturation" process of adopting the "American way of life and values."

In this sense, my goal is to examine each immigrant's version of Christianity in establishing their American identities rather than Asian American identities. In this process, their Christian narratives reinterpret their particular ethnic background and immigrant experiences and in this process, each ethnic heritage becomes a fundamental factor of having providential destiny to be "desirable" Americans, rather than something which would be given up. Therefore, my study is expected to relate Asian American studies to the American national identity formation.

### III. The two Asian American groups: Filipino and Korean Americans

In this article, I selected the cases of Filipino Americans and Korean Americans for three reasons. First of all, these two groups are recently among the fastest growing minority groups in America, with the population of each group reaching close to two million. They are relatively new Asian American immigrant groups because their large scale of immigration resulted from the 1965 immigrant policy. As the result of this law, Filipino, Korean, Asian Indian and Southeast Asians comprised over 90 percent of the total Asian immigrants in 1971.<sup>13)</sup> In the case of Filipinos, over 1.3 million immigrants came to America between 1970 and 1996. With a population of over 1.8 million according to the 2000 census, Filipino Americans have become the second largest Asian group in the United States after the Chinese.<sup>14)</sup>

The large scale of Korean immigration followed the amendment of the Immigration Act of 1965 which abolished the restriction of immigration from Asia. Since then, a large number of Korean immigrants has arrived in America every year and the continual influx of Korean immigrants have augmented Korean American communities. According to the 2000 census, of the total number of Koreans in America, 65 percent were reported to be foreign born and only 35 percent were

13) Timothy P. Fong, *Asian-Americans: Experiences and Perspectives* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000), 20.

14) <Asian Population of U.S., 2000 Census>

	Chinese	Filipino	Asian Indian	Korean	Vietnamese	Japanese	Others
%	24	20	16	10.3	10.2	9.7	6.3

Tony Cranes and Fenggang Yang. ed. *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries* (New York: New York University Press), 17.

U.S. born. In addition, even though the annual number of Koreans admitted declined steadily in the 1990s, recording the lowest level in 1999, it has gradually increased since 2000.<sup>15)</sup> As a result, according to the 2005 U.S. Census, the population of Koreans in America reached over a million, recording 1,246,240.<sup>16)</sup> The post-1965 immigrants from both countries are from urban areas unlike the early immigrants who came from rural areas. In addition, they came to America to settle permanently in family groups.

Secondly, the demographical research shows that these two groups demonstrate the highest religious affiliations, especially Christianity including Catholicism, among Asian Americans. According to the demographical study of religious affiliation of Asian Americans, the Filipino Americans are the most religious Asian American group, followed by Korean Americans. About 94 percent of Filipino Americans expressed their religious identity and almost 71 percent attend religious services once a month at least. Korean Americans attend religious services (77%) more often than Filipino Americans.<sup>17)</sup> Furthermore,

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15) While only 107 Koreans were admitted between 1941 and 1950, the number of admitted Koreans as permanent residents increased rapidly to 6,231 between 1950 and 1960, 34,526 between 1961 and 1970, 267,638 between 1971 and 1980, and 333,746 between 1981 and 1990. The number of annual admittance has declined steadily after reaching its peak of 35,849 in 1987. The number of Korean immigrants admitted in 1999 was only 12,301, the lowest level recorded since 1972. The number of Koreans admitted has increased gradually since, and it was 20,742 in 2001. A total of 827,156 Korean immigrants were admitted to the U.S. between 1948 and 2001.

Eui-Young Yu and Peter Choe, "Korean Population in the United States as Reflected in the Year 2000 U.S. Census," *Amerasia Journal* 29:3 (2003-2004), 5.

16) The total number of Koreans in America is estimated to be about 2 million including approximately 250,000 illegal immigrants, over 50,000 students and non-permanent residents who are staying for extended period. *Dong-A Ilbo* (*Dong-A Daily Newspaper*), Oct. 27, 2007.

17) Pei-te Lien and Tony Carnes. "The Religion Demography of Asian American Boundary Crossing." Carnes, Tony & Fenggang Yang. ed. Op. Cit., p.39.

these two groups show their religious involvement dominantly in Christianity in comparison with other Asian Americans. 79 percent of Korean Americans identified themselves Christians including 11 percent of Catholics, while in the case of Filipino Americans, majority of them are Catholics (68%). However, evangelical Protestantism is recently increasing among Filipino American communities, making up 18 percent of Filipino Americans.<sup>18)</sup>

Finally, both countries were predominantly influenced by the United States in their modernization in the twentieth century, which contributed to the construction of their fantasized images of America. Based the pre-immigrant exposure to American influences, their attitudes idealized everything relating to America. This so-called “American fever” according to Korean expression, served as strong motivation for their immigration to America.

