



## ***The Life of Jesus Series by Kim Ki-chang: An Analysis Based on Andrew Walls's Translation Theory***

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines Kim Ki-chang's The Life of Jesus through Andrew Walls' translation theory. Just as God was translated into human form in 1st-century Palestine, Kim translates biblical figures into Joseon dynasty social roles to express spiritual hierarchy. Kim translates Jesus as a yangban with a halo, symbolizing divine authority. Peter appears first as a commoner but later wears yangban attire as he follows Jesus, reflecting spiritual transformation. Kim also creates historical distance by placing his biblical scenes in the peaceful Joseon era rather than the wartime Korea he lived through. Notably, Kim used his own face in painting Peter sinking in the waves, expressing his personal anguish over the Korean War while preserving a distance. Although Kim's portrayal of the stories of Jesus Christ had limits due to Joseon class structure, it was a creative and bold attempt to translate the Christian narratives into a Korean visual idiom, thereby deepening their relevance and offering a distinctly Korean interpretation that resonates beyond their original setting.*

**Keywords:** Kim Ki-chang, *The Life of Jesus* series, Andrew Walls, translation theory, yangban, Joseon dynasty, genre painting, inculturated Christian art

## Introduction

Unbo Kim Ki-chang 雲甫 金基昶 (1913–2001) was a Korean-style painter who between 1952 and 1953, amidst the Korean War, created a series of 30 works on the life of Jesus. These works depict various social classes, including yangban (nobility) and commoners, set in the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910). But why did he depict Jesus specifically as a Joseon-era yangban?<sup>1</sup> And how can we interpret and understand the various figures belonging to different classes that appear in *The Life of Jesus* series?

Research on Kim Ki-chang's *The Life of Jesus* has been conducted in various Korean academic fields within art history and Christian theology. In the arts, there are studies that discuss the content and expression of his work and classify Kim Ki-chang's *The Life of Jesus* as a Korean modern Christian painting (Jeong 2006; S. Kim 1999; Y. Kim 2002; Han 2009; M. Lee 2015; Lim 2007; Myung 2004).

In theology, Lee Jung Sook examined Korean Christian art, including Kim Ki-chang's *The Life of Jesus*, as attempts at cultural indigenization of a foreign religion using Korean content and form (J. Lee 2001). Sim Youngok has viewed *The Life of Jesus* series as exhibiting a unique method of biblical interpretation aimed at localizing Christianity, classifying the work into four themes and briefly analyzing the content and form of the individual pieces (Sim 2020). Also notable is Kim Jin-Myung's analysis of the series through an aesthetic biblical interpretation framework. Based on the assumption that Kim Ki-chang interprets the biblical texts from the perspective of a Christian artist, Kim examines the iconography of *The Life of Jesus*, combining interpretations of biblical passages and themes with aesthetic commentary for interdisciplinary study (J. Kim 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2024). But while Kim Jin-Myung's iconographical studies are useful for interpreting the Bible texts, there are limited in their ability to draw out a full understanding of the

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1. In this research, the term “yangban” includes both the *munban* 文班 (civil officials) who are part of the royal aristocracy and hold current or hereditary power, as well as the *muban* 武班 (military officials) who were responsible for guarding the palace and national defense (Kang 2024, 255).

paintings. Ahn Shin had more to say on the usefulness of the pieces for theological education, insisting that Kim Ki-chang's series can be visual texts for Christian universities in today's age of World Christianity (Ahn 2018).<sup>2</sup> On a different note, Song Chisun examined how Kim Ki-chang's *The Life of Jesus* reveals the artist's conscious and unconscious elitism and male chauvinism in its depiction of men and women of different social classes (C. Song 2021). However, Song's analysis primarily focuses on the static meaning of the yangban and the artist's intentions, while neglecting to consider the shifting and expanding meaning of that social class.

While there have been several international exhibitions of Kim Ki-chang's *The Life of Jesus*, research by non-Korean scholars has been scarce. Notable is Heather Marie Burt's analysis of folk art paintings by two Christian artists from Asia, Sadao Watanabe and Kim Ki-chang, using Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity. From an art historical perspective, she sees their indigenous Christian paintings as occupying a "third place" (Burt 2017).

