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Rahab in Joshua 2 and Korean Bible Women: A Postcolonial Reading through Homi Bhabha's Lens[1]

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Abstract

Women have long been recognized as faithful believers throughout the biblical narrative and Christian history. Rahab, viewed from the perspective of the Book of Joshua, appears as a courageous ally who advanced Israel's divine mission; yet, from the standpoint of Jericho's king, she embodied betrayal and subversion. This tension exposes the complex dynamics of faith, loyalty, and power when the marginalized engage with dominant religious narratives. It also resonates with the experiences of indigenous peoples whose cultural and spiritual worlds have been confronted by Western missionary expansion. Often lacking sensitivity to local epistemologies and cosmologies, Western Christian missions not only proclaimed the gospel but also dismantled indigenous traditions, reconfiguring spiritual identities in the name of conversion.

In Korea, Bible Women played a pivotal role alongside Western missionaries in the expansion of Christianity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their unwavering faith and commitment have drawn increasing scholarly attention within the study of Korean women's history in recent decades. This paper seeks to reexamine the actions and theological consciousness of Korean Bible Women through a postcolonial lens, with particular attention to Homi Bhabha's liminality, sly civility, and the Third Space for their identities and evangelistic practices. The analysis employs Rahab's narrative as a comparative framework, illustrating an intercultural reading of Scripture from an Asian woman's perspective and demonstrating how biblical stories can be interpreted through indigenous epistemologies and experiences.

Keywords

Rahab, Korean Bible Women, Postcolonial Interpretation, Korean Feminist Biblical Interpretation, Homi K. Bhabha

1. Introduction

This paper explores the hybrid identities of Rahab in Joshua 2 and the early Korean Bible Women through a postcolonial lens, specifically applying Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of liminality and sly civility.

Traditionally, Rahab is read within the Deuteronomistic History as a converted Gentile, a portrayal framed by the dominant tradition that celebrates her allegiance to Israel while silencing her indigenous voice. However, to the Canaanites, she may have appeared as a traitor; to the Israelites, a heroine of faith. These contrasting depictions reveal power dynamics that suppress the story of the indigenous woman in favor of the conqueror's theology. However,

1 This paper is a revised of a presentation delivered at the Society of Asian Biblical Studies meeting on July 13, 2024, at Yushan Theological College and Seminary, Taiwan.

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by viewing Rahab as a mediator who initiates cultural integration, new contextual meanings emerge for today's readers.

In Korea, the concept of "indigenous people" remains unrecognized. Since the Dangun myth (2,333 BCE), Koreans have regarded themselves as a single, homogenous ethnic group—a view reflected in modern demographics. As of 2024, only 5.2% of South Korea's 51.21 million residents are foreign, and naturalization rates remain low (14,616 individuals) due to a deep emphasis on ethnic distinctiveness.[2] Despite limited historical immigration, Christianity flourished in Korea through local agency. Most notably, Korean Bible Women served as pivotal evangelizers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, adapting missionary efforts into a homegrown movement.[3]

By juxtaposing Rahab and these Bible Women, this paper moves beyond traditional biblical interpretation. Both groups occupied liminal positions—transitional in-between states where rigid identities dissolve into cultural hybridity. In the Third Space, they practiced sly civility: a form of colonial resistance where subjects use apparent compliance to subtly subvert dominant authority.

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates how these women navigated dominant structures—whether the Israelite conquest or Western missionary paternalism—to assert agency. Through the resilient *anbang* (inner room) and shamanic roles, they shaped localized interpretations of biblical narratives, transforming foreign ideologies into resilient, indigenous expressions of faith within the early Christian revival movements.

2. Rahab in Joshua 2, a Deuteronomistic History, and Bible Women in Missionary's History

In this section, Rahab will be examined from the perspective of the biblical authors, which helps remind us of fruitful interpretive approaches. First, the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH) interprets the fall of Jerusalem—a pivotal event in the history of the Southern Kingdom of Judah—as the result of the Babylonian imperial attack. While the Judean community faced an identity crisis during imperial invasions, their victory stories maintained their status as YHWH's people. Rabbis later praised Rahab for her beauty and wisdom. She sheltered the spies, saved her family, converted, married Joshua, and her descendants included priests and prophets. Rahab symbolizes Israel's positive influence on Gentiles and serves as an example of successful conversion and repentance.[4] Furthermore, her outsider status provided the author of the Book of Joshua with a potent narrative that could be lived out resiliently during the Babylonian exile,

2 As of 2024, South Korea's total population is approximately 51.21 million, with 2.65 million foreign residents, accounting for about 5.2% of the total population ("Foreign Residents," Ministry of Justice, accessed October 9, 2025, https://www.moj.go.kr/moj/2412/subview.do). In the same year, 14,616 individuals either naturalized or regained Korean citizenship, representing a 0.5% increase from the previous year ("Nationwide Status of Naturalized and Inherited Citizens," Ministry of Justice, accessed November 12, 2025, https://www.moj.go.kr/moj/2413/subview.do).

