

Book Review: “*Silence In Translation*”: 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 in Myanmar and the Development of a Critical Contextual Hermeneutic

By Anna Sui Hluan (Langham Academic, 2022)

Reviewed by Kimberly Dickson

“*Silence*” in *Translation* is the published version of Anna Sui Hluan’s PhD dissertation, which examines the Judson Burmese translation of 1 Cor 14:34–35. Deeply researched and meticulously argued, a book review can scarcely capture all that she has covered. She devotes a large section to comparing the Greek and Burmese translations that could be skipped or browsed by most readers unfamiliar with these languages. Even so, readers stand to gain insight into important hermeneutical issues that need to be considered when doing Bible translation.

Hluan concludes that a new type of interpretation should be used, which she names a Critical Contextual Hermeneutic. Her approach provides a promising tool for anyone involved in Bible translation and interpretation in cross-cultural contexts. Sui Hluan’s specific context, Myanmar, offers a case study for this approach. Focusing on Adoniram Judson’s translation and the cultural context of Myanmar, she provides practical examples of how the translator’s context, the receiving culture’s context, and the biblical context are all distinct critical contexts that must be evaluated in translation.

When evaluating 1 Cor 14:34–35, Sui Hluan makes her threefold concentration clear. Through detailed research, she establishes Judson’s nineteenth-century American missionary background, which uncritically accepted patriarchy. Though his translation reflected his era’s beliefs that men should be in authority over women, his life and the lives of his wives (Ann Hasseltine 1812–1826, Sarah Hall Boardman 1834–1845, and Emily Chubbuck 1846–1850) demonstrated a belief that women can and should lead in many ministry outreaches including occasional preaching. This view is reflected in his translation of the Greek word *lalein* (“to speak”), which occurs in v. 34 and again in v. 35, as “to preach.” Rather than limiting all women’s speaking, he limited only preaching. However, as Hluan points out, in the Myanmar context, combined with the Greek word *sigao*, “silence,” in the same passage, the effect of the translation has been to limit women’s speech and leadership.

Turning first to women’s speech, her explanation of silence in the Myanmar context is enlightening. Myanmar’s culture has been deeply impacted by authoritarian rule that dates from imperial reigns prior to colonialism, to the current post-colonial period. Giving practical examples, she explains that submissive silence is expected by all who are not in authority (22). Silence is further reinforced through Buddhism, the major religion of Myanmar. As she says, silence governs “the relationship between rulers and ruled, men and women, and parents and children” (322). And regarding women, “women’s silent submission, and shame if this virtue is violated” are central to the culture (251). Even within church leadership, this silence ensures that the “leaders” have absolute authority and power, which is not questioned by other men. This dynamic has created church leadership in direct opposition to Jesus’s teaching, which requires that whoever wants to be great must be the servant of all. Culturally, when applied to women—who in Myanmar culture are considered inferior to men—the term “silence” does far more to limit women than Judson likely ever meant to communicate in his translation (28, 40, 252).

Hluan then evaluates the biblical context of this passage. Recognizing the disputes about this text’s context and its effect on translation, she broadly compares and contrasts scholarly views and then details the approaches of Wayne Grudem, Ben Witherington, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, whom she identifies as complementarian, biblical egalitarian, and Christian feminist, respectively. She sees that, despite disagreement on the cultural issues in Corinth, scholars place a huge emphasis on these issues as key to the interpretation of this text (287). She provides a fair background for each scholar, and analyses how their approach may be relevant to the Myanmar context. She offers what she finds most helpful from each in the Myanmar context. Concluding that the perspectives of Grudem, Witherington, and Schüssler Fiorenza are too centered in their American cultural backgrounds, she includes work from theologians more overt about contextual issues in interpretation.

Hluan concludes that, contrary to Grudem’s views and the fundamentalist beliefs of Myanmar churches, the status of women should not be defined by the consequences laid out in Gen 3, but rather through the redemption of Jesus and the ethics of Gal 3:28 (249). With a whole-Scripture approach, she recognizes the counter-cultural actions of Jesus and Paul, which she brings to the interpretation of this difficult text (317). She notes the many women Paul references as coworkers, the situations where he obviously expects that they are not silent, and the 1 Cor 11 passage addressing women’s attire when praying and prophesying in the church (290). She concludes that 1 Cor 14:34–35 is context-specific, meaning, it addresses a specific issue of disorderly worship in Corinth (304). Agreeing with Schüssler Fiorenza that Paul references a Roman law that limits women’s speech, Hluan points out that Myanmar has no such laws (310, 313, 315, 316). Thus, the passage cannot be uncritically applied across time and cultures (316–17).

Quite appropriately, she concludes her book by comparing her approach to one of the first female evangelical translators, Katharine Bushnell. In the same way that Bushnell saw that male interpreters had reinforced translations that discriminated against women, Hluan sees the current Burmese translation discriminating against women in Myanmar (328–29). She understands that to challenge Myanmar’s respected Judson translation will bring controversy and adversity, yet she maintains that an approach like Bushnell’s, combining a view of Scripture as authoritative with a woman’s experience, is crucial for the church to move forward.

Overall, this book is worth the time and focus it takes to read, especially as the Myanmar context better represents the present global church than the Western context does.



Kimberly Dickson currently hosts CBE International’s *Mutuality Matters* podcast: Women in Scripture and Christian History and the Global Impact of Egalitarian Theology and Human Flourishing. She is a PhD student in Old Testament and Hebrew Studies at the University of Edinburgh.