Filipino’s “American Fever” is based on the Filipino colonization history. America influenced every aspect of the lives of the Filipinos for forty-eight years of colonization (1898-1946). Throughout the colonization period, the Filipinos believed that they were “Little Brown Brothers” of Americans and dreamed of living in their colonial master’s home, America. Filipino American writer Gamalinda Eric explained this colonial mentality of Filipinos:

In the Philippines, America is a presence as huge as God. Every Filipino is expected from the first day of school to acquire an exhaustive knowledge of America the Beautifulits language, literature, history, and culture...<sup>19)</sup>

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18) Ibid., p.46.

19) Eric Gamalinda “Myth, Memory, Myopia: Or, I May Be Brown But I Hear America Singin’” in *Flippin’ : Filipinos on America* Luis H. and Francia Eric Gamalinda ed. (New York: The Asian American Writers’ Workshop. 1996), 2.

Even though the American government did not grant the Filipino immigrants American citizenship, they could enter the United States under the condition of U.S. nationality, regardless of the restriction on immigration from Asian countries. As Asian American historian, Robert Takaki said; "They had come here, thinking they were Americans, pushed from the Philippines by poverty and pulled to America by 'extravagance.'"<sup>20)</sup>

In the late twentieth century, highly-educated Filipinos who suffered from a scarcity of jobs and high competition also came to America. In addition, relatively low wages with respect to for the professional status motivated them to leave their country for America. The Filipino professionals immigrated to America with ideal images of American abundance and also belief in American Dream which means that anyone can achieve success commensurate with their efforts. In Takaki's interview, a Filipino immigrant Carlos Patalinghug said to his friend in Philippines when he visited his home: "If you work, you'll get milk and honey in America."<sup>21)</sup>

In the case of Korean immigrants, anthropologist Kyeyoung Park explained this characteristic: "Koreans do not emigrate because they cannot survive in their home country but because they dream about America ... all immigrants are fed by cultural colonialism from America. In Korea, this is described as American fever."<sup>22)</sup>

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20) Ronald. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company. 1989), 316.

21) Ibid., p.433.

22) In an interview by Kyeyoung Park, a respondent remarked, "Without any deep thought, I was just eager to go to America. I was told again and again that America is a wonderful and beautiful country, full of gold, indeed a paradise in this world. In a word, I had the American fever (*migukpyeong*)." Kyeyoung Park, *The Korean American Dream: Immigrants and Small Business in New York City* (Ithaca, NY:

A cause of Koreans' "American fever" traces back to the contact with American missionaries. In the process of Korea's modernization in the early twentieth century, American missionaries introduced white middle class Protestant cultures and values as standards of civilization in contrast with Korean traditional cultures and values. Witnessing the luxurious lives of American missionaries, Koreans regarded living like Americans as a symbol of their success in terms of living standards.

After liberation, Koreans had more chances to reach American conveniences and commodities through contact with American soldiers stationed in Korea. For Koreans who were experiencing extreme poverty in the 1960s, the relatively affluent lives of American soldiers contributed to their dreaming of America. In the following quote, a Korean American man recalled his impression from the contact with American armies.

When I was growing up in Korea in the 1960s, life was very difficult. We were very regimented, forced to have our hair cut short and forced to wear uniforms to school. I faced a lot of economic hardships. We did not always have enough to eat. Sometimes all of my family members had to share one egg. I came into contact with American soldiers when I was young. It seemed to me that they were all able to eat well every day. They ate lots of meat. I remember thinking that if I went to America, I could eat like that too, even if I was a beggar in America. Like all other Koreans, I had to serve in the Korean military. I remember being always hungry and always cold. The U.S. soldiers would come out of their tents in weather that was twenty degrees below zero Centigrade wearing only their underwear. In those days, blue jeans from American were so popular. If I could ever afford a pair of jeans, I would not wear them, I would just

look at them. To me, America seemed like heaven.<sup>23)</sup>

Koreans who were experiencing extreme poverty in the 1960s dreamed of American affluence. However, since only a small number of people could afford to purchase these products in the early period of Korean economic development, possession and consumption of these American luxurious goods at home became a symbol of high social status.<sup>24)</sup> The increasing opportunities to watch American lives through media fantasized western styles of living as well. Therefore, they decided to immigrate to America to obtain American ways of life which they thought would be urban middle-class lifestyles.

