

Mothers' Prayers and Korean Feminist Minjung Theology: The Hermeneutical Encounters among Hannah, Mary, and Lee So Seon*

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Abstract

Korean theologians began to study Minjung theology after Jeon Tai Il's self-immolation in 1970. In addition, they hermeneutically read and study the Bible in the Korean contexts, and dedicated their life to developing Minjung theology. However, the Christian research of Minjung women has been overlooked in the Minjung theology studies. This paper aims to introduce the faithful life of Mrs. Lee So-Seon (1929-2011), the mother of Jeon Tae Il, and analyze it with two biblical mothers: Hannah and Mary. Lee

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symbolically became a mother of Minjung. Her prayer for hope and strength encourages people to look forward to a better future in Korea, and seek the Kingdom of God in the world. Her prayers are able to do away with the yoke of oppression and intensify the oppressed people's cry for justice. Moreover, I will demonstrate that the theological and hermeneutical interpretation of Lee's prayers with Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10) and Mary (Luke 1:46-55)—can be intertwined with the prayer and life of Lee. This analytical study enables us to understand how we read the biblical texts of mother's prayers in the Korean women's contexts, empowering women for a wise life and justice. It also invites us to reconsider the meanings of doing theology in Asia.

• **Keywords**

Lee So Seon, Korean Feminist Minjung Theology, 1 Samuel 1-2, Hannah, Mary, Luke 1, Prayer

I. Introduction

Prayer has been understood as a tool to request individual blessings in the so-called conservative Christian traditions. Prayers are not, however, the sole domain of prosperity theology which degenerates into divine blessings for mammonism. Prayer is a rite of doing theology in contextual theologies and traditions. As we know well, Minjung theology is a contextual theology in the Korean Peninsula from the 1970s to the present. Minjung theology originated from the self-immolation of Jeon Tae Il (1948-1970), a factory worker and young Christian adult, on Nov. 13th, 1970 in protest of the Korean laborers' working conditions. His monumental sacrifice motivated Korean theologians to start studying the Minjung, a marginalized people, in Korean society. They were awakened by Jeon's sacrifice, subsequently becoming Minjung theologians.

Suh Nam Dong, a pioneer of Minjung theology, indicated that Jeon performed his self-immolation after attending prayers and community service in a mountain prayer house for six months.¹ Jeon decided to end his life in obedience to God's voice that he heard in his prayers. Some may deem his self-immolation as a sin. However, we must reconsider his action as a "holy calling" even though it was the saddest decision in his life. The studies of Minjung theology widely treat with inattention to the importance of prayers. Given the significance of prayers in the Minjung activist, it must be noted that Jeon's Christian beliefs and actions essentially stem from his mother, Lee So Seon (1929-2011), because

1 Nam Dong Suh, "Du Iyagiui Hapryu (The Confluence of Two Stories)," in *Minjung Sikkhakui Tamgu* (*Exploring Minjung Theology*) (Seoul: Hangilsah, 1983), 78.

his Christian setting can be traced back to her.

Consequently, Minjung theologians have studied Jeon's life more than that of his mother. They focused seldom on Minjung women in their theological constructions of Minjung theology. As she was Jeon's birthmother, Lee became the mother of Minjung after her son's sacrifice. Beyond the Minjung movement, she propelled a variety of social issues that many regards her to be a human rights activist. Underneath all her social activities, there was undying sincerity in her piety and prayers. This paper aims to demonstrate and testify to the life and prayers of Lee. Her life and prayers give us the contextual application of an Asian woman's beliefs and struggles. As Asian Christians, we have a strong heritage of biblical texts at the same time we have faithful foremothers to be theologically studied ever since Christianity came to Asia. The confluences of biblical mothers—Hannah and Mary—with Lee enable us to engage insightful hermeneutics for those interested in Korean Minjung theology. It moreover seeks to highlight the significant contribution of mothers' prayers to their sons' missions. Samuel, Jesus, and Jeon were the products of their own mothers' prayers. The two biblical mothers' sons became prominent figures in the Bible, and both prayed for their sons to plead to God, as did Lee. We are familiar with their sons who demonstrate their leadership as a priest, Christ, or a hero. Furthermore, studying Lee's prayer in comparison with that of both Hannah and Mary can exemplify how to read biblical texts from the contexts of Korean Minjung women's beliefs and struggles. This paper follows the four categories of form criticism exegesis—structure, genre, setting, and intention (conclusion)—by drawing from the mothers' prayers and comparing the ancient

texts if necessary.