Examining existing research reveals several gaps. First, Kim Ki-chang's *The Life of Jesus* is generally categorized as inculturated Christian art. However, can we truly say that *The Life of Jesus*, wherein Christ is depicted against the background of Joseon-era buildings or nature and portrayed as belonging to various social classes, constitutes inculturated Christian art? If so, it is necessary to contemplate the criteria by which *The Life of Jesus* has been classified as inculturated art and what significance this holds.

Second, there has to date been no iconographic analysis of Kim Ki-chang's *The Life of Jesus*. Existing studies on the iconography of *The Life of Jesus* generally quote and explain biblical texts corresponding to each piece in the series, then conduct a cursory examination of Korean clothing and background scenes in the depictions. More detailed explorations of various figures in the series, the pieces and attire they wear, and their significance in the Joseon era are necessary.

This study analyzes the representations of Kim Ki-chang's biblical

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2. However, Song Chisun (2021) insisted that care be taken in using *The Life of Jesus* for religious education because it reflects elitism and a patriarchal relationship between women and men.

narratives in *The Life of Jesus* through the lens of World Christianity, a concept in the field of Christian missiological studies, and the associated translation theory. World Christianity emphasizes the global diversity of Christian expressions, moving beyond a West-centric view to recognize non-Western practices as central to the faith. The World Christianity perspective recognizes how the center of Christianity continues to shift and change as the religion is disseminated to multiple regions and cultures (Phan 2016).

Building on the perspective of World Christianity, Andrew Walls, a Christian missiologist, argues that incarnation is itself translation. Wall's translation principle can be summarized in the following four key points (Walls 2004, 27–29): 1) God's incarnation, taking on the human body of Christ, was "divine translation"; 2) Christ was fully translated into the fullest reaches of personality, experience, and social relationships in the particular human Jesus Christ, a Palestinian Jew of the 1st century; 3) as believers in different cultures respond to Christ, Christ is retranslated; and 4) in this process of retranslation, a semantic extension occurs in both the source language as well as in the receptor language. In this process, the incarnation, the "divine translation," is the most important event in the history of redemption, and is the foundational missionary event where the cosmic being of God localized Godself as a regional being that is human. God chose "translation as the mode of action for the salvation of humanity," and the Christian faith rests on this divine act of translation, and Christ is the translation of God's message (Walls 2004, 26–27). Walls' translation theory may then be applied as a lens for interpreting Kim Ki-chang's *The Life of Jesus* as an indigenous Christian artwork through which Christ was retranslated (Jeon 2024, 236–237).

In the following section, I will examine the process and context of translating *The Life of Jesus* into a Korean Christian image set against the backdrop of the Joseon era. Next, I will analyze how Kim Ki-chang attempted to visualize Jesus, a God who became human, through attire reflecting the class hierarchy of Joseon Korea. Here, I offer a detailed analysis of how Jesus Christ was depicted as a yangban in *The Life of Jesus*, as well as how the disciples, sinners, impoverished, and ordinary crowds in the biblical narratives are dressed and placed within the Joseon hierarchy. In the final section,

I will examine Kim Ki-chang's motives for translating Jesus' life in the particular time and space of Joseon Korea rather than his own wartime circumstances of contemporary Korea. This study analyzes Kim Ki-chang's *The Life of Jesus through Walls*' translation theory to offer a new perspective.

### The Context of Translating Jesus as a Yangban

Kim Ki-chang's hearing was impaired due to illness when he was 7 years old. Thanks to his mother who was a teacher and a nurse, he learned to read and was also brought to church.<sup>3</sup> At 17, Kim became a student of the artist Kim Eun-ho to learn oriental painting. Kim Ki-chang's early paintings take after the delicate brush strokes of his teacher. From the early 1930s to 1945, when the Japanese colonial period ended, Kim employed Japanese shading techniques to Korean characters and nature (M. Song 2016, 139).<sup>4</sup> At Kim Eun-ho's suggestion, Kim Ki-chang submitted these Japanese-style paintings to the Joseon Fine Art Exhibition hosted by Japan, where he was won honorable mentions six times and received special prizes four times (K. Kim 1977, 218–236).<sup>5</sup>

Between 1952 and 1953, during the Korean War (1950–1953), Kim Ki-chang stayed in Gunsan, his wife's hometown, and there painted thirty pieces from scenes in the biblical narrative of the life of Jesus Christ. Twenty-

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3. Later, in 1985, Kim Ki-chang converted to Catholicism after his daughter became a nun.