In sum, the basic views of America as a wealthy country were inherited from the early twentieth century and strengthened in both countries. It did not matter whether they respected American cultures and societies or not. They regarded living in America as a symbol of their success and as a way to promote their social status in terms of living standards.

Based on these three reasons discussed above, this article will discuss Christian narratives of Filipino and Korean Americans, in establishing what it means to be Americans within the Biblical context of Exodus based on each ethnic background. As Japanese American theologian Fumitaka Matsuoka defined, theologians of both groups

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23) Ku, Dong Hwan (pseudonym) "War Zone" *East to America : Korean American Life Stories*, Eui-Young Yu and Elaine H. Kim, ed. (New York: New Press, 1996), 37.

Dong Hwan Ku was born in Korea in 1958. He immigrated to America in 1984 when he was twenty-six years old by marrying a immigrant woman who was living in the U.S.

24) Sang-Dawn Lee, *Big Brother, Little Brother: The American Influence on Korean Culture in the Lyndon B. Johnson Years* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002), 57.

“treat cultural distinctness as the primary context of their theological reading of America.”<sup>25)</sup>

#### IV. Filipino Americans: Eleazar S. Fernandez

Filipino American theologian Fernandez Eleazar<sup>26)</sup> provided theological explanation for Filipino Americans to make sense of their experiences in America within the framework of the exodus narrative, which has been one of the main narratives for the marginalized or immigrants who have been struggling for liberation and survival. Fernandez' interpretation illustrates how Asian American Christian leaders interpret their immigrant experiences within the context of the history of the Jewish in the Old Testament in the Bible. The symbols in Exodus such as God's chosen people, deliverance, and exodus toward the Promised Land, have a powerful impact on interpreting and understanding the experiences of a group in a flexible way within the different contexts. In general, the story of Exodus resonated with the national history of those who have experiences of oppression and freedom as well as immigration from one place to another. Christian leaders implored the congregation to make sense of their transnational experiences within the framework of Exodus.

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25) Fumitaka Matsuoka, "Introduction." in *Realizing the America of Our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans*. Eleazar S. Fernandez and Fumitaka Matsuoka. ed. (St. Louis, Missouri; Chalice Press. 2003), 3.

26) Revered Eleazar S. Fernandez is a Filipino American theologian who is a professor of the United Theological Seminary of Twin City. Fernandez grew up throughout his college education in the Philippines and came to America for studying his graduate study at Princeton and Vanderbilt University. He served as a pastorate in the Philippines and America.

Fernandez applied these exodus narratives to Filipino American immigrant lives based on their distinctiveness from other ethnic groups in America. What is distinguishing in his message is that he interpreted Filipino American immigration to America as "Exodus-toward Egypt" rather than "Exodus from Egypt."

Although many find themselves not just surviving in the country but actually thriving, Filipino Americans have by no means entered the promised land, the United States or America, as jubilant conquerors; to the contrary, they have landed on these shores as a colonial people and have gone on to experience life as second-class citizens. Consequently, instead of the traditional exodus-from-Egypt narrative, with its accompanying themes of conquest and election, I suggest that the narrative that best articulates the Filipino-American experience is that of exodus-toward-Egypt.<sup>27)</sup>

His distinct interpretation of Filipino American experiences is based on the colonization history of the Philippines. At first, the Spanish colonized the Philippines since the sixteenth century (1521). Then, as the result of the Spanish-American War in 1898, the winner of the war, the United States, took over all of the former Spanish colonies including the Philippines. Therefore, the Philippines became an American colony until they gained independence in 1946. During and after the American colonization of the Philippines, a large number of Filipinos immigrated to America with rosy images of American society which had been developed through contact with Americans as their

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27) Eleazar S. Fernandez, "Exodus-toward-Egypt: Filipino-American's Struggle to Realize the Promised Land in America." in *A Dream Unfinished: Theological Reflections on American from the Margins*. Eleazar S. Fernandez and Fernando F. Segovia. ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 2001), 169.