II. Structure of Prayers

1. The Divine Portent in Mother's Dream and Annunciation

Just like some dreamer characters in the biblical traditions, Lee dreamed before knowing that she was conceiving her son, Jeon Tae Il. Korean people often report having a similar kind of dream (*taemong*) before giving birth. Lee had two *taemong* associated with both soybeans and the sun in which her grandfather appeared. In the first dream, the seeds of soybeans are scattered, and rooted; the flowers are blooming, and the soybeans are fruitful. Then, people will not go hungry; her son, in the future, would prevent hunger. In the second dream, the sun is divided by her heart and spreads over the world with its rays shining on all villages, inferring that her son would have a wonderful life. After dreaming these dreams, Lee gave birth to her son on Aug. 26, 1948. Her father-in-law named the boy Tai Il meaning the "Big One." Jeon's grandfather had great expectations for his grandson, including a long life, which are revealed by naming him, Tai Il. His wish for his grandson to have a long life went unfulfilled when Tai Il died at 22. However, short his life, his influence on Korean society as his name suggests, has been indelible.

I would like to highlight Jeon's life before focusing on Lee's prayer and praxis related to her *taemong* structure and his name, Tai Il. The soybeans in her *taemong* metaphorically prognosticate how he would be important for workers in Korean society from

the past until now. Born to a destitute family unable to provide him with education after the fourth grade, Jeon became a shoeshine boy, a newsboy, and a seller of gums and other goods. At age 16, he began working in *Seoul Pyeonghwa Sijang* (the Seoul Peace Market) in 1964. While working at the sewing machine factory, he realized the horrendous working conditions fellow workers faced daily under the government's economic policies and sympathized with the younger workers' struggles placed on them by their environment. For instance, the workers were forced to take caffeine pills and work three nights in a row.² One day a young girl suffering from stage III pulmonary disease vomited blood on a sewing machine and was then fired because of her illness.³ Her unfair dismissal shocked Jeon. His compassion for young workers led him to focus on two strategies to annihilate injustice in Korean society—study and praxis—in the prayerful mind.

Firstly, the dehumanization caused by factory owners and the Park Chung Hee government drove him to study law. He established the workers' groups, *Babohoe* (Foolish Group) and *Samdonghoe* (Three Markets Group), and studied Labor Law with other workers. He even taught law to his mother. Moreover, he wrote a letter to President Park on Dec. 19, 1969,⁴ and improving the work environment for the young workers who traveled up to 98 hours per week. However, he could not attain hope for the workers and nothing seemed to change. He never received a reply

2 Young Rae Cho, *Jeon Tae Il Pyeong Jeon (The Critical Biography of Jeon Tae Il)* (Seoul: Jeon Tae Il Foundation, 2017), 238.

3 Cho, *Jeon Tae Il Pyeong Jeon*, 132.

4 Tae Il Jeon, National Institute of Korean History, "Jeon Tae Il Yeolsaga Bakjeonghui Daetongryeongege Bonaen Pyeonji (A Letter from Jeon Ta Il to President Park Jeong Hui)," accessed June 29, 2022, http://contents.history.go.kr/front/hm/view.do?treeId=020308&tabId=01&levelId=hm_160_0020.

from the Park government.

Secondly, before his tremendous efforts of determination, he had a heartfelt conversion to Christianity. He prayed in the *Samkaksan* Prayer House on Aug. 9, 1970, "I must come back to my poor brothers and return to my hometown in the heart. My whole vision stands on the side of young people in *Pyeonghwa Sijang*..... Please be patient for a while. I will sacrifice for those whom I never leave, even though I am weak."⁵ He hoped sacrificing himself would subvert the horrible situation of young workers. On November 13th, 1970, Jeon pressed the Labor Standards Act into his bosom during an act of self-immolation on the *Pyeonghwa Sijang* market street, shouting "Enforce Labor Standards Act. We are not machines!" He died in a hospital on that day without proper treatment because the hospital required to have approval from authorities. His name, Tai Il, was not big enough for the people in high positions in the 1970s. What a sad story that we hear! Meanwhile, his flame became the torch of the Korean labor movement and Lee's dream about her son was fulfilled. Her *taemong* of preventing hunger predicted that Jeon was an important believer and activist in Korean Christianity.

No mother in the world wants to see their son's death in their life. Lee might not wish to dream such a big dream which eventually transformed Korean society and theology. She would say that what if "I" did not dream Jeon's *taemong*. Nevertheless, it was Lee who kept following Jeon's sacrificial will in the same two features of activist and believer. She never stopped working for the working class even though she faced imprisoned several times. It could be said that her social movement figuratively

5 Cho, *Jeon Tai Il Pyeong Jeon*, 133-134.

shined on the Korean blue collars just like the divided sun of her dreams. She never forgot her son's last will in her struggle to attain a better life for the workers. On Nov. 27th, 1970, she founded The Division of *Cheongkea* Cloth in the National Labor Union.⁶ This labor union issued an association statement on Sept. 9th, 1977 against the arresting of Lee and oppression of the labor movement. It stated, "Free Lee So Seon, Restore Labor Center and Punish Violent Policemen, etc."⁷ She became the mother of the Koran laborers. Her motherhood was based on her social and political role for the Minjung, not just her biological relationship with Jeon.⁸ It was Lee who made her *taemongs* come true.