4. Idang Kim Eun-ho was taught by Yuki Somei 結成素明 (1875–1957), a professor at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. There, he was introduced to a Japanese painting style that blended Western realism—particularly techniques such as perspective and chiaroscuro—with the traditional characteristics of Japanese painting, such as flat color planes and stylized composition. Building on this foundation, Kim Eun-ho sought to modernize traditional Korean coloring technique (*chaesaekhwa*) by incorporating Western-style realistic sketching, light and shadow, and adopting the refined, elaborate qualities of general Japanese-style coloring (M. Song 2016, 139).

5. However, during the Japanese colonial period, Kim Ki-chang created paintings that promoted Japanese imperialism or cooperated with Japanese colonial rule. Following liberation, he was designated a pro-Japanese painter along with his mentor Kim Eun-ho, for which he officially apologized. Regarding the criticisms of his pro-Japanese activities, as well as his confessional writings on the subject, see Ki-chang Kim (1977, 218–236).

nine of them were completed in 1952, while the last was painted in 1953 at the request of a German missionary commissioning a painting for an Easter greeting card. Here, the resurrected Jesus was painted as walking out of his grave with a peach tree in the background (Unbo Kim Ki-chang Compilation Committee 1994, 42–45).<sup>6</sup> *The Life of Jesus* series that was the result of these efforts was drawn as folk art involving various social classes and set during the Joseon dynasty. Kim Ki-chang himself identified several reasons for employing this style.

First, American missionaries requested that Kim Ki-chang express the biblical narrative in a Korean art style. In the period 1950–1951, Anders Kristian Jensen, an American missionary and a close acquaintance of Kim Ki-chang, repeatedly encouraged Kim to create a Korean representation of Jesus. As Kim Ki-chang later recounted:

There are many sacred paintings in the world. Christ was not born for any one country. It was only that he borrowed the most unfortunate country at the time [Israel]. Because he is the savior of all humanity, many countries depict Christ in ways that reflect their own image to make the faith more accessible to them. There are sacred paintings in Japan and China that take after their appearances as well. I hope that you will begin to cultivate the power to complete the sacred paintings for Korea. (Ki-chang Kim 1977, 211)

Kim Ki-chang was moved by this urging (M. Kim 2014). In particular, he was deeply inspired by the statement that Christianity should firmly establish itself in Korea as the religion of the Korea people (Sim 2020, 41). Kim was also encouraged by the wife of David Booth, an American physician and medical missionary at Severance Dental Hospital, to illustrate all Korean customs as paintings for sale to Americans.

Ms. Booth, despite her busy schedule, regularly sold my paintings, providing me with a part of my living expenses each month and closely moni-

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6. See Appendix for the topic list of pictures of *The Life of Jesus*.

toring my artistic progress. The reason I still enjoy painting genre scenes today, and the reason Ms. Booth at that time enjoyed painting all aspects of Korean life, was because she encouraged me to depict various facets of Korean customs in my work, which sparked my enthusiasm. Of course, genre painting had been one of my favorite subjects since the time I was selected for the art exhibition for my piece “Neolttwigi” [Korean see-saw]. Moreover, in searching for the distinctly Korean significance in oriental painting, I naturally turned to Korean traditional customs. (S. Kim 1999, 111–112)

As such, Kim Ki-chang’s *The Life of Jesus* series can be said to have arose out of his friendship with American missionaries who requested he translate Christianity into Korean art form.

*The Life of Jesus* series is classified as genre painting in terms of form and content. In its form, the series of genre paintings shows Kim’s experimentation with Korean painting style that diverges from the previous Japanese painting style he pursued until Korean liberation. In terms of subject content, genre paintings had typically depicted the everyday lives of the common people. Then in the 18th century, the commodified leisure activities of the yangban class, including boating, *go* playing, stone stacking, and gambling, became a prominent subject in genre paintings depicting the elite (Chang 2007; Kang 2024). This leads us to inquire why Kim chose to depict Christ as a yangban who empathizes with the common people.