colonial masters in their homelands. Considering this historical background, Fernandez called Filipino American experiences “exodus-exile” because they moved into the colonial master’s country even after they were liberated from it. He argued that the Biblical model of Exodus fits the Euro-American experiences who occupied the new land by conquering the Native Americans who were symbolized as Canaanites in the Bible.<sup>28)</sup> According to him, Euro-Americans made an exodus “by way of conquest of the American” Canaanites-Native Americans while Filipino Americans did not come to America as “jubilant conquerors” but as “exiles.”<sup>29)</sup>

For this purpose, Fernandez constructed an analogy between Filipino Americans and the immigration of Jacob’s family from Canaan to Egypt in the book of Genesis. Genesis in the Bible is composed of immigrant stories of Abraham and his descendents. Terah, Abraham’s father, set out from Ur of the Chaldeans (in modern Iraq), the land of his birth, to go to Canaan with his family including Abraham. Then, when they reached Haran (Syria), Terah settled there and lived 205 years until he died. However, Abraham left Haran and finally entered Canaan, God’s Promised Land. Abraham’s descendents lived there until Jacob, Abraham’s grandson, immigrated to Egypt. Then, Jacob’s descendents stayed in Egypt for 400 years. Exodus is an immigrant journey of Jacob’s descendents back to Canaan under the leadership of Moses. These Biblical figures in the book of Genesis took on a ‘sacred pilgrimage’ and pursued the entrance to Canaan, God’s Promised Land.

Fernandez focused on the immigration of Jacob’s family. They

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28) Fernandez, Eleazar S. “A Filipino Perspective: “Unfinished Dream” in the Land of promise” in Smith, Christine Marie ed, *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1998), 72.

29) Ibid.

moved to Egypt for finding food and jobs because of the continuous famine in their homeland. Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons, invited his family to Egypt, the wealthiest country of that time, so that they could escape from poverty in their homeland. Fernandez paralleled the situations of Jacob's family and the Filipino immigrants by articulating homogenous points between their motivations for immigration. According to him, both left their homelands for survival in an economic sense.

In resonance with the gradual immigration of Jacob and his family, Filipinos have also come to the United States in waves..... Managing to land on the shores of America is only the beginning of a long journey. Newcomers have to deal quickly with the demands of living in a new country, especially in terms of employment. the struggle to "make it" in America cannot wait. After all, this is the main reason why they have come to America: they want to "make it." Again, there is clear resonance here between the plight of Jacob's family and the plight of the Filipino's "old timers."<sup>30</sup>

He continued the analogy between the two groups by comparing the jobs given to each in the new land. According to him, Jacob and his family were given shepherd jobs that "from the masters' point of view" would fit them. Likewise, the early Filipino immigrants were given jobs which "from the perspectives of their employers" would fit them.

Being small in physical stature, their Euro-American employers thought that they would not suffer from back pain, even if they had to stoop from

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30) Eleazar S. Fernandez, 2001. Op. Cit., p. 171-172.

morning till sunset they seemed naturally suited, therefore, for the planting and harvesting of such crops as asparagus, iceberg lettuce, spinach, strawberries, and sugar beets.<sup>31)</sup>

Through the comparison between the plight of the early Filipino immigrants to Jacob's family, God's chosen people, Fernandez established self-images of Filipino Americans as a God-chosen people who were carrying on God's special calling and taking on a "sacred pilgrimage" toward Canaan in the end. This pilgrimage symbol provided a framework for them to make sense of their difficulties in America as a part of their sacred journey which would eventually bring God's blessings to the immigrants themselves and their descendents.

In this narrative, the destination of the journey is the entrance into the promised land. Fernandez' exodus/exile model also aims at the settlement in Canaan, the United States. However, because in the case of Filipino Americans who are located within the territory of Egypt, Fernandez suggested to "realize the promised land in Egypt"

Unlike the biblical Israelites, Filipino Americans have no intention of leaving Egypt (the United States); they have made the decision to cast their lot in this new country and have resolved to realize the promised land in Egypt. Yes, realize the promised land in Egypt, not outside of Egypt, not outside of the United States.<sup>32)</sup>

While the exiled Israelites longed for an eventual return to their homeland, Filipino Americans, except for some first-generation immigrants who long to spend their retirement years in the Philippines, have resolved to

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31) *Ibid.* p. 172.

32) *Ibid.*, p. 169.

stay in America. They have resolved to realize the promised land in Egypt.<sup>33)</sup>

Based on Fernandez' model, Filipino Americans are regenerated "Americans" with Filipino ethnic heritage by participating in the exodus/exile journey. Furthermore, for Filipino Americans, what it meant to be Americans requires the exorcising of the "colonial demon" and resurrection of a new-self, which he called "post-colonial subjecthood,"<sup>34)</sup> through their Christian identity as God's chosen people.