3 The United Methodist Church founded the Women's Bible Class in 1897, while the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) did so in 1898. Mee Kang Yang, "Faith and Activities of Early Bible Women," *Korea Christianity and History* 62 (November, 1992): 98 (In Korean).

4 Tamar Kadari, "Rahab: Midrash and Aggadah," Jewish Women's Archive, accessed July 7, 2025, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rahab-midrash-and-aggadah#pid-16543.

when the DtrH was being shaped.

Secondly, in the Matthew community, Rahab was recognized as an ancestor of Jesus through the Davidic genealogy (Matthew 1). Rahab served not only as a model of faithful conversion to the YHWH community but also as a symbol of liminality between imperial power and local traditions from both historical and ideological perspectives. The spies sent by Joshua were not merely representatives of a powerful group, as ancient Israel had not yet engaged in imperialistic conquests of neighboring countries. Theories on the origins of Israel suggest peaceful immigration, revolution, or a pioneering model rather than conquest. Israel's imperialistic expansions occurred in modern times.

During the composition or canonization of the DtrH, Israelites faced invasion and displacement by the imperial power of Babylon. The DtrH was compiled under imperial auspices, incorporating "the laws and narrative material, known as the King's Law, consisting of previous local traditions, with an unknown amount of imperial censorship, editing, or fabrication."[5] The DtrH, beginning with Josiah's decolonizing reformation, according to Uriah Kim, critiques ideological justifications for power while marginalizing alternative perspectives.[6] Furthermore, one can consider the DtrH's struggle and response to imperial powers. The historical intention of the DtrH is crucial for understanding Israel's hope expressed through Rahab's decisions and words, especially in relation to the reestablishment of the DtrH community after the identity crisis caused by imperial powers. This perspective also invites us to engage modern postcolonial theory.

Interestingly, when we compare Rahab's story with that of Korean women, we find that the stories of Bible Women in the Korean Christian community and history were not widely heard for a long time. It was only after the 1970s, around the centennial of Protestantism in Korea, that the history of Bible women began to be gradually studied through women's history publications of each denomination.[7] Korean Christian historians largely overlooked women's history, despite the crucial role of Bible Women in supporting Western missionaries and facilitating evangelism in local areas. Patriarchal concepts and colonial historiography often marginalized the significant contributions of Bible Women during missionary activities. While Korea was not colonized by Christian countries, it was occupied by Japan from 1910 to 1945. Consequently, the nature of colonization in Korea differed from that in Africa and South America, where missionaries often accompanied colonial endeavors that introduced both Christianity and colonization. Bible Women were depicted by the missionary perspectives throughout their reports, now they need to be read from more current methodology, post-colonial points.

5 Jon L. Berquist, "Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization," in *Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 81-82.

6 Uriah Kim, *Decolonizing Josiah: Toward a Postcolonial Reading of the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005).

7 Eun Jung Kim, "The Origin, Beliefs and Consciousness of the Bible Women in the Region of the Korea Mission of PCUSA" (PhD diss., Yonsei University, 2020), 4, (In Korean).

3. Post-Colonial Approaches: Globalization, Liminality and Sly Civility from Homi Bhabha

3.1 Globalization

From the traditional Israelite perspective, Rahab is often portrayed as a generous Gentile woman who guided the two men sent by Joshua. In rabbinic tradition, she is said to have converted, married Joshua, and become the ancestress of Huldah the prophetess.[8] Her identity thus became firmly established within Jewish tradition. However, if we shift our perspective from the Israelites to Rahab herself, she can be seen as a globally recognized figure who adapted to a new cultural environment rather than remaining confined to her Canaanite origins.

As Homi Bhabha suggests, the true process of globalization must initiate at home, within the local and relational encounters that reveal the complexities of power and identity.[9] Rahab's story illustrates this idea: within her own house, she engages the foreign spies through subtle negotiation and strategic hospitality. She may be understood as embodying a different kind of globalization, one rooted in relational openness. Her engagement with the Israelite strangers demonstrates her capacity to create a transformative space of encounter within her own home. Rahab thus occupies a liminal space between Israelites and Canaanites, navigating competing allegiances while protecting her household. Her interaction with the Israelites reflects not passive submission but an active reconfiguration of allegiance and identity. In this sense, Rahab occupies a liminal space between the Israelites and the Canaanites, navigating competing powers while opening a transformative space for cross-cultural encounter and faith.

Likewise, Korean Bible Women was a collective term referring to those who sold portions of the Gospel, assisted missionaries, and later pioneered and revitalized Christianity in Korea.[10] Though most of these women had no opportunity to experience life beyond the Korean context, they embraced their participation in a global Christian movement by accepting Christianity.