Not only did Lee dream about Jeon's birth, but also his death. One day the pastor of Lee's church asked her to perform the fasting ritual in her church. During the last day of her five-day fast, on Nov. 12th, 1970, she dreamed of a white blanket with men in Korean topcoats holding the blanket's four corners.⁹ The men put Jeon on the blanket and brought him to the sky. Lee could not interpret the dream of her fasting prayer. She did not know about Jeon's self-immolation, even though Jeon strongly requested his mother go to the marketplace the next day, on Nov. 13th, 1970. The fasting prayer and dream were the portent of Jeon's historical sacrifice and the ensuring origin of Minjung Theology in South Korea.

6 Tae Il Jeon, Areumdaun Cheongnyeon (Jeon Tae-il, A Beautiful Young Man), "Nodongjaui Eomeoni (The Mother of Laborers)," accessed June 15, 2019, <http://www.chuntaeil.org/?r=home&c=1/12/16&ckattem pt=1>.

7 Korean Democratic Foundation's Open Archives, "Cheonggye Piboknojoui: 9.9 Gyeolsa Seoneon (*Cheongkea* Cloth Union: 9.9 Declaration of Association)," accessed June 15, 2019, <http://db.kdemocracy.or.kr/isad/view/00484352>

8 For the Korean mothers' social roles after her modern industrialization, see, Young Mee Lee, "Motherhood as a Theological Model for Redemption," in *Korean Feminists in Conversation with the Bible, Church and Society*, ed. Kyung Sook Lee and Kyung Mi Park (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 15-27.

9 Do Yeop Oh, *Jigyeopdorok Gomaun Saramdeula: Lee So Seon, Yeodeunui Gieok (Thankful and Unforgettable People: The Memories of Lee at Age 80)* (Seoul: Hoomahnitas, 2008), 74-85.

Taemong would be a unique phenomenon for Koreans, since it is fundamentally related to pregnancy dreams in Korean culture. Likewise, Mary's conception story in Luke 1:26-38 originates from the announcement of Jesus' birth. The angel Gabriel was sent to Mary to announce the conception of a son. We named this divine appearance the Annunciation of the blessed Mary. The biblical text maintains six elements of the conception of her Son: "1) the entrance of the angel (1:28), 2) Mary's perplexity (1:29), 3) the heavenly message (1:30-33), 4) Mary's objection (1:34bc), 5) the reassurance and sign: Mary's virginal conception and Elizabeth's pregnancy in her old age (1:35b-37)."¹⁰ In addition, 6) verse 38 is divided into two sections: Mary's acceptance and the angel's departure.

The announcement of Jesus's birth begins with an angelic appearance confirming the divine will which invited Mary to receive a mysterious communication. It also invites us to revisit the portent of the marvelous story of Jesus's birth. We can meet a mother who was perplexed about the wondrous Annunciation. Mary's first response to this message to the angel in their dialogue was "How will this be,since I am a virgin?" (cf., v. 34). The structure in the written text (vv. 26-38) tells us how Mary felt her complete surprise. This may demonstrate the hardness of childbirth and nurture from mothers who would like to pray more than before. At the same time, the short written text does not fully substantiate her intense feelings and concepts. However, she replied again "I'm the Lord's servant..... May it be to me as you have said" (cf., v. 38). The dialogue between Mary and the angel

10 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 28 (New Haven: The Anchor Yale Bible, 2009), 335.

leads us to consider Mary's prayer in Luke 1:46-56 which will be discussed in "God's Righteousness in the Magnificat" on the part of the setting below.

Heroes need to have a miraculous birth. The beginning and end of Mary's Annunciation are highlighted by the angel of God visiting Mary and leaving her. This scene is a typical phenomenon of angelic dreams or visions and indicates divine precedence in revelation and human subsequence in the human subject's faithfulness. The divine conception occurred during the dreamy annunciation of Mary. In the ancient world west, conception stories demonstrated that the process begins with a mother's dream. Octavius' conception story, in the dream of his mother Atia, serves as a prime example. She dreamed of her conception through a gliding serpent. After Augustine was born, many considered him the son of Apollo.¹¹ *Taemong* is a common phenomenon among Koreans, while the conception dream of the west is exceptional for kings.

One should concentrate not only on the mother's dream but also on the father's dream, since one can also read that Joseph dreamed of Jesus' conception in Matthew 1:18-25. The angelic appearance emphasized divine intervention. The appearance of the angel reaffirmed the peoples' faith in this miraculous conception and caused Joseph to change his mind about secretly sending Mary away. Jesus' birth story transformed the whole family's dream structure. It was such shocking news for them, as Jeon's grandfather surprisingly interpreted Lee's *taemong*.

