



Season 2, Episode 9 Chloe Sun Wants the Marginalized to Become Conspicuous

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

book, writing, chloe, god, people, absence, esther, read, chinese, question, christian, voice, margin, academic, hear, insights, unique, old testament theology, academic writing, stickers

SPEAKERS

Chloe Sun, Helen Lee, Promo, Ed Gilbreath, Maila Kim

Maila Kim 00:01

Welcome to the every voice now podcast where we bring voices of color into the spotlight. I'm Maila Kim,

Ed Gilbreath 00:08

and I'm Ed Gilbreath. In every episode, you'll hear from authors of color about the making of their books, as well as the challenges they had to overcome along the way. Hey there, Helen Lee

Helen Lee 00:25

Ed Gilbreath! Always a pleasure. I am so glad to be co hosting with you today.

Ed Gilbreath 00:29

Me as well. And we've got another great guest to share with our listeners today.

Helen Lee 00:34



Yes, I was so delighted that we had a chance to speak with Chloe Sun, author of our book *Conspicuous in His Absence: Studies in the Song of Songs and Esther*, which is a fascinating read from our IVP Academic line and examines a pretty deep question which is, what are we to make of God in these two books of the Bible which are very rarely studied together? And in both God is not even mentioned.

Ed Gilbreath 01:02

Chloe is examining some really intriguing questions. And she also has a very unique lens through which she's doing her scholarship, as someone who is originally from China, who became a Christian here in the US, and who now teaches and specializes in Biblical Studies at Logos Evangelical Seminary in Los Angeles.

Helen Lee 01:19

Yeah, I really loved hearing about how she's so intentionally thought about her place and her voice in a field where there aren't many women present, not to mention women with her particular Asian cultural lens, and she had pretty good insights and suggestions about writing as well. So our listeners will have a chance to look forward to those tips too.

Ed Gilbreath 01:40

Well, let's not delay any longer than we hope you all enjoy this week's show. We are so excited today to welcome Chloe Sun to the every voice now podcast. Welcome, Chloe.

Chloe Sun 02:00

Thank you for having me. Great to be here.

Ed Gilbreath 02:03

Yes, yes. It's so good to have you. Could you start us off by telling us a little bit about your personal backstory, where you were born and where you grew up?



Chloe Sun 02:13

I was born in China, and I grew up in Hong Kong. And then when I was a freshman, I came to the states for college and became a Christian here. And I now live in Los Angeles. So at first I was an international student and gradually evolved into the so called first generation Chinese living in America. And I'm married to a Asian American, Chinese American. So I'm kind of in between different worlds.

Helen Lee 02:38

Chloe, when you came here for college, did you expect that you would stay here in the US?

Chloe Sun 02:43

No, no, I didn't plan to stay. It just happened that way. During my sophomore year in college, I started to receive the call to go into ministry. So right after college, I went to seminary. And the first course that I took at seminary was Hebrew. And I started to fall in love with Hebrew, and then the Old Testament and I prayed to God, what do you want me to do with my life? And gradually, I was sensing that teaching, and forming future pastors, would be my call. And so that's that's how I stayed.

Helen Lee 03:23

Was it challenging for you with anyone in your family that you became a Christian? Was there any tension there? Because it sounds like that was not something you expected when you first came?

Chloe Sun 03:34

Right, right. Yeah, that's a good question. Well, I am the first Christian in my family. And when I first became a Christian, my parents were they were atheists, and they were against it. And so it was really hard to communicate with them and make them understand what I'm going through and what Christianity is about. So I had a hard time to make my faith, communicable to them, understandable to them. But gradually, my mom, sensing my persistence, she went to church



herself, and later on, she became a Christian. And then I also shared the Gospel with my brother. He, he later became a Christian, not because of me, but I sowed the seed of the Gospel in his heart and my dad. He's the main story. He was an atheist all his life, because of his experience back in China. His heart was very, like hardened like the Pharaoh. But then eventually, on his deathbed, it was my brother who led my dad to Christ before he passed away. And so it went in full circle; I first shared the Gospel to my brother, and later on, my brother shared the Gospel to my dad. So my whole family became Christian.