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3.2 Liminality

Homi Bhabha describes liminality as emphasizing the importance of in-between spaces where fixed identities are disrupted, giving rise to hybrid and ambivalent forms. His focus on these liminal zones provides a valuable framework for analyzing the complexities of cultural identity and the enduring effects of colonialism.[11] According to Bhabha, "The stairwell as liminal

8 · "Megilah 14b-13," Sefaria, accessed November 12, 2025, https://www.sefaria.org/Megillah.14b.13?lang=bi

9 · Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), xiv-xvi.

10 · Mee Kang Yang, "A Study on the Bible Women from the Perspective of Participation and Exclusion: Focusing on the 1910s-1930s," *Christianity and History in Korea* 6 (1997): 141, (In Korean).

11 · Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 5, 209-217.

space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white."[12] The concept of liminality challenges fixed identities and creates space for cultural hybridity, which embraces difference without reinforcing hierarchy or reverting to primordial oppositions.

The hybridity of Rahab's character allowed her to navigate a precarious position, surviving amidst the affection of the Israelites. However, the author or redactor of the Book of Joshua did not explicitly portray her as bridging the Canaanite and Israelite cultures. Rahab's character was esteemed within the YHWH community during an imperial era. She could serve as a model for the exile or post-exile community. Rahab, as a gentile woman, could not establish a resilient identity for her own people. However, she became a heroine for the exile and post-exile Israelites, who constantly confronted cultural differences whether in Babylon or their homeland.

Meanwhile, Korean Bible Women sought to overcome aspects of Korean culture—particularly the lack of modern thought reflected in women's illiteracy and Confucian patriarchal norms. Through Christianity, they experienced opportunities for education and personal growth, even gaining the dignity of having their own names.[13] Their dual identity as Koreans and Christians offered them a new way of life, as Christianity became a means of liberation from patriarchal constraints. The liminal space between Christianity and Korean culture became a platform where they could redefine themselves as new persons. The roles of Korean Bible women gradually developed from selling Bibles to preaching the gospel and establishing churches during the late Joseon Dynasty and the Japanese colonial period. For example, representative Bible Women include Won Da-bida, a 63-year-old who preached to 3,000 people and sold 1,750 books in 1918; Shin Maria, who sold Bibles and evangelized along the Korea–China border; and Kim Shin-gyeong, who was later sent from Gosan-ri Church as an evangelist to Jeju Island.[14] Their liminal position between traditional and modern thought enabled them not only to receive new ideas through education but also to share them with others.

3.3 Sly Civility

Bhabha also explores the notion of sly civility, a subtle form of resistance within colonial discourse, to illustrate how colonized subjects can undermine colonial authority through seemingly compliant behavior.[15] Rahab is portrayed as a Gentile woman who later joined the Jewish community. However, if we view her simply as a faithful Gentile woman, we interpret her without sensitivity to her historical and social context. A certain man already knew that the spies had come to her house (Joshua 2:2) and reported it to the king of Jericho. Nevertheless, Rahab lied and hid them. Was her action a betrayal of her own community? Why was her action accepted by the Israelites? One should carefully consider her position within the Jericho

12 · Ibid., 4

13 · Eun Jung Kim, *The Korean Mission of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and Bible Women* (Kenosis: 2023), 272-278 (In Korean).

14 · Sung Jin Chang, "Major Contributions of Bible Women in the Early History of Korean Protestantism," *The Institute of Korean Christian History News* 75 (July 2006): 48 (In Korean).

15 · Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*,132-144.

community. As a marginalized woman, she might not have felt any sense of belonging or affiliation with the inner circle of Jericho's leadership, even though she was a resident of the city.

Thus, she acts as an initiator in communicating with the two Israelite spies—outsiders engaged in exploring the new land. Her negotiation with the spies, in which she asks for a sign of good faith and the assurance that her family would be spared from death (Joshua 2:12-13), demonstrates both courage and strategic wisdom. When strangers come to one's home, it is not easy—especially for a woman of Rahab's marginalized status as a "prostitute"—to confront them directly. Even one can interpret her role as a host for the strangers, since the prostitute of the Hebrew word has been translated into innkeeper in Targum.[16] Her status may be debatable based on historical reality, yet Rahab's actions reveal her intent to protect her family and ensure their survival against the attack of outsiders. Moreover, she lied to mislead the king's messengers about the spies. This was not done for the spies' sake; rather, her deception and persuasive actions were intended to save herself. If the rumor about the spies' infiltration into Rahab's house had been true, her life would have been in danger because of the king's retaliation. Thus, her resilient appeals were understood and accepted by both the spies and the king. Moreover, by invoking the Exodus story, Rahab shows her awareness of Israel's history and thus constructs a platform of understanding between herself and the outsiders.

