

A Plea for the God Who Is Not God

Foreword

By Rev. Dr. Jongrok Lee Professor of Old Testament Studies, Hanil University and Presbyterian Theological Seminary

1. Soul and Zero – That Fatal Allure

Soul and Zero is, quite literally, a book about "spirit (영)" and "zero (0)." The title, born of long years of deep contemplation and spiritual insight, is both intriguing and captivating. It is concise and precise, expressing the author's intent clearly, and at the same time, the pairing of these two single-syllable characters presents a profound question that could preoccupy one for a lifetime. The title alone suggests that this is no ordinary book.

Indeed, the author engages with a vast range of religious themes. As the reader progresses through the book, it becomes evident that the author is both a critical scholar of religion and a devout spiritual practitioner who seeks communion with the transcendent. His religious research does not stop at describing religious phenomena. He strives to grasp the essence of religion itself. Through a thorough study of sacred texts and close observation of countless religious patterns, he undergoes an academic and spiritual journey in pursuit of true religion. The author seeks to share the spiritual truths he has realized with all people. He clearly holds firm religious convictions and devotes himself to spreading them – in that sense, he is an "apostle of the divine."

If we could all realize the truth and live accordingly, the world would one day

become a paradise. Let go of the cords of prejudice that bind you, and join the author on his voyage toward truth, guided by what led him to enlightenment. (Korean ed. p. 7)

Thus, he invites us all on a "voyage toward truth." In this age of simulacra, where fakes dominate and appear more real than reality, even God has become a hollow concept, and the resulting vacuum is filled by human greed. In such an age of idolatry, the author's invitation is truly sacred. I resonate with his thoughts and gladly accept his invitation.

A few years ago, I myself criticized the spiritual decline and greed of Christianity, asserting that "spirituality (영성) is zero-ness (영성)." This book excites me deeply, not only because of its themes, but because the author is both my friend and my spiritual comrade. Let me cite my previous writing:

"Spirituality is zero-ness. It is the state of being freed from the severe greed that clings to the world even while pretending to reject it. It is the surrender of stubborn ambition disguised as vision. It is the awe of God, the humility before the Word, and the choice to live according to God's will even when it seems foolish."

As the author asserts, and as I affirm from experience, spirituality (영성) is indeed zero-ness (영성). The author devotes himself entirely to "spirit." While I do not agree with all of his positions – for example, I reject his view that "all living beings are made up of body, mind, and soul; the body and mind perish, but the soul, which existed from eternity, will exist eternally" (Korean ed. p. 5) – I respect his bold theological reflections. As a scholar of the Old Testament, I understand humanity as embodied, breathing life forms, which is why I develop a "theology of the body."

Still, I fully agree with his aphorism: "From the soul's perspective, all existence is you. Love them as yourself. Give." It is this kind of clarity and insight that grips my attention.

"There have always been efforts to erase the sublime teachings of religious founders, simply because they threaten the power structures of religious institutions. The distortion of teachings has made it difficult to distinguish between truth and falsehood." (Korean ed. p. 4)

I agree wholeheartedly. Not only Christianity, but nearly all religions have fallen into such a state. Korean Christianity is particularly grave. Having forgotten and distorted its core, it has lost its religious essence. Spirit (영) should be zero (영), and all religions should urge detachment from worldly desire (Korean ed. p. 143), but Korean Christianity has replaced zero-ness (영) with "prison (영)," that is, the prison of greed. True spirit (영) should be eternal (영), but when religion loses its essence, it loses its relevance and cannot endure. Corrupted religion is dangerous. It is better not to exist than to be evil.

2. A Critique of the Old Testament

Soul and Zero begins with the "essence of being," then moves to "the afterlife," "enlightenment," "true belief," and finally, "right living." Although the author harshly criticizes religions, the book remains deeply spiritual. It is telling that the author does not transition directly from being to enlightenment, but instead delves into the afterlife.

He never tempers his critical gaze on institutional religion. He does not tolerate any falsehood or injustice. Rather, he seeks to expose them, to reveal the truth widely. What captivated me most was that the book concludes with an appendix titled "Problems of the Old Testament."