Helen Lee 05:00

Oh, that's amazing. I don't think yet we've had a guest on the podcast that has had that kind of evangelistic story where they are like the first in their family. And the whole, the Gospel has moved for their whole family like that. So that's really amazing.

Ed Gilbreath 05:15

That's powerful.

Helen Lee 05:15

That's amazing to hear.

Chloe Sun 05:16

Yeah, God has done something great in my family.

Helen Lee 05:20

I love that story. That's incredible. I'd love to hear your insights, or just any observations on what it is like to be Chinese living in China or Hong Kong, in a less diverse setting versus being Chinese and living here in the US, just anything that kind of comes to mind as being different or harder or easier about being Chinese descent here in the US versus what you experience in China.



Chloe Sun 05:47

Within the Chinese community, there is diversity as well, because Chinese itself, you know, from the Chinese from China, and the Chinese from Hong Kong, the Chinese from Southeast Asia, they're all different, you know, they speak different languages, they have different cultures and politics. But then coming into US, it's even broader, you know, widens this diversity. And I, and I like to interact and meet people from different cultures and ethnicity and races, because everyone reflects the image of God. And then when I look at them in the eye, you know, I see, they, even though they don't look like me, or even talk like me, they are beloved by God. And so in that sense, I see the kingdom, you know, the kingdom is, is is diverse, it shouldn't be just one ethnicity or one race.

Helen Lee 06:38

Yeah. And we see that beautiful picture, of course, throughout Scripture of God being the God of all the nations, I wonder what it's like sometimes for people who come to the US from different countries, what it feels like to experience all the different kinds of racial tensions you see in the US, right, we have such a heritage and history that we're still trying to overcome. It would be interesting to hear from your lens, as someone who's come from a different cultural context.

Chloe Sun 07:05

I do sense the racial tension in the US. And that's such an unending topic throughout history, you know, the tension between the white and the black communities. I consider myself as someone living in the margin of the dominant culture, and a lot of times invisible, and hidden. And what I say doesn't matter, you know, to the mainstream. So that's how I felt living in the margin. And that comes to the writing. That's why it's so important to write and to publish, and to have a voice to speak to the center, and widen, widen the margin. And so that way, the margin will not stay at the margin, we have something to contribute to the center and change that narrative.

Ed Gilbreath 08:00



I have a question Chloe, more about writing in general. I'm curious, when did you first begin dreaming of becoming a writer or being a published author?

Chloe Sun 08:13

So it was right after finishing up my dissertation, as I was writing the dissertation, I was in the momentum to write. So after finished writing my dissertation, I didn't want to lose this writing momentum. So I thought to myself, you know, I need to keep writing. And writing becomes a part of me. So that was right after I finished my dissertation, as I first started writing, I wanted to be published. So I don't write just for the sake of writing, I have the goal of being published being out there that people can read and share the insights that I gained from my research, from my reflection.

Ed Gilbreath 08:57

What was that journey like, on the road to being published? What kind of challenges did you face?

Chloe Sun 09:02

It has been exciting, but there, there are barriers along the way. For example, mostly from their internal barriers, such as the fear of rejection, you know, I think a lot of people fear that their proposal will be rejected, and then that's caused a lot of shame, you know, internally. And then there's also the fear of, just the fear of being out there. And then what if the colleagues or readers disagree with what I wrote or didn't like it? So that's another barrier. Another one would be, some people may take it too personally if they were rejected by the publisher, then that means the person, that the author, will be rejected. So I would advise those who are trying to publish don't be afraid and don't take it personally.

Helen Lee 09:58

Yeah, that is very, very good advice. I think that all writers everywhere around the world all struggle and can relate to that feeling and those fears of rejection. So that's, that's good that you named them.