Bhabha points out the uncertainty of colonizers who cannot fully grasp the natives' intentions, which are expressed through sly civility. The natives' refusal to meet the colonizer's demands disrupts colonial surveillance and confession strategies that seek calculable subjects. Their resistance, which Nathanael Halhed in *A Code of Gentoo Laws* interpreted as madness, exposes the tensions between civility and colonial control, transforming discourse itself as colonial uncertainty reshapes both narrative authority and the meaning of civil representation.[17] Similarly, Rahab's suggestions to both the spies and the king's messengers demonstrate a double form of sly civility, as each group follows her directions. The spies hide among the flax on the roof, while the messengers search outside the city. Rahab directs both the spies of Joshua and the king's messengers; they are all strangers to her. Yet she must navigate the dangers of social and political bias in order to survive. Though the male powers of Joshua and the king threaten her, she endures. Moreover, Rahab seeks to save her family through the covenant she makes with the spies, symbolized by the red cord hanging outside her house. Thus, Bhabha's theory of sly civility, originally developed to analyze postcolonial power relations, can also be applied to women's subtle forms of resistance against male authority—particularly the power of strangers who threaten their survival and ability to act.

In the Korean context, Bhabha's concept of sly civility can be understood as a form of resistance against Japanese colonization. During the colonial period, Bible Women often played crucial roles as intermediaries in the independence movement and, at times, in opposing

16 · Don C. Benjamin, "A Story of Rahab as Host, not Harlot (Josh 2:1-24+6:22-25)," *Explorations: Journal for Adventurous Thought* 12, no.2 (1993): 55-77.

17 · Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*,141.

the practice of Shinto shrine worship.[18] Moreover, their actions represented a covert form of resistance to colonial power. The Korean Bible Women demonstrated two forms of resistance against both colonial injustice and patriarchal-ecclesiastical inequality. The first example is as follows: beginning in 1905, the atmosphere in Korea was charged with the threat of Japanese invasion. In Seoul, street fighting broke out between Korean soldiers and Japanese troops after the disbandment of the Korean army in August 1907. Christian women—many of whom had never cared for an injured man before—immediately began nursing the wounded soldiers.[19] Moreover, Yun Hee-ae in Gaeseong and Han Young-shin in Pyongyang were arrested for their leading roles in the March First Movement in 1919.[20] These are only a few examples of the Bible Women's participation in resistance against Japanese colonization. While Western missionaries tended to focus primarily on individual spiritual formation—such as puritanism, pietism, and evangelicalism[21]—the Korean Bible Women actively engaged with the social structures shaped by colonial oppression and injustice.

The second example of patriarch inequality is that, just as Rahab welcomed the foreign spies, aware of the bias and danger within her own community as a marginalized woman,[22] the Korean Bible women accepted the gospel as a means of liberation for their spirit, body, and mind. Moreover, during the 1930s, they resisted the ecclesiastical authority of the Korean Church in three major areas: unequal treatment and salaries compared with male ministers, the male-centered church structure, and the negative social perceptions of Bible Women.[23] Despite these challenges, they maintained their hope for evangelizing Korean society while wisely voicing their grievances and seeking fair recognition. Their passion and devotion were often misunderstood both by their own Korean families and by Western missionaries—the two groups of "strangers," much like those encountered by Rahab. Nevertheless, the mission of the Bible women became a crucial foundation for the growth of Korean Christianity.

Thus, Bible Women actively participated in independence movements during Japanese colonial rule. The March 1st Movement exemplified rapid national mobilization despite Japanese suppression. Despite their significant roles in church and independence activities, particularly during the March 1st Movement, Bible Women have been understudied. Their contributions to education, enlightenment, and independence movements are historically and educationally significant.[24] However, the situation of Christian resistance against the oppression of imperialism has been changed after the end of the Japanese colonial period.

18 · Chang, "Major Contributions of Bible Women in the Early History of Korean Protestantism," 46.

19 · Kim, *The Korean Mission of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and Bible Women*, 328-329.

20 · Ibid., 330.

21 · Deok Joo Lee, "The Faith and Theology of Early Missionaries to Korea," *Christianity and History in Korea* 6 (1997): 50-58, (In Korean).

22 · Chang, "Major Contributions of Bible Women in the Early History of Korean Protestantism," 48; Yang, "Faith and Activities of Early Bible Women," 93-94.

23 · Yang, "A Study on the Bible Women from the Perspective of Participation and Exclusion," 169-170, (In Korean).

24 · Yoo-kyoung Ko, "The Role and Significance of the Bible Women in the 3.1 Movement," *Women and History* 31 (December 2019): 101-132.