As Lee had a dream of Jeon's death, the annunciation of Mary

11 Cf., John Dominic Crossan, "Virgin Mother or Bastard Child?," in *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, ed. Amy-Jill Levin with Maria Mayo Robins (London, New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), 54-55.

foretold the context of Jesus' crucifixion. Mary learned from Gabriel about Jesus' "kingship" which was confirmed by Pilate. The augmented story hits the climax of Jesus's death on the cross. Jesus's identity as a king in the annunciation was a matching point of his crucifixion. Gabriel in the annunciation said to Mary, "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David" (Luke 1:31-32). Jesus' greatness was also proclaimed by Pilate before Jesus' death saying, "Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so'" (Luke 23:3). Mary's annunciation regarding his kingship confirmed her son's future and role for those who believe him. The adequate leadership of sons was an important vision for mothers both in the New Testament and Old Testament. As Mary and Lee unintentionally had either the dream or the vision about their own son, respectively; while Hannah willingly had a son. Let's move on to Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

2. "If" Prayer Requests and Divine Answers

Mothers' desperate prayer for their children was the generic feature of asking for God's grace both in Lee and Hannah. Lee's prayer for recovery from her eyesight and God's answer caused her to become a Christian. One day in 1966, Lee was suddenly blinded because of malnutrition and the shocking news of a destructive house fire in *Namsan Dong*.¹² The neighboring lady

12 Jong Deok Min, *Nodongjaui Eomeoni: Lee So Seon Pyeong Jeon (The Mother of Laborers: The Critical Biology of Lee So Seon)* (Pahjoo, Kyunggido: Dolbegae, 2016), 159-162.

greatly encouraged Lee to attend church and prayed for her eyes. Lee then went to church with the lady and prayed to God for 100 days, sincerely and faithfully: “I have four children who need my care. If I am a blind mother, they will be neglected. Please recover my eyes so that I can take care of them.”¹³ She might pray for God, “If you, God, help me, I will believe in You all my life.” God miraculously healed her eyes, after then she became a Christian. Lee’s “if” presented a condition while Hannah’s “if” was a vow as we will see below. By using “if,” Lee asked God to give God’s mercy on her who always anticipates children’s future.

Hannah was a barren woman like other matriarchs—Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel—even like Elizabeth, the relative of Mary. One reads Hannah’s prayer after the dedication of Samuel to God with her joy in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. She truly evinced her great joy (v. 1), expressed God’s incomparability (v. 2), admonished against proud speech (v. 3), specified God’s activities (vv. 4-10) by telling the reversal of the existing order (vv. 4-8) and confirming the God’s new order (vv. 9-10).¹⁴ However, this song did not occur without effort, since she had to go through the adversity of childless. Her “if” phrase in 1 Samuel 1:11 can demonstrate how she endures her hardship.

Likewise, we need to focus on a structure of 1 Samuel 1 that provides with of her sincere requests for her son. In 1 Samuel 1:11, Hannah prayed before God in vow in the “if” prayer request form: ‘im rā’ōh tīr’eh (if only you will look on). Verse 11 is that “She made this vow: ‘O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but

13 Min, *Nodongjaui Eomeoni*, 161.

14 Antony F. Campbell, S. J. *1 Samuel*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature Vol. VII (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 37.

will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a Nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head” (1 Samuel 1:11). This verse belongs to the genre of prayer.¹⁵ Hannah’s prayer highlights “You (God) will look on (rā’ōh ʾīr’eh)” in imperfect verbal form with infinite absolute, since it demonstrates God as the second person in the dialogical form, and express her emotion, thoroughly. In addition, Hannah used “if (‘im)” the vow formula assuring a promised relationship with God. Her desperation led her to make the combination of a prayer and a vow.

The request for fertility is a common heartfelt prayer not only in ancient Israel, but in the Ancient Near East. Etana, the king of the dynasty of Kish in ancient Sumeria, prayed to Shamash, “O lord, may it issue from thy mouth; Grant thou me the plant of birth! Show me the plant of birth. Remove my burden and produce for me a name!..... Inside it lies an eagle; He will give thee the plant of birth.”¹⁶ Etana’s difficulties arose from his childless situation which couldn’t be resolved by human authority. Meanwhile, Etana’s wife’s pregnancy, in his eyes, was the reward for saving a dying eagle from a pit. The bird brought the plant of birth to Etana.

Unlike Etana, Elkanah, an Ephraimite husband of Hannah, had children from his other wife, Peninnah, in 1 Samuel 1. Nevertheless, like Etana, Hannah felt burdened without a son and made a vow to God. The male characters in her narrative were unable to apprehend Hannah’s desire for a son. Elkanah

15 For the genre of prayer and vow, see Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39 with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*, vol. XVI, the Forms of the Old Testament Literature (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 527,543.

16 E. A. Speiser, “Akkadian Myths and Epics,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, Third Edition with Supplement, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 117.

tried pacifying Hannah by saying, “Am I not more to you than ten sons?” (1 Samuel 1:8b). However, his lack of understanding motivated her to maintain prayer and make a new vow, which appears in 1 Samuel 1:9-11. Furthermore, Eli the priest misunderstood her prayer posture, and v. 14 reads “So Eli said to her, ‘How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine’” (v. 14). Hannah was praying and gently murmuring, while Eli was unable to comprehend her. Eli represented the old priestly tradition, while Hannah depicted the new tradition through her son, Samuel. The scene of Hannah’s prayer stressed the counterpart between rising and setting in the priestly tradition. It even reveals a new form of leadership in the Israelites: kingship. God answered Hannah’s prayer by giving her a son, while Eli’s family, including his sons, were removed from the plan by God. One can highlight mothers’ future-centered prayer in the “if” format of both Lee and Hannah.