The author critiques many religions, always trying to reveal their essential teachings. But his treatment of the Christian Bible—especially the Old Testament—is exceptionally sharp. I am a Christian minister and a professor of Old Testament at a theological seminary. So when the author writes lines like "If God is like the Yahweh of the Old Testament, he cannot be a true God" (Korean ed. p. 105), I cannot help but take notice.

Of course, I do not agree with all of his assessments. There is room for critique. But I fully support his fundamental questions. While he sometimes misunderstands the Old Testament and clings to superficial aspects of Christianity, his critical approach resonates with my own scholarly work. Anyone reading my writings will see this clearly.

Christians have misused the Bible. Especially in modern times, Western churches, caught up in missionary imperialism, used the Bible to justify colonizing Asia, Africa, and Latin America. They cited Scripture to rationalize the massacre and oppression of other peoples. The Puritans in America invoked the Bible to justify slaughtering Native Americans and seizing their land. They also used it to legitimize enslaving Africans.

The author exposes the irreligiousness, violence, deception, and fabrication of the

Old Testament by quoting actual passages and makes a persuasive case for discarding it. He argues that the Old Testament impedes the noble teachings of Jesus (Korean ed. p. 361). This view is not his alone; many share it. Therefore, the argument carries weight. That is why I, though an Old Testament scholar, take his words seriously.

3. The God Who Is Not God

So far, I have explored Soul and Zero in relation to my own work and the points with which I sympathize. Now, as an Old Testament scholar, I want to respond to the book's theological criticisms.

The fundamental issue I face as a theologian is this: Is the God of the Old Testament truly God?

Reading the Old Testament, one is struck not so much by God's greatness, but by Israel's deep faith that makes God great. God never clearly reveals Himself in history. He only becomes God through Israel's confessions of faith. He does not appear omnipotent. He appears powerless—unable to be God unless people call Him so.

When Babylon destroyed Israel, when the temple was desecrated, when people were slaughtered and displaced, God remained silent. He did nothing to stop the horror. He allowed imperial aggression to proceed unchecked, relinquishing His role as Lord of history. How could Israel still call Him Creator and Sovereign?

Israel constantly had to renew their confessions of faith. God was like sand: the

tighter you held on, the more it slipped through your fingers. Likewise, just when we think we understand God best, He eludes us.

How is theology possible when God is unknowable? What can we say about One whom we cannot grasp?

The Old Testament is full of signs that God abandoned being God. He never made Israel a great nation. In the divine hierarchy of the ancient world, Israel's God was always a minor deity. He never mastered international affairs. He could not even govern His own people. Can such a being be called omnipotent?

God often declares He will annihilate His own people. Such rage is unworthy of a holy God. His temperament is volatile. One moment, He swears to destroy; the next, He is overwhelmed with compassion. He is deeply affected by human suffering. But a true God should be constant. How can we call One "God" who vacillates so wildly, who suffers such pathos?

Thus, the God of the Old Testament is "a God who is not God." That God cries out: "I am not yet God."

I am not yet God. Though people plead and proclaim me so, I am not yet God. As long as people suffer unbearable pain, I am not yet God. As long as some exploit my name for fame and power, I am not yet God. As long as the innocent despair and die alone, I am not yet God. As long as Mammon is worshiped in my place, I am not yet God. As long as violence is committed in my name, I am not yet God. Even if you call me God a thousand times, I am not yet God—Not yet.

Yes, not yet. Not yet God. For God to be truly God, more time must pass. Until then, God lives with us in our suffering. He waits for us to act on His behalf. So He remains weak. And in that paradox, He is the true God—one who breaks our definitions, who walks with us in humility, free from the falsehood of omnipotence.

To conclude: Soul and Zero does not reject the true God who refuses the throne. Scripture is not the word of God, but the word about God. The Old Testament contains truth, but not all of it is true. Not everything it says about God is the final answer. The issues the author raises are valid and should be faced head-on. By focusing on the genuine elements of Scripture and our own religious insight, we can transcend the false images of God—and meet the true One. That, I believe, is the aim of Soul and Zero.