4. The Identity of the Korean Bible Women: Resilient Outsider and Insider

Bible women were invaluable helpers to missionaries in Korea from the late nineteenth century until the early twentieth century. Western missionaries needed intermediaries due to Confucian virtues and patriarchal customs. For example, men and women over seven years old could not sit together. Additionally, it was not easy for foreigners to approach Koreans during that time.

J. Robert Moose (1864-1928), a Methodist missionary who served in Korea for 25 years starting in 1899, described one aspect of Koreans' thoughts and attitudes in a mission report. He stated, "The people are so superstitious that I found it impossible in many instances to get even the age of men and the number of their children."[25] It shows how an impenetrable barrier was set against foreigners. The people who made it through this iron wall were Bible Women. The importance of Bible Women was documented in various mission reports. Annie Oakes mentioned that native missionaries and teachers could not work without the assistance of Bible Women. If the missionaries did not come together with Bible women, they were not welcome among the local women.[26]

Bible women were trained in both side of education reading Korean and learning gospel. The first task undertaken by missionaries who came to Korea in the late 19th century was educational work. They showed a great interest in women's education more than anything else. The reason for their keen interest in women's education was their belief that if women, who played the most significant role in educating children in Korea, became Christians, their children would also become Christians.[27]

The photo titled "The Large Bible Institute Group, Korea, 1908–1922" reflects the intense educational enthusiasm and commitment of Korean women during this period.[28] The description is as follows:

> Relatively few Korean men and women have had any opportunity to go to school, but they are eager for instruction. Once a year they are gathered into Bible Institutes for a week or ten days of training. They come in large numbers. Some of them walk long distances and endure great privation for the joy of learning more of God's Word, that they may return to their humble villages and teach others about the Christian way. There are many of these classes for men as well as women. Probably the total attendance for all the Missions in Korea

25 · J. Robert Moose, "Are the Koreans Increasing in Numbers?" *The Korea Review* (April, 1906): 121. http://anthony.sogang.ac.kr/KoreaReview/KoreaReviewVolume6FullText.html

26 · Yeong Woo Liptak "Bible Women: Evangelism and Cultural Transformation in the Early Korean Church" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 193-195.

27 · Hyunphyo Yang, "The Status and Role of Women in the Early Korean Church," *Yeoksah Shinhak Nonchong* 42 (2023): 283.

28 · "The Reverend Corwin & Nellie Taylor Collection, Methodist Episcopal Church (Photographer)," USC Libraries, accessed July 20, 2024, https://digitallibrary.usc.edu/CS.aspx?VP3=DamView&VBID=2A3BXZL0M9BSZ&SMLS=1&q=Korea+slide+lecture&RW=1920&RH=919#/DamView&VBID=2A3BXZL0MPK6V&PN=1&WS=SearchResults. "Large Bible Institute Group, Korea, 1908-1922," USC Libraries, accessed December 8, 2025. https://digitallibrary.usc.edu/asset-management/2A3BF1O6QUJH4?&WS=SearchResults&Flat=FP

reaches 50,000 a year. Here we have a Woman's Institute. Recently in Pyeng Yang 320 women assembled to study in one of these self-supporting Bible Institutes.

It is not easy to count the number of Bible Women. However, in 1913, according to the British and Foreign Bible Society, 43,326 people were read the Bible by kwônsô puin (a woman who recommends books), and 2,669 women were taught to read the Korean script. By 1930, the number of women taught to read by these Bible women had increased to 12,756.[29] Not only male Western missionaries but also female Western missionaries needed Bible women for their mission work. Statistics from the Korea Mission of the Presbyterian Church (USA) indicate that from 1884 to 1923, there were 3,104 Bible women. During the same period, there were 487 single female missionaries, 1,105 female missionaries who came with their husbands, and 2,044 female teachers.[30] One can see that the number of Bible Women is greater than that of single female missionaries for 39 years. Interestingly, the number of Bible Women increased alongside the number of female missionaries.

One reason for the flourishing increase of Christians may stem from the high level of religious disposition among Korean women. According to Homer B. Hulbert (1863–1945), an American missionary and Korean independence activist, Koreans were Confucian in their social relationships, Buddhist believers in philosophical matters, and turned to shamanism in times of critical life crises.[31] This suggests that Koreans demonstrated a form of religious resilience, adapting their beliefs and practices according to different circumstances. In the late 19th century, the daily lives of Korean women were deeply religious.