Before Kim Ki-chang painted *The Life of Jesus* series in the style of genre painting, he was greatly interested in the Joseon-era paintings of Shin Yun-bok and Kim Hong-do. According to Kim Hyung-min (1987), a wealthy man once brought and showed Kim Ki-chang thirty black-and-white photographs of Shin Yun-bok’s works during the years Kim lived in Gunsan. Kim claims that this incident directly influenced his decision to paint *The Life of Jesus* in 18th-century Joseon-era attire and in the context of Joseon-era buildings and landscapes that evoke the genre paintings of Shin Yun-bok (M. Kim 2014, 18; C. Song 2021, 211).

Certainly, yangban appear in the paintings of Kim Hong-do and Shin Yun-bok. Figure 1 shows a yangban half-reclined and relaxed, watching the



**Figure 1.** Kim Hong-do, *Rice Threshing*, in Danwon Folk Painting Album, late 18th century. Light-colored painting on paper, 28.2×35.6 cm, Gansong Art Museum

**Figure 2.** Shin Yun-bok, *Boating on a Clear River*, 17th century. Light-colored painting on paper, 28x 23.9 cm, National Museum of Korea

commoners labor and thresh rice. Most of the grain obtained from the labor of the common people was the property of the yangban.

In Figure 2, Shin Yun-bok depicts yangban on a leisurely boat cruise with women. In the time of Shin Yun-bok in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Joseon upper class had fallen into moral decline, and there was a widespread reexamination of idealist neo-Confucianism they had long upheld. In this context, Shin Yun-bok, directly and indirectly revealed his criticism of the aristocrats and the *jungin* (middle-class) and their chauvinism in his portrayals of yangban at leisure. Through his art, Shin skewered the dominant image of the yangban as virtuous and ascetic figures of noble moral character devoted to the Way (*do*) and scholarly pursuits. He also challenged the prevailing male supremacist belief that men may treat women however they pleased (Sim 2020, 265, 280).

In contrast with the negative image of yangban in both Kim Hong-do and Shin Yun-bok's genre paintings, the Christ figure depicted as a yangban in Kim Ki-chang's *The Life of Jesus* is portrayed in a much more positive

light—sacrificing and empathetic of the suffering of common people. This centralization of the positive aspect of a yangban departs from traditional genre paintings. In the terms of Andrew Walls' translation theory, Kim Ki-chang may be said to have re-translated and re-signified the cultural image of yangban through the figure of Christ.

The most distinctive feature of the thirty paintings in *The Life of Jesus* is that they are set in the Joseon period. Christ, a Palestinian carpenter who lived to his thirties two thousand years ago, was reimagined in the sociopolitical and cultural context of Korea (C. Song 2021, 198). The characters dressed in hanbok, including Jesus in a white *durumagi* and a *gat* on his head, against the backdrop of traditional Korean houses with either thatched or tiled roofs, are reminiscent of traditional genre paintings.

The thirty paintings in the series may be largely divided into four categories: Jesus' birth and childhood, life and lessons, suffering and death, and resurrection and ascension (Sim 2020, 41).<sup>7</sup> On the whole, there are few pieces on the birth and childhood of Jesus compared to the other three segments on his adult, public life. This reveals Kim Ki-chang's emphasis on Jesus' public life and suffering in solidarity with others, which resonates with the suffering Kim's contemporaries in the Korean War.

### Translating Christianity's Spiritual Order into Joseon's Social Hierarchy

In this section, I will analyze how Kim Ki-chang expanded the meaning of Joseon-era social class through his paintings. Kim tried to visualize a Christian spiritual hierarchy through the metaphor of class difference between the yangban and the common people.<sup>8</sup>

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7. See appendix.

8. Kim Ki-chang was the first to depict Jesus as a yangban in traditional Korean paintings. It has been pointed out that an earlier instance of Jesus depicted in Korean garb can be found in Kim Jun-geun's illustration of *Pilgrim's Progress*, translated by James Gale in 1895 (Park 2008). This character is portrayed as pouring oil on fire. Given that *Pilgrim's Progress* is about a man's journey toward understanding Christ's suffering and reaching Heaven through faith, the man pouring oil should be understood as the Holy Spirit rather than Jesus.