II. Genre of Mothers’ Prayer: A Heart Touching Dialogue

Lee continuously prayed in her dark room holding her Bible and talking with God. Whenever she felt lonely or confronted life’s difficulties, she prayed. On Nov. 13th, 1970, Jeon was hospitalized from his self-immolation, in critical condition, hardly able to speak with his mother. In the tradition of Matthew 10:29, Lee prayed to God, believing that no sparrows would fall to the ground apart from God’s will. Jeon and his mother were confident that God would grace the poor laborers, Jeon included.

Following Jeon’s death, Lee has prayed not only during pivotal

moments but during ordinary times. People around Lee thought she was always talking to somebody or monologuing, but in reality she was sharing her thoughts and heart with God.¹⁷ Jeon's wish, "Please do not take my death in vain," touched Lee's heart. She actively analyzed the Minjung situation and participated in social movements for 41 years. During her praxis she never stopped praying. According to Lee, Jesus was neither a subject that flew in the sky nor floated in the air, but was crucified in the place of the suffering Minjung.¹⁸

At prayer meetings she attended, and in the demonstration encampment, she revisited her same prayers. For instance, on April 16, 1980, she prayed on the roof of *Pyeonghwa Sijang* with 500 union members: "Lord, here are your daughters who could not sleep for one week and desperately held up a strike for the wage increase. You will take care of the poor workers and strengthen them so that they may live as human beings in this life. You will make the CEOs repent of their wrong mind through the Lord's ability."¹⁹ The demonstration resulted in a success and they sang "We Shall Overcome" on April 17. She continued praying for equality and justice, becoming the mother of workers.

Furthermore, Lee's prayer at the thirteenth memorial service of Jeon mentioned her struggle against the oppressors of the Jeon Doo Hwan government. Lee was held under the house arrest because President Ronald Reagan planned to visit Korea for the summits between two leaders. If the foreign reporters had not been interested in South Korean human rights then it is probable that the government wouldn't have allowed Lee to participate in

17 Oh, *Jigyeopdorok Gomaun Saramdeula*, 35.

18 Min, *Nodongjawi Eomeoni*, 238.

19 Min, *Nodongjawi Eomeoni*, 406.

the memorial service. The Jeon government allowed Lee to attend hoping to restrain the press from questioning the government about their oppression of Lee. Her prayer is as follows, “We thank you Father God who causes everything to work. Now we have been in the difficulties. We will overcome everything as we unite together..... Please give wisdom and courage to those who are not able to come today. Please make the wicked governors to repent. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.” In solitary with God, she prayed for people and confirmed her faith.

God has listened Lee’s prayer even though her neighboring people misunderstood her prayer posture. The union leaders of *Cheongkea* Cloth did not believe how her prayer would be working. One day, she prayed for starving union leaders all night in her church. The next day, Ewha Womans University’s professors visited Lee and treated them to lunch fortuitously.²⁰ Moreover, the professors expressed their respect for what Lee and leaders worked hard for the union. The union leaders appropriately realized the importance of her prayers.

In the Old Testament, it was Hannah who expressed thanksgiving for God who heard her prayer. Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 1-2 provides two genres—story and hymn of praise—²¹ since the two chapters provide us the narrative of Samuel’s origin and dedication (1 Samuel 1), and the hymn of praise highlighting the joy of Samuel’s birth (1 Samuel 2:1-10).

That Hannah had to pour out her soul tells us that Hannah must pay heavy price for her joy. Lee prayed in her sincere heart no matter who could understand her. Likewise, Hannah’s prayer

20 Oh, *Jigyeopdorok Gomaun Saramdeula*, 112-115.

21 Campbell, *1 Samuel*, 42-43.

tugged on God's heartstring with heart-touching dialogue: "But I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:15b). "Pour out" is translated from the Hebrew šāpak. Šāpak describes the human emotions of "the release of a life-threatening power that usually does end up destroying life. . . ., inundating God with lamentations and pleading for their lives."²² This verb appears in Hebrew about fifty times accompanying passages with spilt blood.²³ The ancient Israelite tradition conditioned Hannah to feel aggravated at her childlessness. This tradition highlighted rivalries between women regarding either barrenness or fertility.²⁴ As mentioned earlier, Eli, the temple priest, did not recognize that her tempered prayer was a dialogue with God confessing her physical agony and spiritual suffering. The lack of understanding of people around Lee and Hannah was a common circumstance, in particular, in solitary dialogue with God.