However, this religiosity was expressed through their worship practices and their reliance on various traditional religions, spirits, and superstitions. Because Korean women had limited access to education, they lacked Western-style knowledge, which in turn made them more susceptible to these beliefs. Although Bible Women acquired new religious perspectives through missionary teaching, they already possessed a deeply rooted religious mindset. Therefore, their position can be understood as dual: they were insiders in the sense of being eager learners within the educational setting, yet also outsiders who received a new religion through a form of resilient spiritual adaptability. Korean Bible Women knew how to approach other Korean women and share the gospel by engaging with common experiences, such as conflicts with their in-laws and difficulties caused by their husbands' behavior in a patriarchal society. Many women carried *han*—deep emotional wounds—that needed healing, often through the presence of other women who understood their suffering. Because of this, Korean Bible Women were welcomed into women's shared domestic space known as the *anbang*. The *anbang* functioned not only as a place for fellowship and conversation but also as a space where the gospel was shared, sometimes alongside small-scale selling of goods.[32] This demonstrates the

29 · Lee-Ellen Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success: Using the Anbang Network and the Religious Authority of the Mudang," *Journal of Korean Religions* 3, no. 1 (April 2012): 120.

30 · Kim, "The Origin, Beliefs and Consciousness of the Bible Women," 270-271.

31 · Requoted from Jong Suh Kim, "Identity of Korean Religion after 1945," *Religion and Culture* 25 (2013): 1-2.

32 · Young Ok Park, "Characteristics of the Women's Movement in the Late Joseon Dynasty and Women's Social

Bible Women's resilient and adaptive approach to ministry, grounded in cultural familiarity and shared life experiences.

5. The Third Place: The Resilient *Anbang* Place and Bible Women's Shamanic Role

As the mindsets of the Bible Women reflected a resilient position between outsider and insider, their visits to the *anbang* placed them in a liminal space between Korean cultural traditions and Western Christian missionary influence. As Homi K. Bhabha points out, the Third Space refers to a conceptual realm where cultural meanings are not fixed or rooted in a single origin, but are continually reinterpreted, reshaped, and transformed across different contexts.[33] In this sense, the *anbang* became an ideal site for Korean Bible women to perform an in-between identity, through which they mediated the Christian gospel and contributed to the transformation of Korean society. Missionaries and evangelists alike sought to locate themselves meaningfully within this journey, ensuring that their activities were authentically practiced in the spaces where they were present.[34]

Additionally, J. Robert Moose, a missionary who lived in Choon Chun, Kangwon Province, on the east side of Korea, for 10 years in the early 1900s, mentioned the ages of the women who heard the Gospels and read themselves.[35] The thousands of women who passed over forty of fifty learned the gospels. Although women were excluded from formal education, Bible women emerged as pedagogical agents within the Third Space of the *anbang*. Through their embodied practices and mediation, education penetrated the domestic sphere, facilitating the transformation of women within their lived spaces.

Bible Women over forty years old could easily access the *anbang*, the women's quarters of a Korean home, which were off-limits to men and foreigners in Korea's strict Confucian society.[36] The *anbang* network functioned effectively for building relationships in a specific place. Within the *anbang*, Korean women and missionary women engaged in a reciprocal exchange, gaining access to each other's cultural space. This became an open place for welcomed guests, similar to how Rahab opened her roof for the spies. As Bhabha discusses concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, and liminality—ideas that address the spaces where different cultures meet and interact—Bible Women embodied these dynamics. They were insiders to Korean culture and therefore understood the functions and social expectations of the *anbang*. At the same time, they were outsiders within the *anbang* because many of the women who occupied that space had not yet encountered the gospel brought by the missionaries.

Advancement," *Kuksahkwan Nongchong* 83 (June 1999): 124 (In Korean).

33 · Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 53.

34 · Please refer the quotation of Sadie Moore's report on Bible Women from Angel Santiago-Vendrell, and Misoon (Esther) Im, "The World Was Their Parish: Evangelistic Work of the Single Female Missionaries from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, to Korea, 1887–1940," *Religions* 14, no. 262 (2023): 11 of 15, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020262

35 · J. Robert Moose, *Village Life in Korea* (Publishing House of the M. E. Church, South, Smith & Lamar, agents, 1909), 114, accessed December 3, 2025, at https://archive.org/details/cu31924007757382/page/n125/mode/2up

36 · Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 119.

The role of Bible Women was not only teaching the Bible but also leading people in spiritual life, which sometimes resembled the exorcism practices of shamans, whether they agreed or not. According to Mary Scranton,[37]

> We have three [Bible Women] connected with the Sang Dong work, another in Su Won, one at Chang Won, and two others who itinerate in the country as they are directed. These women are highly respected and are believed to have the ability to offer up prevailing prayer. If anyone is in trouble of any sort, in mind, body or estate, the Bible woman is sent for to pray and sing psalms. When anyone gets tired of trying to propitiate the evil spirit, it is the Bible woman who must come and take down the fetishes and burn them. They are called upon to cast out devils, as well as to offer the fervent effectual prayer for the healing of the sick.