*Translating Jesus as a Yangban*

The image of Jesus as a yangban may be understood through Walls' theory of translation. Walls saw how Christ can become visible in the very things that constitute a nation. In the same way, Kim Ki-chang made Christ visible in Korea, from a Palestinian Jewish man in Roman tunic to a Korean man dressed as a yangban.<sup>9</sup> In the theory of translation, the primary, act of translation is the divine act of God taking on a particular human body. This act initiates subsequent and constant acts of new translation (Walls 2004, 27). Given these processes, diversity is a necessary product of incarnation. Yet it should also be noted that the first divine translation is qualitatively different from secondary translations from one human language and culture to another. It follows that Kim Ki-chang's translation made sure to distinguish Christ as a yangban of the highest social status and drew disciples and other characters as of the same or lower status.

Secondly, the principle of extension in translation theory notes that the original language undergoes a change in meaning during the translation process. Walls emphasizes in his translation theory that the meaning is actually expanded. Walls (2004, 26) notes how "the words of the receptor language are pre-loaded, and the old cargo drags the new into areas uncharted in the source language." In other words, in an attempt to translate and express something into the new, that is, receptor language, one has to use the existing concepts within the receptor language conventions. And in this process of incorporating the new element into the receptor language (and its new culture), the language system must necessarily expand to make room for the new element. At the same time, the translated element of the source language has also been expanded as the result of it being translated into a new language (Walls 2004, 28). Applied to yangban Jesus, Christ is the translated element that enters the receptor language to expand both the

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9. Kim Eun-ho, who was the teacher of Kim Ki-chang, also depicted Jesus wearing a Roman tunic in his traditional Eastern paintings. Later in 1985, Kim Hak-soo, who created a series of works on the life of Jesus, also portrayed Jesus in a Roman tunic, while his disciples were depicted wearing traditional Korean yangban attire.



**Figure 3.** Kim Ki-chang, *The Samaritan Woman*, 1952. Light coloring on silk, 63×76cm, Seokpajeong Seoul Museum

receptor language system as well as the meaning of Christ, the source language. By the depiction of Jesus as a yangban in Joseon era, the meaning of Christ has been renewed and enriched. At the same time, the meaning of yangban has also been expanded and shifted by showing Jesus as a yangban. Yangban can now mean more than an authoritarian ruling class, leaving wider possibilities for the self-sacrificial yangban in solidarity with the socially marginalized.

Figure 3 depicts a scene from John 4:5–14, in which Jesus meets a Samaritan woman by a well on his way from Judea to Galilee. Jesus tells the woman who came to fetch water about a spiritual well that never runs dry. Jesus the traveler is dressed in a *dopo* (robe) and a *gat*, while his interlocutor

is a simple rural housewife, signified by the hairstyle that shows her marital status. While from the Goryeo to the mid-Joseon periods the formal *gache* (a decorative wig meant for both decoration and as an expression of the wearer's dignity) was limited to court women, by the late Joseon period the distinction was lost, and the custom spread to the women of lower status (Sim 2013, 277).

But Kim Ki-chang still distinguishes between the status of Jesus and his disciples in other clothing items. For example, from the sixth painting depicting the child Jesus on to the later paintings, Jesus is always painted wearing a red *sejodae* or a *sultti*, a thin band around the waist only worn by men of high status in Joseon. Clearly, Kim Ki-chang intended to portray Jesus as a member of the privileged class.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Spiritual Transformation through Change in Disciples' Attire*

Walls also explained the cultural particularity of incarnation: "When Divinity was translated into humanity he did not become generalized humanity. He became a person in a particular locality and in a particular ethnic group at a particular place and time. The translation of God into humanity, whereby the sense and meaning of God was transferred, was effected under very culture-specific conditions" (Walls 2004, 28). In Kim Ki-chang's depiction of the disciples, this culture-specific particularity is evident. Kim symbolically represented spiritual transformation through changes in the attire of the disciples. Figure 4 depicts the scene in which Jesus calls the disciples by the Sea of Galilee (Luke 5). The disciples leave all their possessions to respond to Jesus' summons to be his disciples. Kim portrays the disciples committing themselves with utmost sincerity (Sim 2020, 45).