## V. Korean Americans: Rev. Dong-Seon Lim

Like Rev. Fernandez, Korean American Reverend Dong-Seon Lim's<sup>35)</sup> sermons are based on the history of the Jewish in the Old Testament in the Bible, such as Exodus, for interpreting the immigrant experiences of Korean Americans. As in the case of Fernandez' interpretation, Lim used Korean unique history as a source for making an analogy between Korean American experiences and Exodus in the Bible. According to Lim, for Korean immigrants, Exodus has meant release from their homeland, a land of colonization, war, national division,

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33) *Ibid.*, p. 181.

34) Eleazar S. Fernandez "Postcolonial Exorcism and Reconstruction: Filipino Americans' Search for Postcolonial Subjecthood." Eleazar S. Fernandez and Fumitaka Matsuoka. *Op. Cit.*, p. 95.

35) Rev. Dong-Sun Lim is a founder and former senior pastor of the Oriental Mission Church in Los Angeles, California, which is located in the Los Angeles Korea town. The Oriental Mission Church is a Korean American church with more than three thousand members. He came to America for his further study at Azury Seminary in 1946.

military authoritarian political regimes, limited social mobility, and class polarization caused by rapid industrialization, and an exodus toward the United States, a land of wealth and opportunity. However, unlike the colonizing master for Filipino Americans, America had a liberator image as a for Koreans based on a century of Korea-American relationship.

In the narrative of Exodus, God led Korean immigrants into the Promised Land which they believe is America. This analogy enables Korean immigrants to understand their transnational movement as linear assimilation from homeland to America which they believe is the better place. Therefore, they obtain their distinct identities without denying their Korean ethnic backgrounds. Even if they place emphasis upon Korean ethnic backgrounds, they try to establish their American identities distinguishing themselves from Koreans in Korea.

In the process of articulating the Biblical story, Rev. Lim reveals the views of the diasporan situations of Korean immigrants. Lim gave a message with the theme of Exodus in his sermon, *Thanksgiving in the Feast of Tabernacles* (1991).<sup>36)</sup> Lim took the text from Leviticus, chapter 23. The Feast of Tabernacles is a week-long autumn harvest festival of the Jewish people. It was the final and most important

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36) The Feast of Tabernacles is a week-long autumn harvest festival of the Jewish people. It was a final and most important holiday of the year and began on the fifteenth of Tishri. Tishri is Israel's seventh month. It's roughly September or October in solar calendar. In Leviticus 23:34, the Bible indicates the date of the holiday and period, "Say to the Israelites: 'On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the LORD's Feast of Tabernacles begins, and it lasts for seven days.'" Tabernacles refers to the temporary dwelling that Jews are commanded to live in for seven days during this holiday. This holiday commemorates the time when the Jews lived in tents in the wilderness during the forty-year that the Israelites were wandering in the desert between liberation from Egypt and entrance into the Canaan. Lim delivered the sermon about what the Jews thanked God for in the Tabernacles during this holiday.

holiday of the year and began on the fifteenth of Tishri.<sup>37)</sup> *Tabernacles* refers to the temporary dwelling that God commanded Jews to live in for seven days during this holiday. This holiday commemorates the time when the Jews lived in tents in the wilderness during the forty-years that the Israelites were wandering in the desert between liberation from Egypt and entrance into Canaan.<sup>38)</sup> In this sermon, Lim made an allegorical connection between Jews and the Korean Americans. Exodus provides a good metaphorical framework for Koreans, satisfying their native Korean identity and their immigration experiences.

In modern history of Korea, one of the greatest historical tragedies was the colonization by Japan. Under Japanese occupation, Koreans' lives were miserable, almost like slaves because Japan exploited everything in Korea, politically, economically and culturally. The memory and story of colonization by Japan provided Korean Christians a source to create an analogy with Egypt's oppression of Israel.

Considering that the Japanese occupation period represents the slavery time of the Israelites under Egypt, the independence of Korea from Japan is analogous to the exodus from Egypt of the Israelites. Lim's parallel between the freedom of the Israelites with that of the Koreans traces the identity of Korean immigrants back to Korean national historical incidents. Lim's Exodus narrative interprets the

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37) Tishri is Israel's seventh month. It's roughly September or October in solar calendar. In Leviticus 23:34, the Bible indicates the date of the holiday and period, "Say to the Israelites: 'On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the LORD's Feast of Tabernacles begins, and it lasts for seven days.'"