In the eyes of the Western women missionaries, the spiritual practices of Bible Women and Korean shamans were not significantly different. Both Bible Women and shamans were respected for their spiritual authority and their ability to offer wise counsel and healing. While Bible Women introduced modern knowledge of hygiene and home management, both groups provided valuable spiritual guidance and were esteemed for their positive influence on the lives of Korean women.[38]

From a colonial standpoint, exorcism was viewed as necessary for indigenous peoples, whose religions were frequently depicted as embodiments of evil spirits. Missionaries often regarded non-Christian societies as uncivilized, treating evangelization not only as spiritual conversion but also as a vehicle for introducing "civilization." Postcolonial theorists continue to grapple with why religious—rather than secular—nationalism has become dominant in many former colonies, shaped by the complex interaction of indigenous traditions and Western influences.[39] Within this dynamic, religious nationalism frequently marginalizes or devalues Korea's indigenous religions and cultural practices.

However, the concept of the Shaman as a superstitious performer was also transmitted into the missionary work of Korean Bible Women. They demonstrated exorcism by expelling spirits from possessed people in villages and burning haunted objects in homes. This exorcism is similar to the role of Korean Shamans in villages. Furthermore, the rituals performed by Bible Women and Shamans for the people were similar to the *kut*. The *kut* is a common shamanic ritual performed for clients, involving song, dance, spirit communication, and offering a ritual meal to seek ongoing goodwill from the spirits or to remove their ill-will.[40] The fundamental idea of the *kut* was not accepted in Christian tradition and rituals. However, Bible Women aimed to evangelize through healing and counselling, similar to how shamans healed the rift between clients and spirits, restoring balance and hope for a better future. Both shamans and Bible

37 · Requoted from Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 127.

38 · Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 131-132.

39 · Arvind Mandair, "Postcolonialism," *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Staursberg and Steven Engler (Oxford University Press, 2016),182.

40 · Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 131.

Women shared the methodology of helping people by visiting them and guiding their spiritual lives as religious leaders.

Additionally, some Bible Women themselves experienced *sinbyŏng* (spirit sickness), an illness traditionally associated with the initiation of Korean shamans. Early Bible Women such as Chu Lulu suffered from physical and mental afflictions similar to *sinbyŏng*. Chu Lulu understood her recovery as miraculous and divinely guided, a perspective that parallels the shamanic healing experience.[41] Additionally, after recovering from illness—or even from difficult childbirth—women converted to Christianity and later devoted themselves to the work of Bible Women.[42] Western-style medical treatment was often regarded as mysterious by Koreans, regardless of whether scientific methods were actually used.

Women's religious experiences were also evaluated differently under colonial frameworks. The colonial mindset of Western missionaries did not allow space for the coexistence or legitimacy of Korean spiritual traditions. Indigenous religious discourses were forced to translate themselves into dominant Western categories. Although indigenous religious practices often resembled those found in Western traditions, they were still required to prove their spiritual value according to Western standards.

Bible Women typically had to choose between two forms of spiritual authority: traditional shamanic leadership and Christian teaching. While they generally rejected Korean-style spiritual leadership, their mission work—especially their visits to the *anbang*—often resembled shamanic practices. In these spaces, they participated in a resilient and interconnected spiritual network. The Western evaluative framework applied to shamanic figures must be reconsidered, as the Bible Women's methods of entering and working within the *anbang* can be understood as culturally appropriate and effective forms of engagement.

6. Ideological Transition in Postcolonial Perspective: From Rahab to Korean Bible Women

According to Musa W. Dube, Rahab—depicted within an imperial narrative—symbolizes colonized land.[43] Her portrayal in Joshua 2 foregrounds themes of subjugation, loyalty to colonizing power, and imperial ideology, complicating feminist attempts at subversive readings. Rahab's character has even been appropriated as a model for modern colonizing strategies applied to the Third world. Musa W. Dube continuously argues that Rahab's actions lacked cultural and political significance within Canaanite culture. If Joshua's entry into the promised land is viewed as an act of imperialism, Rahab's decision to hide the enemies can be interpreted as a betrayal of her indigenous people.

However, the author(s) of Joshua—commonly attributed to the DtrH—lived during the exilic or post-exilic period. This context suggests that the DtrH was not part of a colonizing regime

41 · Strawn, "Korean Bible Women's Success," 132.

42 · Park, "Characteristics of the Women's Movement in the Late Joseon Dynasty and Women's Social Advancement," 124-125.

43 · Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Chalice Press, 2000), 77-80.

but rather was writing from within a community resisting imperial domination.[44] Thus, unlike the modern State of Israel, ancient Israelites should not be understood as colonizers. Rahab's story, therefore, functions as a covenant-centered narrative addressed to a displaced people, emphasizing divine promise and the hope of returning home. Erhard S. Gerstenberger argues that the Book of Joshua aims to shape the identity of the postexilic community by articulating ideological priorities rather than focusing on literary style.[45] The Deuteronomistic corpus—from Joshua to 2 Kings—was revised to emphasize separation from the Canaanites, not the Persians, thereby strengthening Israel's covenantal identity as the chosen people. This ideological shift marks a movement from an empire-centered framework to an Israel-centered one, casting these texts as paradoxical protest documents containing ideological potential.[46] Rahab's character is depicted within the ideological framework aimed at establishing the subjectivity of the Israelites during the exile or post-exile period. Thus, the modern use of the Book of Joshua, including this narrative, by contemporary Israel for territorial expansion reflects a distortion that fails to grasp the context of the DtrH.