In this scene, Jesus is depicted as a *yangban*, while the fisherman Peter is dressed as a commoner. The traditional *yangban* class of Joseon had its

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10. Men's fashion in the Joseon era changed little by little, and the status distinctions gradually blurred over the years. But the red *sultti* was a representative piece clothing worn only by a high status *yangban*. For more on the clothing and customs of the Joseon dynasty, see Hanguk gomunseo hakhoe (2006) and Song (2021, 224–225).



**Figure 4.** Kim Ki-chang, *Calling of the First Disciples*, 1952. Light coloring on silk, 63×76cm, Seokpajeong Seoul Museum

own exclusive class consciousness. If any yangban were to recruit followers, they would have been from the yangban class who passed the official state examinations rather than common fishermen. The scene in which the yangban Jesus calls a common fisherman to be his disciple was radically unconventional.

In Kim Ki-chang's *The Last Supper*, Jesus is painted as dining with the twelve disciples for the last time on the eve of his crucifixion (Matthew 26: 20–29; Mark 14:17–25; Luke 22:14–23). The composition places Jesus at the center of a traditional Korean wooden floor hall, surrounded by the twelve disciples, all dressed in yangban attire, seated around a table in a circular arrangement. The figure of Judas Iscariot on the far left looks more awkward



**Figure 5.** Kim Ki-chang, *The Last Supper*, 1952. Light coloring on silk, 63 × 76cm, Seokpajeong Seoul Museum

than sinister and seems out of place in the group (Sim 2020, 50). On the table, instead of the traditional Christian image of wine and bread, there are Korean rice cakes and cups, as well as a hot pot and a meat dish. Kim Jin-Myung (2024, 418) interprets the meat on the table as symbolizing the Passover lamb in reference to the Old Testament narrative of the Passover festival of the Israelites (Exodus 12). In this scene, Peter and the disciples, who were commoners and fishermen before they were called upon, are now in yangban attire. It is evident that Kim Ki-chang intended to translate them as of high status (Song 2021, 224). This was a visual translation of spiritual change that occurred the moment disciples began following Christ.

Another key feature of Jesus is the halo behind his head that differentiates him from other figures dressed as yangban. Jesus is distinguished from the disciples as not just another human aristocrat but as divine in nature.

#### *The Sick, the Poor, and the Sinners Translated as Commoners*

*The Life of Jesus* series also features many commoners. They first appear in the scene of Jesus' birth. Kim Ki-chang sets the nativity scene in a cow stable



**Figure 6.** Kim Ki-chang, *Nativity of Christ*, 1952. Light coloring on silk, 63 × 76cm, Seokpajeong Seoul Museum

commonly found in rural Korea. Mary is covered with a robe of light green shade, looking down at baby Jesus wrapped in cloth. Beside her is Joseph wearing a *gat*. A halo that represents the divine aura in both Eastern and Western cultures is drawn behind the heads of baby Jesus and Mary. Around the stable, various classes of women are gathered to prepare dishes to congratulate and celebrate Jesus' birth. The livestock in the painting also encircle Jesus as if to celebrate his birth (Sim 2020, 42).

In other paintings, the physically ill and the *sinner*s who seek out Jesus are generally depicted as commoners. Why were these people drawn as commoners to distinguish them from Jesus and the disciples? These instances visualize the spiritual hierarchy through the social status hierarchy of the

Joseon dynasty. Jesus in yangban attire and a halo around his head is at the apex. The disciples who moved up the status from commoners to yangban show the status transition in the spiritual realm. The sick, the poor, and the sinners were portrayed as commoners to visualize their spiritual state.

### Translation Distanced from the Contemporary Korean Context

The setting of Kim Ki-chang's paintings of Jesus' life is somewhat distanced from the contemporary era. This was an intentional choice of Kim Ki-chang. His translation may be interpreted in two ways.

#### *Insertion of Temporal Distance*

At the time Kim Ki-chang painted *The Life of Jesus*, he was in Gunsan, the hometown of his wife, amidst the Korean War. As he explained the motivation for the series, "I felt the necessity of creating a Korean-style sacred painting as I thought that the suffering of Jesus was similar to the tragedy of our nation" (K. Kim 1977, 145). The Roman Empire of Jesus' day and the Japanese Empire and subsequent Korean War in Kim Ki-chang's day had key similarities. Just as the Jews in Jesus' day suffered under Roman oppression and yearned for political liberation by the coming Messiah, in the 1950s when Kim made his paintings, there were popular prophecies circulating that purported to have foreseen the fall of the Joseon dynasty, the division and unification of the nation, and the emergence of a new ideal monarch.<sup>11</sup> Koreans also yearned for a leader to lead them through political liberation.