Both Hannah and Lee tried to relieve their agony in mother-son prayers, even they expressed thanksgiving for God who their prayers in the desperate situations such as the son-related requests. They devoted their life to genuine heartfelt prayer.

III. Prayer Requests in Mothers' Setting

1. New Leadership in Justice

22 R. Liwak, "Šāpak," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 15, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabray, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 438.

23 Liwak, "Šāpak," 432.

24 Esther Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," *Semeia* 46 (1989), 161-162.

Prayer contents must be very relevant to prayers' lives regardless of East and West. Moreover, divine characters embodying power and control have continued to appear in myths and epics from ancient times until present. We can compare the content of the mothers' prayer and an ancient prayer. In the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk was praised for maintaining sovereignty over the other gods in saying "Thou, Marduk, are the most honored of the great gods, Thy decree is unrivaled, thy word is Anu. From this day unchangeable shall be thy pronouncement. To raise or bring low—these shall be (in) thy hand. Thy utterance shall be true, thy command shall be unimpeachable. No one among the gods shall transgress thy bounds!"²⁵ The ancient texts said Marduk could lift the gods up and down because of his omnipotent power. The most powerful Marduk cut off Tiamat's life in the cosmic battle to complete the creation. In this epic, the winning of battles is how deities demonstrate their power. However, "the mother-related prayers" in the biblical tradition and the Korean Minjung induce people to seek through their justice.

Among everyone, it was Jeon's mother who most clearly knew Jeon's passion to see justice executed in Korean society. However, the Park Jung Hee government rejected her protest, arresting her and sending her to jail in 1977 as mentioned earlier. The fact that she was placed in solitary confinement made her depressed. One day she dreamed about her son scolding her for not liking to eat in prison. In her dream, Jeon, arising from his coffin, encouraged and woke her. Lee contemplated that "even the dead would like to live and talk to me. What am I doing here? I must live well and

25 Speiser, "Akkadian Myths and Epics," 66.

take care of myself.”²⁶ After seeing her son, Lee started quietly praying in her cell as usual. Her prayers were not for her own benefit but for the weak. As a mother of workers, she prayed for those who were imprisoned during the suppression of the labor movements.²⁷ She even complained to God for allowing them to suffer, just as Job did (Job 3). However, she kept praying and treating the prisoners as innocent sheep who only desire to be laborers’ graced with human rights and justice.

A mother’s prayer for justice, as in Lee’s case, is a recurring theme in the biblical texts, for example: the prayers of Hannah and Mary. In Hannah’s song the setting is associated with Samuel’s birth story and dedication. However, scholars are often more concerned with the secondary edition of Hannah’s song²⁸ rather than the original. If later redactor(s) would not agree with Hannah’s prayer as her original characteristics, they did not keep it in the Deuteronomistic cycle. Rather, Hannah’s voice was heard throughout Samuel, and scholars found Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 intriguing when compared to David’s thanksgiving song in 2 Samuel 22:2-23:7.²⁹ The former begins Samuel and the later closes it. Hannah thought her son, Samuel, was an answer to her broken heart prayer. The books of Samuel illustrate Israel’s new leadership system of prophets and kings.³⁰ Hannah’s conception of Samuel eventually began “a new era.....

26 Min, *Nodongjaui Eomeoni*, 372.

27 Min, *Nodongjaui Eomeoni*, 435.

28 Walter Brueggemann, *Great Prayers of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 25.

29 Ilse Müller, “Books of Samuel: Women at the Center of Israel’s History,” in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 142.

30 Campbell, *1 Samuel*, 42.

for Israel; Hannah's song celebrates it,"³¹ since she was the mother of the priest who firstly anointed kings: Saul and David. Like Jesus, and Jeon, Samuel became a crucial figure of the leadership transition of the Israelites from judges to kings. Thus, the setting of Hannah's song clarifies that the birth of her son was associated with the birth of a new leadership in Israel.

The beginning of the thanksgiving song (1 Samuel 2:1-10) details Hannah as a proud mother: "Hannah prayed and said, 'My heart exults in the Lord; my strength (qeren) is exalted in my God, my mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory'" (1 Samuel 2:1). Even though "qeren" is translated into "strength" in the NRSV, literally it translates as "horn." Horn metaphorically refers to the "strength" or "victory" in God's act of raising.³² In other words, through this prayer, this woman confidently praises the Lord for his power to transform the power dynamics of the weak and the strong. Verses 7-8 reveal that the Lord creates both poor and rich, and "He raises up the poor the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's and on them he has set the word." According to her song, social liberation and political liberation were *sine qua non* for justice to be delivered.³³ Samuel was Israel's first appointer of kings. According to the text, a dynasty must be founded to distribute justice for the poor and needy. Hannah's prayer blessed the Israelites who would be under the future monarchy's arm of justice.

In a similar fashion, Mary's song, named the Magnificat in

31 Campbell, *1 Samuel*, 34-35

32 Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, Second Edition, Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 10 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 15.