Turning to the Korean context, Bible Women played a pivotal role in transmitting new ideological frameworks during the early Christian period. Their work signaled a transition from Confucian and patriarchal ideologies to the ideology of Western Christianity. Although this transition aligns with the early stages of Western imperial influence, it did not necessarily reinforce women's inferiority; in many cases, literacy and Christian teaching elevated women's status.

Bible Women should, therefore, be examined through postcolonial criticism. Spiritual guidance from shamans already shaped Korean religious life, yet colonial missions attempted to delegitimize indigenous religious systems. A postcolonial methodology, however, invites us to reconsider these dynamics by examining how Bible Women's roles can parallel those of shamans. Scholarship on Bible Women typically highlights their leadership to affirm women's significance in Christian history, but it is now necessary to reassess their position within both Korean and Western cultural frameworks. Although women occupied subordinate roles within patriarchal society, literacy in Korean and the ability to read the gospels enhanced their social status. Beyond literacy, their cultural mediation requires further scholarly attention from post-colonial perspectives.

In sum, the comparison between Rahab and the Korean Bible Women reveals how women positioned at the margins of empire function as agents of ideological transformation. Their stories illuminate the complex negotiations between indigenous identity and external authority,

44 · Mark Sneed, "Review of Uriah Y. Kim, Decolonizing Josiah: Toward A Postcolonial Reading of the Deuteronomistic History," review of *Decolonizing Josiah: Toward A Postcolonial Reading of the Deuteronomistic History* by Uriah Y. Kim, *The Bible and Critical Theory* 3, no. 3 (2007): 47.1.

45 · Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Israel in the Persian Period: The Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.E*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 278-281.

46 · Cf. William S. Morrow, "The Paradox of Deuteronomy 13: A Post-Colonial Reading," in *Studien zur altorientalischen und biblischen Rechtsgeschichte, zur Religionsgeschichte Israels und zur Religionssoziologie; Festschrift für Eckart Otto zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Achenbach, R. (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), 227-239.

between resistance and adaptation. By reading these figures through a postcolonial lens, we can more fully recognize the cultural, spiritual, and interpretive agency exercised by women who have long been constrained by both patriarchal and colonial narratives.

7. Conclusion

According to R. S. Sugirtharajah, Postcolonial biblical interpretation explores two aspects: the Bible as a colonial tool and as a resistance source against colonial rule.[47] He also emphasizes the missionary work. Women have been recognized as faithful believers in the Bible and Christian history. Rahab, from Joshua's perspective, was a great supporter of the Israelites' spies. However, she was seen as a betrayer by the king of Jericho. This raises questions about how indigenous people respond when their own culture and beliefs clash with those of newcomers. Missionaries of Western Christianity, often lacking an understanding of local culture and beliefs, sometimes dismantled indigenous practices and cultures during their evangelization efforts.

In Korea, Bible Women played a crucial role alongside missionaries in the growth of Christianity during 19th-20th centuries. Their unwavering faith and commitment have been a significant focus on Korean women's history in recent decades. This paper aims to reevaluate the actions and thoughts of Korean Bible Women through a post-colonial lens, considering their identities, and evangelizing practices. Korean Bible Women stay in liminal stage with their sly civility method to present the gospel among women to build up the tremendous platform for Christian revival and growth. This paper hopefully serves as an example of intercultural reading of the Bible from an Asian woman's perspective, and demonstrates how we can interpret biblical stories from an indigenous viewpoint.

In conclusion, a postcolonial juxtaposition of Rahab and the Korean Bible Women reveals how both figures embody liminality and practice sly civility as articulated by Homi Bhabha. Rahab's navigation between Israelite and Canaanite worlds exemplifies a strategic negotiation of power that safeguards her household amid competing allegiances. Likewise, Korean Bible Women mediated between foreign missionaries and local communities, subtly challenging hierarchical and colonial structures through culturally attuned, intermediary roles. Together, these cases show how women in hybrid, in-between spaces exercise meaningful agency within—and at times against—the constraints that shape their worlds. By interpreting Rahab and the Korean Bible Women through Bhabha's framework, this paper highlights how liminal actors negotiate power, facilitate the spread of Christianity, and contribute to localized biblical interpretation. Their often-overlooked roles were, in fact, crucial to the establishment of Christianity on the Korean peninsula.

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