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11. Prophetic texts such as the *Namsago bigyeol* 南師古秘訣, popular in the southern regions including Jeolla-do province in the 18th century; the *Jeonggammok* 鄭鑑錄, which circulated in the northwestern regions; and the *Doseonbigi* 道先秘記 from Chungcheong-do province, all conveyed similar themes. Among them, the *Jeonggammok* contains prophecies about "a great upheaval," the rise of an ideal ruler referred to as a *sinin* 神人 ('divine man'), and a nation that "is divided into three parts, but later reunites as one." These ideas remained widespread among the general population throughout Korea, even into the final years of the Joseon dynasty in the late 19th century (C. Song 2021, 205–206).



**Figure 7.** Kim Ki-chang, *Healing the Sick*, 1952. Light coloring on silk, 63 × 76cm, Seokpajeong Seoul Museum

But with the Korean War raging in Kim Ki-chang chose to portray scenes in Jesus' life set in the peaceful bygone era of the Joseon period, with the exception of the scene of crucifixion or King Herod's massacre of infants.

For example, in *Healing the Sick* (Fig. 7), the yangban Jesus is depicted as one who empathizes with the suffering of the common people and heals the sick and disabled. He is seen laying hands on a person kneeling before him and asking to be healed. Jesus' disciples dressed as *yangban* surround him observing the ministry.

What is notable about this painting is the background. There are low rolling hills and trees with pink apricot and peach blossoms commonly found in rural Korea. In the distance, smoke gently rises from a thatched-



**Figure 8.** Kim Ki-chang, *Refugees*, 1953. Light coloring on silk, 63×76cm, Seokpajeong Seoul Museum

roof house. The scene evokes a peaceful and warm spring day. Other paintings in the series, such as *Feeding the Five Thousand*, *Adoration of the Magi*, and *Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, are similarly placed in such serene settings of the Joseon era.

In contrast to the peaceful scenes of the Joseon era in most works in *The Life of Jesus* series, Kim Ki-chang's *Refugees*, which he painted during the same period as *The Life of Jesus* series, evokes a very different mood. *Refugees* shows masses of hunched people fleeing the frontlines of the Korean War laden with their heavy belongings. Cold, hungry, and exhausted refugees are steeling against the snowstorm. Their heads are down so as not to reveal their facial expressions, but one can easily imagine. Kim Ki-chang painted other such realistic scenes of his day.

But for *The Life of Jesus* series, Kim intentionally set the scenes in the much more peaceful and idealized setting of the Joseon period, rather than

his own war-torn era, to maintain a distance between his artistic subject and his own reality. As Kim himself depicted in *Refugees*, the Korean War was painful and tragic. As a Christian, Kim imagined what it might be like to have Christ present in this situation, then chose to depict him in a more peaceful time at least a century previous rather than portraying the graphic realities of the present. The choice was perhaps driven by his desire to hold on to hope in hopeless times and show an image of a once again peaceful Korea under the reign of God.

*Kim Ki-chang Translates Himself as Peter in the Storm*

In *Jesus Walking on the Water* (Fig. 9), Jesus, walking on water, reaches out to save the sinking disciple Peter. The biblical narrative explains that Peter, who initially walked on water, became fearful and began to sink. What should be noted in this painting is the face of Peter, for which Kim painted his own likeness.<sup>12</sup> Peter the disciple is traditionally described as impulsive and prone to mistakes. Similarly, Kim Ki-chang describes himself as impatient and making many mistakes. When he converted from Protestantism to Catholicism in 1985 as his daughter became a nun, Kim Ki-chang welcomed the baptismal name Peter. Kim was said to have been pleased by a name that so well suited his character (S. Kim 1999, 126–127).

