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Ko, Grace. "Review of Ascension Theology and Habakkuk: A Reformed Ecclesiology in Filipino American Perspective, by Neal D. Presa." *ChristianityNext* issue 3 (Winter 2019): 100-103.

Neal D. Presa, *Ascension Theology and Habakkuk: A Reformed Ecclesiology in Filipino American Perspective.*

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. xv + 99 pp.

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Presa's book is an attempt to interpret the biblical text through the lens of the Reformed ascension theology with the purpose of addressing issues facing the Filipino American Christian Community. The book is divided into five chapters, each prefaced with an abstract. It is part of the Palgrave series, "Asian Christianity in the Diaspora," edited by Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Joseph Cheah.

In Chapter 1, "Reformed Contextual Ecclesiology," Presa argues that the challenges facing the overseas Filipino are different from that of the indigenous Filipino in the Philippines. Thus, there is a need to contextualize the theology of struggle to address their needs as they strive to live out their faith in a different culture as a minority group. Presa proposes reading Habakkuk from a Filipino American perspective. He believes reading it from "a cultural autobiography" would reflect one's "self-identity" and "location," which would affect one's interpretation and engagement with the text (pp. 6-7). He incorporates the Reformed ascension theology with a Filipino diaspora lens to exegete the text of Habakkuk and to use it for theological, homiletical and pastoral purposes.

With Chapter 2, "Ascension Theology and Habakkuk," Presa laments that ascension theology "has not been fully mined for its ecclesiological ramifications," yet this period of Christ's ascension is the time and space that the church lives. He explains the ascension theology as understood by Calvin and Barth, and that both saw this as the church participation

and communion in the history and the ongoing life of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit (p. 17). He then relates this to the Filipino American's experience of suffering and hope, as well as their connectedness to the homeland and their contribution to the flourishing of the American society and their Philippine homeland. He sees Habakkuk as a perfect example to express the experience of Filipino in diaspora.

In Chapter 3, "Ascension Homiletic and Habakkuk," Presa uses his three-part sermon on Habakkuk to demonstrate the Filipino American homiletic framed within ascension theology. The first sermon, "Silent Absence," explores Habakkuk's initial complaint to God because of the apparent divine silence facing the violence and injustice in the society. He uses Hebrew meanings of Habakkuk's name (embrace) and the oracle (burden) to suggest that "Habakkuk was desiring God to embrace the burden of Israel" (p. 32). He relates it to ascension theology by showing that God may seem absent, but he has already acted by sending his Son to take on the violence and inhumanity and won the victory by raising Christ from death (p. 33). In the second sermon, "A Life that Waits," he exhorts the church to wait for the Lord just as Habakkuk did in the midst of havoc caused by human sins. He contends that Christ's death by violence is the counter-violence for the redemption of humanity to end all violence and concludes by calling the congregation to follow God in the waiting. In the third sermon, "Selah. Behold," he asks whether we can pause and praise the Lord amidst the dissonance caused by human evil. He finds solace in knowing that we can because of Jesus' example and his work (p. 36).

Presa proposes in Chapter 4, "Ascension Hermeneutic and Habakkuk," the use of "sacramental hermeneutic" to exegete the Bible. This chapter explains this methodology and convinces the reader that "sacramentality is an approach to exegete texts of Scripture, the contexts of life, and the subtexts of heart" (p. 39).

Chapter 5, "Ascension and the Diaspora in Action: A Pastoral Word," further explains how ascension theology shapes and affirms three key areas of Filipino culture: prayer in community, communal feasting and food, and water (baptism). Presa is adamant about struggle as hopeful risk, encouraging fellowship among Filipino American Christians, and keeping their cultural heritage.

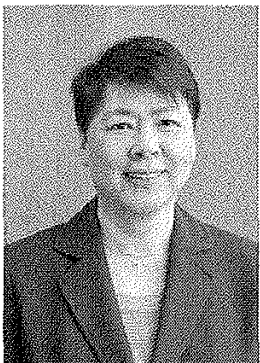
Presa is to be commended for his effort to merge Filipino culture with ascension theology in the reading of Habakkuk. He brings to the foreground the role of culture and experience in the interpretation and application of the biblical text. His insistence in reading the Scripture through the cultural lens with a theological framework is an attempt to make the biblical text relevant to his audience. His vivid descriptions of Filipino life in American society, particularly their communal life in the church, give the outsider a good introduction to Filipino culture.

Presa's weakest link is in his exegesis and exposition of Habakkuk. He calls Habakkuk a "minority prophet" and a "prophetic minority within the exilic community" (p. 21), which is incorrect or at best unclear on both counts. Firstly, the so-called "Minor Prophets" refers to the length of the books, not their significance or status. Secondly, Habakkuk was a pre-exilic prophet during the reign of Jehoiakim (609-598 BCE), and the setting of his book is before the invasion of the Babylon (1:5-6; 3:16). In his first sermon, he mentions that Habakkuk "communicated the oracle, or burden, to the Lord" (p. 44), but in the biblical text, Habakkuk is the recipient of the oracle from the Lord (1:1). The problem is that he is too eager to use the etymology of Habakkuk's name and the word "burden" as a springboard for his sermon. (Not to mention, no modern translation renders the Hebrew word *massā'* as "burden.") Also, Presa's explanation of the chiasm in Habakkuk 3 (p. 46) seems arbitrary and forced.

Despite this weakness, Habakkuk's message is applicable to all generations and to all people, for suffering, injustice, and evil pervade human society. Presa's reading through the lens of ascension theology brings another welcome aspect to the ongoing discussion of the relevance of theology to daily life struggles.

ASCENSION THEOLOGY AND HABAKKUK:
A REFORMED ECCLESIOLOGY IN FILIPINO AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

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