38) In the Bible, Leviticus chapter 23, verse 42-43 says "Live in booths for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in booths. So your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God."

Korean history in religious term and provide the image of God's Chosen people for Koreans:

When the Israelites had been suffering under slavery in Egypt for 430 years, God emancipated them to be an independent race through Moses. Additionally, God wanted them to remember their past and not to forget their history of slavery when they finally settled down in Canaan after all their wilderness experiences. God wanted the same for us. Suppose God had not freed us from Japan on Aug. 15, 1945, what would we be like now? Could our ancestors have survived? If they had all been killed, what would have happened to their descendents? Do you think it would have been possible for us Koreans to immigrate to America? We would not have been able to immigrate to America. Therefore, we have to give immense thanks to God who has protected our race until now.<sup>39)</sup>

Saying "God wanted the same for us." between the two cases, Lim paralleled the independence of the Koreans and the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. In "the same to us" above in Lim's sermon, "the same" indicates that "God wanted them to remember their past and not to forget their history of slavery when they finally settled down in Canaan after all their wilderness experiences." Based on Lim's analogy, God freed Koreans from the bondage of the Japanese occupation, and Koreans came from the hard lives in Korea through the wilderness to America. Lim clarified this point more directly in the end of his sermon by defining twentieth century Canaan as America:

Where is the land of milk and honey? I believe it is the present

39) Lim, Dong-Seon. "Thanksgiving in the Feast of Tabernacles" (1991) in *Who'e'go'wah Jun'mang: Jul'gi' Sul'kyo'jib. (Recollection and Prospects: The Sermon Collections in Special ceremony)*. Rev. Dong-Sun Lim. (Seoul: Qumran Book. 2000), 331-332.

America. Therefore, just be thankful for living in this prosperous land. Even if people say America is having economic depression these days, we can see there are many harvested fruits in the farms thanks to God's blessing. I sincerely tell you to appreciate everything you have. Then, as is says in Psalms, I pray that you think about what we can do to repay all these blessings from God and put it into action.<sup>40)</sup>

Canaan symbolizes the final destination of pilgrimage as the Promised Land given by God. However, while Rev. Fernandez viewed Exodus as Exile to Egypt, Lim interpreted that Korean immigrants has come to Canaan based on the economic and political disparity between Korea and America. The following testimony of one Korean immigrant quoted in Rev. Lim's essay manifests that the transnational interpretation was the basis of Korean immigrants' understanding of their lives in America.

It was when I went to Hawaii for leading a revival meeting in one Korean American church. After the meeting, I was about to leave for the airport early in the morning on Saturday. Then, one young deacon (*jipsa*) drove his van and offered a ride to the airport. I got on his van with great gratitude. We arrived at the airport ahead of the departure time. He bought me coffee and some snacks and we had a talk. He said he had been brought up in the mountains in *Kangweon* and he survived on nothing more than corns and potatoes when he was in Korea. He also said that he was working as a gardener and even if he were not rich, he appreciates his life because the life in Hawaii was like living in paradise in comparison with his past in Korea. Though young people may not be able to understand, if we hear the hardships of those who have experienced Japanese colonization, post-colonization disorder and the Korean War, we

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40) Ibid., p. 341.

cannot help thanking God for our current lives in America.<sup>41)</sup>

In the quote above, the young deacon was satisfied with his life in America in comparison with the tragic history in Korea, saying, “the life in Hawaii is like living in paradise in comparison with his past in Korea” Based on the testimony of the young deacon in Hawaii, Lim contended that Koreans in America should be content with their lives by remembering all the hard historical times including “Japanese colonization, post-colonization disorder and the Korean War,” although they did not experience them firsthand.

In addition, Lim’s interpretation that Korean Americans have arrived in Canaan is based on the disparity between America and other countries around the world.

With God’s grace and your understanding from the church, I have been to so many countries in the world. Nevertheless, I could not find a country as good as America. I have been to France, Great Britain, Germany and Italy and America is beyond comparison. They are not economically sufficient. Neither are they sufficient in education and culture. China will follow American after at least 50 years. Russia is suffering from unspeakable hardships. In comparison to these countries, America is a huge country and owns fertile land. Needless to say, there is desert. However, America is a rich country which guarantees the freedom of speech, religion, association and residence. In addition, there are many middle class people and it is good for the education of children. Anyone will get the opportunities if he only works and is able. America is a country with good welfare system for the old, children and the handicapped. America is a

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41) Dong-Sun Lim. “Pungseonghan Sam” (Affluent Life) in. *Hoegowa Jeonmang: Jeolgi Seolgyojip (Recollection and Prospects: The Sermon Collections in Special ceremony)*. Lim, Dong Seon (Seoul: Qumran Book. 2000), 361.

country with good housing and medical facilities as well as good transportation and good cars.