33 Müller, "Books of Samuel," 142

Luke 1:46-55, praises God's power. This power has torn down rulers from their thrones and exalted the humble: it is a song of protest within the biblical tradition.³⁴ In addition, God has filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty-handed. The Magnificat was responding to Mary who felt the child in her womb leap. Mary wanted to praise God for Mary's humble state. From biblical times till present all generations will count her as blessed, even though her unexpected conception was perplexing. Through this prayer, readers realize the powerful strength of God can overcome the confusion of weak and powerless women and that "mothers' prayers" intensifies the project for justice and liberation.

After looking at these stories, of the Minjung mothers and of the biblical mothers, we must answer the question: who was Jesus? Jesus, the son of the Minjung, was crucified for the oppressed and died instead. According to Yung Suk Kim, a New Testament scholar, Jesus knows the weakness of the weak,³⁵ however, "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25). Jesus was weaker than other authorities and was crucified by the bureaucratic power of his time. Yet, He removed the power of death and rose from the dead. Mary's prayer, reviling against the unjust power players, infiltrated Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Mary's song best describes Jesus's identity, since this song highlights the Lord's power to feed the hungry and provide for the poor (cf., Luke 1:53).

Mothers' prayers never leave their children. Lee strongly

34 John Van Den Hengel, SCJ, "Miriam of Nazareth: Between Symbol and History," in *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, ed. Amy-Jill Levin with Maria Mayo Robins (London, New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), 145.

35 Yung Suk Kim, *Messiah in Weakness: A Portrait of Jesus from the Perspective of the Dispossessed* (Eugene: CASCADE Books, 2016), 6.

believed in the righteous life written about Jesus in the New Testament.³⁶ In other words, the Bible teaches people to follow Jesus, whose mother's prayer demonstrates the forever prevailing conclusions of justice.

2. Sisterhood and Solidarity (Luke 1:39-45) in Prayer

The Annunciation of Mary in Luke 1:26-38 gradually expands on Elizabeth's pregnancy in verses 39-45. Given the miracle stories between Mary and Elizabeth, one can clarify the women's solidarity between them. Elizabeth was barren but now was pregnant with her son, John the Baptist. Women's solidarity between Mary and Elizabeth could promote a new vision. Mary visited her relative Elizabeth who was also pregnant in an unexpected situation because of her old age. Pregnancy may cause problems for someone. Mary expected to receive advice from Elizabeth. Two women may not find their self-esteem regarding their pregnancy because of perplexity, however, they celebrated their special blessings in their sisterhood and women's solidarity. Scholars named vv. 42-45 as the Song of Elisabeth, "was filled with God's prophetic Spirit, utters first a blessing over Mary."³⁷ Elizabeth played an important role as a prophetess by saying to Mary "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.....the mother of my Lord to me... and blessed is she who believed that there would be the fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord (cf., Luke 1:42-43 and 45)."³⁸

36 Min, *Nodongjaui Eomeoni*, 238-239.

37 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. *The Gospel according to Luke (I-IX)*, *The Anchor Yale Bible* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1970), 358.

38 Jane Schaberg, "Luke," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, Expanded Edition, ed. Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 371.

Elizabeth solved Mary's problem by confirming God's fulfillment and blessing. Her prophecy made Mary proclaim the Magnificat in Luke 46-55. A man had no function in Mary's conception and Jesus's birth since there was neither male sperm nor intercourse in the virginal narrative.³⁹ Mary and Lee contain solidary points in common.

Meanwhile, Lee realized an urgent request from female unions. In the *Babohoe* and *Samdonghoe*, there were no women groups in the 1970s, even though 80 percent of the laborers of the *Cheongkea* Cloth were women.⁴⁰ Thus, Lee organized the women union *Acaciahoe* whose first leader was Chung In Sook. *Acaciahoe* educated female workers, and actively hold various projects such as Bazar or fundraising until the end of the 1970s. Many prominent women's rights activists came from *Acaciahoe*. Lee emphasized women's rights and solidarity because women's situation could be ignored by the male leadership of labor unions.

Furthermore, she sympathized with female laborers. In 1976, Lee met Im Eun Sook who lost her sight because of an industrial accident.⁴¹ The owner of the factory did not compensate her for damages and gave her only 1 dollar at that time. Its case was an obvious industry disaster, but no one paid attention to this poor laborer. The fact that Im was not the only person of this kind of victimization was a more serious problem in Korean society in the 1970s. In women's solidarity, Lee could feel the same as Im who expressed her suffering (*Han*) from her poverty and inhuman living conditions. Women's solidarity occurred in the mutual relationship between Lee and female laborers. Her sisterhood

39 Schaberg, "Luke," 371.

40 Min, *Nodongjawi Eomeoni*, 202-203.

41 Min, *Nodongjawi Eomeoni*, 296.

solidarity opened to deepen the cooperation in human rights activity.