Chloe Sun 10:12

Another thing about the journey of publishing is that, I'm sure you're familiar with Enneagram right?

Helen Lee 10:18

Oh, yes.

Chloe Sun 10:18

I know, IVP has a series of books on Enneagram.

Helen Lee 10:21

Just a few.

Chloe Sun 10:24

I don't know about you. I'm number four. So I'm the individualist, but I have a strong wing of number three. And number three is achiever. So I like to see the process of writing and come to the point of publishing. And that gives me a sense of joy and accomplishment. It's like I, I have done something. And, and this book is such permanent form. It will outlive my life. And so that longing for longevity, or even immortality,

Ed Gilbreath 11:03

Legacy.

Chloe Sun 11:04

Yeah, that's right.



Helen Lee 11:06

One thing about Enneagram fours is, they love to be unique. I think that's one of the things that drives you. And I think of you, you're a female academic, you are of Chinese descent, you are teaching in this area of Biblical studies. I don't know how many people like that exists here in the US in that way.

Chloe Sun 11:27

Yeah, same here. So, I don't know a lot of people like me.

Helen Lee 11:30

So you're, you're very unique, you're very unique. So that probably is something that your Enneagram 4 appreciates. So I'd love to just hear you even talk about that a little bit. Why is it important for someone who God has designed like you to be represented in the academy, in the marketplace of ideas and books? What are you, Chloe Sun, bringing to the conversation that no one else can bring, particularly in your particular sphere in the academy?

Chloe Sun 12:03

That's a really good question. And that's a question I'd love to address and talk about. I do read a lot of books. And I find there are a lot of books that are focused more on the academic side, the technical side, but then at the same time, they may tend to lose the soul, the spirit, the spiritual aspect of it. And so for me, I like to blend in the academic research with spirituality, and theological reflection. And I want my book to not just be intellectually or theologically sound, but also life-giving. I want people to feel something about God as they read my book, and to have that longing for God, to know God more as the result of reading my book. And also my ethnic background, as a Chinese women, as someone with a hybrid identity, or as a perpetual foreigner, I tend to read the Bible differently, from an angle that maybe not many people can see, such as the Song of Songs, and Esther, they are two books in the Old Testament that rarely, people put the two books together, because they're so different.



Helen Lee 13:24

Right.

Chloe Sun 13:25

One is a song, the other one is the narrative. But then they do share something in common, which is the absence of God. And so when I first see this, and I wanted to write about it, and also think about, the absence of God is at the margin of biblical theology. People want to focus on the presence of God, and his visibility and power, but not his absence, or hiddenness, or silence. And God's absence, hiddenness, and silence parallels my journey as a Chinese woman living in America. And so how do I bring this marginal status into the center? I have to frame it in a bigger framework that is relevant to a wider audience. So I actually wrote the first two chapters at the end. Because the first two chapters framed the Song of Songs and Esther into a bigger narrative of Old Testament theology. How do they fit in, in this big narrative of Old Testament? And that way I can bring the margin into the center, and then challenge the center to rethink about God's absence.

Helen Lee 14:40

I love that you're thinking in those ways of trying to bring the margins to the center. That's that's exactly what we're all about here at Every Voice Now.

Ed Gilbreath 14:48

I love how you weave together the personal and the academic there. I mean, that preaches as they say. Well, we need to take a quick break, but when we return Chloe will do a reading for us. And we'll talk more about the bookwriting process. So stay tuned. And thanks for listening to The Every Voice Now Podcast

Promo 15:09



Helen Lee 15:17

Welcome back to The Every Voice Now Podcast. I'm Helen Lee. And it's time for our Behind the Words segment where we hear a reading from our guests and we find out more about what went on behind the scenes of writing that portion. So Chloe, why don't you tell us a little bit about what you're reading for us today and then go right ahead and read it for us.