The first world countries should have these three things: the passion for education, military power, and economic power. While the Soviet Union does not have economic power, and Japan does not have military power, America is the country with three things. In Europe, it is not an exaggeration to express that many churches are dead. However, American spirit is alive. Some churches are said to have 30,000 to 50,000 members and they run 150 church buses to take the children to their Sunday Schools. We can say that America is a country which is alive with spirit. We came to this country and live without worrying about the satisfaction of basic living conditions by getting permanent residency and American citizenship. We are educating our children as internationally competent people and enjoying the freedom of our faith. Considering all these things, we can say that we are living in Canaan. Therefore, we should be thankful for our lives because we are living in Canaan.<sup>42)</sup>

Lim's metaphor of America as Canaan through the illustration of superior elements of the U.S. to other countries reveals his intention to encourage Korean immigrants to take pride in "being in America" or "becoming Americans" regardless of their own status within America. Lim's Biblical application strengthened his purpose of convincing the Korean American congregation that they made the right choice despite their current difficult situations. According to Lim, it is not right for Korean immigrants to complain about their current lives because they are living in America which he argued is the current Canaan. The Biblical symbol of Canaan provides absolute power to make their

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42) Lim Dong Seon. "Hananimkkye Gamsahara (Thank God)" in Lim, Dong Seon. *Ibid.*, pp. 319-320.

immigrant lives more meaningful.

This is the same idea as Rev. Fernandez' idea of "realizing the promised land" inside Egypt. In both cases, even if they are having difficulties, they still have "unfinished dreams" of fulfilling God's will. Furthermore, both narratives reinterpret their immigrant lives within the context of the progress from Exodus to the entrance into Canaan inside/outside Egypt and sanctify their immigrant experiences and secular dreams which are the material success in America. Based on this process, the distinct ethnic backgrounds of both immigrants become crucial factors to constitute being successful "Americans."

In the context of Exodus, both Filipino and Korean American Christian leaders reinterpret that they are God's chosen people who God brought to the present Canaan, the United States, from the Philippines and Korea, marginalized countries in the context of globalization. In sum, God brought them to the United States, the land flowing with milk and honey and they are still on their sacred journey to realize the Promised Land which is core value of their American identities.

## VI. Conclusion: Pilgrimage into God's Promised Land

Pilgrimage is one of the popular historic Christian symbols. In Christianity, the image of a pilgrim represents a person "who does not absolutize any one place or idea but is always ready to leave the present situation toward a God-promised goal."<sup>43)</sup> This mobility in

pilgrimage appealed to immigrants who believe that their current hardships are temporary and they are still in the process to achieve their own American dream in the land of opportunity. In addition, a pilgrimage identity makes an insecure and hard immigrant life be seen as God-led training in the wilderness on the journey to the Promised Land.

Rev. Sanghyun Lee, a Korean American theologian at Princeton, suggested the pilgrimage symbol as the central identity of Asian American Christians. Lee argued that a pilgrimage symbol became their "faith response" to the question, "what is the real meaning of our immigrant existence in America as marginal people?" Lee likened the lives of Asian American Christians to those of Abraham and his descendents as sojourners. Like Abraham, Asian immigrants left their home country and are still in the process of fulfilling God's promise.

It is in this context of having problems of leaving home and really arriving in America that the image of 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.<sup>44)</sup>

We are called to be a pilgrim people. Like Abraham we have been called by God to live in a wilderness "as in a foreign land," as "strangers and exiles," not feeling wholly at home where we are, nor being comfortable

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43) Lee, Sanghyun. "Pilgrimage and Home in the Wilderness of Marginality: Symbols and Context in Asian American Theology." in *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore*. Kwang Chung Kim et al. ed. (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 2001), 61.