This painting may be interpreted as a metaphorical depiction of the turmoil of the Korean War and the suffering endured by the people. Instead of directly illustrating the chaos of war and the fear of death, he expresses it metaphorically through the precarious situation of a drowning Peter, set in Joseon era. People rowing a small boat atop a massive wave at the top of the painting seem to represent the people of Kim's own era bearing through the conflict. For both Peter and Kim, Jesus extends a hand of salvation and is about to calm the sea. This was an indirect expression of Kim's own anguish for himself and a Korea in wartime.

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12. Kim Ki-chang painted many portraits from an early age, and during his time in Gunsan he gained some renown for his paintings of the US military base there, even earning enough to purchase a house in Gunsan (S. Kim 1999, 197–198).



**Figure 9.** Kim Ki-chang, *Jesus Walking on the Water*, 1952. Light coloring on silk, 63 × 76 cm, Seokpajeong Seoul Museum

Why did Kim Ki-chang choose to paint himself into the picture in place of Peter? A possible interpretation is that the painting is Kim's effort in search of his authentic self. By painting himself as a disciple of Jesus in yangban attire, he expressed his desire to hold on to Jesus' hands and survive as a Christian through the turbulence of the Korean War. By placing himself in the Joseon era, he may also have wanted to rediscover his own roots as a Korean, especially as his nation was in crisis.

In sum, Kim Ki-chang inserted temporal, spatial, and psychological distance using metaphors between his own wartime and his *The Life of Jesus* series. Through these paintings he sought to capture the ideal Christian image of paradise on Korean soil. This was achieved by deliberately distanc-

ing itself from the wartime realities he had personally endured. At the same time, it reflects his longing for a peaceful Korea free from the devastation of war. As a Korean Christian, Kim painted with hope and anticipation for the coming of Jesus and the kingdom of God in Korea by translating the life of Jesus through a distinctly Korean lens.

## Conclusion

In this study, Kim Ki-chang's depiction of Jesus as a yangban, along with other figures portrayed in attire reflecting different social ranks, in his *The Life of Jesus* is analyzed from the perspective of World Christianity, particularly through the lens of Andrew Walls's translation theory. Kim Ki-chang's depiction of Jesus as a yangban was viewed negatively by Koreans due to their preconceived notions of the authoritative and negative aspects of the yangban class. However, the positive portrayal of Jesus as someone who empathizes with and heals the suffering, and who endures hardships to atone for their sins, expanded the traditional image of the yangban.

In addition, while the poor, the sick, and the sinners are portrayed as commoners in Kim's paintings, the change in the disciples' status from commoner to yangban, evident in their changed attire, is a representation of their spiritual transformation. Kim Ki-chang used these images of class distinctions to translate and incarnate Jesus Christ into Korean particularities.

Kim also set the scenes from *The Life of Jesus* in the relatively peaceful Joseon era to distance them from the dramatically contrasting reality of wartime that characterized Kim's own era. Finally, in his identification with the drowning disciple Peter, Kim Ki-chang expresses his personal turmoil and that of his country while maintaining a certain distance from it. And by portraying Jesus in a peaceful Joseon of the past, Kim expressed his hope for the continuation of the divine presence in the Korean nation.

### Appendix: *The Life of Jesus* Thematic Series (30 Paintings)

Categories	Paintings
1. Birth and Childhood of Jesus	1) Annunciation 2) Nativity of Christ 3) Adoration of the Magi 4) Flight into Egypt 5) Massacre of the Innocents 6) Boy Jesus Amazes the Scholars
2. Jesus' Public Life and Teachings	7) Jesus' Baptism by John 8) Satan Tempts Jesus 9) Calling of the First Disciples 10) Sermon on the Mount 11) The Samaritan Woman 12) Healing the Sick 13) Feeding the Five thousand 14) Jesus Walking on the Water 15) Parable of the Good Samaritan 16) Return of the Prodigal Son 17) Jesus Blesses the Little Children 18) Let Him Who is Without Sin Cast the First Stone
3. Passion and Death of Jesus	19) Mary Washing Jesus' Feet 20) Entry into Jerusalem 21) The Last Supper 22) Jesus Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane 23) Trial of Jesus 24) Passion of Jesus 25) Jesus Bearing the Cross Alone 26) Crucifixion of Jesus 27) The Body of Jesus was Moved by the Disciples
4. Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus	28) Resurrection of Jesus Christ 29) Mary Magdalene Sees the Arisen Jesus 30) Ascension of Jesus

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