3, God's Righteousness in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-56)

Mary has been loved throughout the Christian traditions because of not only her birth mother of Jesus but also the poet of the Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55. The setting of song traditions in Luke 1:46-56 involved here would presumably lie in "new exodus typology."⁴² The new exodus during Jesus' time must be interpreted under the oppression of the Roman Empire. Mary, the mother, could endure the imperial oppression politically and morally, if her conception by Panthera, a Roman soldier, occurred in her life as Celsus, the philosopher in the second century, testified.⁴³ She could be representing a Mary who was possibly raped by the Roman soldiers since many Marys could have had similar situations in the Roman Empire. Mary's song was the victorious praise for those who suffered from political power and remained dejectedly without resistance to sexual assault. Thus, Mary's song could be applauded by the victimized women, since God's power tears down rulers from their thrones and exalts the humble: it is a song of protest within the biblical tradition.⁴⁴

Like Hannah, Mary gained her self-confidence "for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (Luke 1:49). In addition, one confirmed the Mighty One scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts with his arm (v. 51) and

42 John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary 35A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 65.

43 Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 117.

44 Hengel, "Miriam of Nazareth," 145.

brought down the powerful from their thrones, and exalted the lowly (v. 52). Mary also appreciated God's power which filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty-handed in verse 53. Through this prayer, readers realize the powerful strength of God can overcome the confusion of weak and powerless women, and that "mothers' prayers" intensify the project for justice and liberation.

Moreover, both Jeon and Lee recognized the significant meaning of economic polarization in Korean society. Lee's community members sought advice from her since her prayers for the poor were not a word but a practice. Mothers' prayers never leave their children. Lee strongly believed in the righteous life written about Jesus in the New Testament.⁴⁵ In other words, the Bible teaches people to follow Jesus, whose mother's prayer demonstrates the forever prevailing conclusions of justice.

IV. Intention (Conclusion): Everlasting Prayers of Mothers for a Better World

One can doubt the presence of Minjung in South Korea saying Minjung theology is an outdated theory since the GDP per capita in South Korea in 2020 is over \$30,000.⁴⁶ Did Jeon's dream come true in the 21st century? Inequality in the distribution of wealth runs in minority groups including poor women. The ratio of annual earnings between women and men in 2018 was 68.8

45 Min, *Nodongjaui Eomeoni*, 238-239.

46 "South Korea GDP per Capita," Trading Economics, accessed June 3, 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/south-korea/gdp-per-capita#:~:text=GDP%20per%20capita%20in%20South%20Korea%20is%20expected%20to%20reach,according%20to%20our%20econometric%20models>.

percent.⁴⁷ This means the gender wage gap of 31.2 percent. The wage demonstrates that we still raise our voices against injustice and sexism. We should articulate the agonies of the marginalized in South Korea. What theologians still should do? The Old Testament tradition emphasizes loving and protecting orphans, widows, and foreigners (Lev. 19: 33-34, Deut. 10: 18 and Ps. 146: 9).

As the Bible highlights the priority of the marginalized, Jeon felt deep concern for his mother who would suffer from his father when he ran away from home.⁴⁸ The last will of Jeon to his mother on his deathbed on Nov. 13, 1970, deeply and powerfully resonates with us: “My mother will follow my will. If she does not, I won’t see her even in heaven..... Pastors only talk about love, they never practice it. Don’t believe their Jesus. Please believe Jesus who loved the poor. My mother will love them.”⁴⁹ Before the last time of his life, Jeon earnestly requested to make a better labor environment preventing tuberculosis and ophthalmic ailment among the young workers. She listened to him saying that “I will follow your will even though my body turns to ash.” The last words Jeon said to her were, “Mom, I am hungry.”

By focusing on Jeon Tai Il’s monumental influence on Minjung Theology, this paper truly highlighted the life and belief of Mrs. Lee So-Seon, the mother of Jeon Tae Il, in the Korean Minjung Theology setting. Her prayers for hope and equality encourage people to look forward to a better future in Korea and seek the Kingdom of God in this world. Her prayers relieved the yoke of oppression, and amplified the oppressed people’s cry for justice.

47 Yul Lee, Yonhap News, “2019 Yeoseongui Sam (2019 Life of Women),” accessed March 30, 2022, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20190701073200002>.

48 Cho, *Jeon Tae Il Pyeong Joen*, 38-43.

49 Oh, *Jigyeopdorok Gomaun Saramdeula*, 83-84.

Once Christians have known the unfairness to Minjung in Korean society, they can contextually learn from Lee's prayers and praxis by interpreting prayers from the biblical traditions of Hannah and Mary. Her prayers relieved the yoke of oppression and amplified the oppressed people's cry for justice. We also pray to God from the heart and praised the Lord who raised up the poor and alleviated their suffering.

Korean feminist theology can adopt mothers' roles in the biblical tradition and analyze the meaning of their prayers, and help to interpret the biblical narratives for today's women in contexts. Mothers including Hannah, Mary, and Lee, seek justice and have dialogues with God in mother-son-related prayers. Their prayers are specialized for Christians' transformation in society from the past until now.

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