44) *Ibid.*, p. 62

any more about returning to where we came from. We are not wandering, aimless nomads, however. We are a pilgrim people who are on a sacred journey. We have been freed from the hold of one culture or one society; we have been called "to go out" with visions for "a better country" that could be a true homeland, not only for ourselves, but for all humankind.<sup>45)</sup>

The robust striving to achieve the American Dream constituted the common ground of Filipino and Korean immigrants identified as pilgrims who had not finished their journeys. Since religious symbols produce universal and absolute meanings, this pilgrim identity can be applied to them across different classes and backgrounds. Based on this belief, they repeatedly confirmed that their decisions were God's calling, hardships in immigrant lives were evidence of God's presence in their lives and that in the end, they would have better futures. This religious understanding nurtured Asian Americans' crude perceptions of their lives, regardless of the complex racial and ethnic environments. They are willing to stick to their goal: successful settlement in America despite the fluctuating social contexts. Asian American Studies scholar Peter Kwong explained this simple understanding of their immigrant lives as:

They (Asian Americans) tend to reckon race in its crude formation, i.e. an identity along skin color and physical features. We are "Asians!" We look different! Therefore, we are being discriminated against! The remedy is to work harder and to show the Whites that we are just as good if not better!<sup>46)</sup>

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45) Lee, Sang Hyun. "Called To Be Pilgrim: Toward A Theology Within A Korean Immigrant Context" in *The Korean Immigrant in America*. Byong-Suh Kim and Sang Hyun Lee, eds. (Montclair, New Jersey: The Association of Christian, 1980), 37.

46) Kwong, Peter. "Asian American Studies Needs Class Analysis." in *Privileging*

As Kwong pointed out, Asian Americans indeed work hard and sacrificed everything for their success in America. Then, Christianity provides them religious meanings to their lives. Within the Christian faith communities, they are en route to God's Promised Land and their success is God's will.

Pilgrim identities bring them "transformation from material life to spiritual life, from earthly to godly life, and from secular pilgrimage to sacred pilgrimage."<sup>47)</sup> According to the messages above, this transformation is significant because their spiritual journeys would bring success to the immigrants themselves and their descendents by the realization of the Promised Land in the United States.

The disparate conditions between the United States and the Philippines and Korea motivated their immigration. Therefore, despite hard experiences as minority groups in America, both Filipino and Korean immigrants are trying to revitalize themselves and generate their own version of the American Dream. They do not tolerate the process of "uprooting and transplanting" to keep the same status as they had in their home country. They came to America to be part of American destiny as citizens of the most powerful country in the current era.

My study of Christian narratives of immigrants in America demonstrates how they redefine what it means to be Americans and use each distinct ethnicity to achieve their goals. They are promoting their own pride as Americans through America's historically inherited concept of God's chosen people. As long as America maintains its

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*Positions: The Sites of Asian American Studies.* Gary Y. Okihiro et. al., eds. (WA: Washington State University Press. 1995), 76.

47) Kim, Tae Kyung. *Transformative Preaching in the Transitioning Korean American Church.* (PhD. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary. 2000), 22.

status as a global superpower, America will be a country of several versions of God's chosen peoples.

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**【Abstract】**

## **“Realization of the Promised Land”: Christian Narratives in American Identity Formation Focusing on Filipino and Korean Americans**

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This article examines Protestant narratives of Filipino and Korean Americans with regard to their American national identity formation. The focus of this article is to find out how they have reinterpreted their ethnic backgrounds and immigrant experiences within the framework of the Biblical exodus story as ways of promoting their American identities based on America’s historically inherited concept of God’s chosen people. Their reinterpretation situates them in the status of God’s chosen people who had been called to America which they believe is the Promised Land and who are on their sacred journey into the realization of the Promised Land.

I selected these two groups because they have made up new immigrant groups in America since the late twentieth century and their pre-immigrant exposure to unilateral American influences caused the formation of their idealized perceptions of America. This tendency motivated them to leave their homeland for obtaining better social status and living conditions. These historical backgrounds have influenced the understanding of their post-immigrant lives in America.

I made the cases of Protestant narratives of two influential theologians, Eleazar Fernandi and Dong-Sun Lim, to demonstrate how Christian symbols such as Canaan and Exodus are used to interpret their transnational immigration and to sanctify the process of their achievement of American Dream. Furthermore, their applications of the Biblical stories in making sense of their immigrant lives reflect their wishes to become central groups in mainstream American society as well as be part of American destiny as a global superpower, rather than to remain as marginal groups.

### **Key Words**

American National Identity, Asian American, Religious Narratives, American Immigration, Filipino Americans, Korean Americans