Chloe Sun 16:30

I'm going to read the first paragraph in the introduction. And then the last paragraph on the second page. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The cry of the psalmist reverberates deep into the heart of the human soul. In the journey of believers, divine forsakenness is a real experience. This religious experience presumes that God is there but he refuses to act. Throughout human history events such as war, natural disaster, genocide, pandemic, violence and injustices of various kinds testify to the persistence of divine absence in human experiences. When suffering abounds, questions of divine absence arise. Out of the entire Hebrew and Christian canon, Song of Songs and Esther set themselves apart by leaving the name of God out of the text. This conspicuous absence of God's name becomes the incentive for writing this book. The goal for this book, then, is to examine, meditate, and reflect theologically on the Song of Songs and Esther in relation to the theology of absence and inquire how these two books function in Old Testament theology. It attempts to address three main questions: (1) What is the nature of God as revealed in text without his name? (2) How do we think of God when he is perceived to be absent? and (3) What should we when God is silent or hidden?

Helen Lee 18:17

I feel like you're hitting at one of these core questions that every Christian on the planet struggles with, you know, at some point in time or another. What do you do when you can't hear God? What do you do when you feel like God is not present in a very real and tangible way? And you've just gone right there to that very challenging question, which I think is very courageous.

Ed Gilbreath 18:45



How did it sort of affect your own personal journey? How did it, you know, writing this sort of open up some new insights about God in your relationship with him?

Chloe Sun 18:57

Personally, you know, I have to admit, I experienced God's absence from time to time. And those times, actually, they draw me closer to God, in a sense that absence makes the heart fonder, you know, I have to seek him even more earnestly. And so, writing this book is a spiritual journey for me, too. It helps me to see God in a more mysterious way and it broadens my own perspective about who God is. So, actually, at the end of this book, I mentioned that even though the book ends here, but for those who seek to find God in their own lives, the path to comprehend the intricacies of the dynamic between God's presence and absence will go on. So it's an ongoing journey of knowing God and seeking God, especially in his absence.

Helen Lee 19:59

One of the things we were talking about in the earlier segment was the uniqueness of your position as someone as someone who is a female, Chinese academic writing in this area of biblical studies. And so I'd love to talk about that even a little bit more about how you feel like your your unique cultural heritage, your unique lens that you're bringing to this field of biblical studies, how might that be different and distinct than what we see in the center? And what? in what way has God used your unique cultural background and heritage to bring new insights into this area?

Chloe Sun 20:38

Sure. Great question. Thank you. So first of all, as I mentioned earlier, in the Western scholarship, I've never seen or actually rare, rarely seen people bring these two books together. That because I'm trying to think outside of the box, I, you know, brought Song of Songs and Esther together. That's one way. And another thing is that usually the technical side, the academic side, and the spiritual side, the soft side, they usually don't mix together. And I try to mix those together. And that reflects who I am as a person, as an academic, and as someone who cares about spirituality. And then the marginal side, the two books, Song of Songs and Esther, they are not like Genesis, or Deuteronomy, or Isaiah. They're not like those big dominant books, or Exodus. They're like smaller books, more feminine. And that reflects, like,



smaller feminine, me, trying to find my place in the, in the bigger world, the Old Testament theology.

Helen Lee 21:58

You studied, studied under John Goldingay, I believe, right? He was, I believe your advisor, I would love to hear a little bit even about his response to your scholarship. Were there ways that your experiences, your unique cultural lens kind of opened his eyes in some areas of understanding these books that was new to him?

Chloe Sun 22:18

Yeah. When I first mentioned about this book idea to him, I mentioned that the Song of Songs, this is how I see it, and I see it both in the literal sense, and also in the figurative sense. But his perspective is he he only sees that in the literal sense, meaning Song of Songs is a reflection of the love between a man and a woman. Not anything else. That's it. And so my book kind of broadens or gives a different perspective, that this book can be read in a figurative sense as well. And so that challenges, I guess, his thinking, and he's actually, Goldingay is actually one of my endorsers in the book. And he mentioned the word margin, and center. And so he is saying that I'm at the margin, but I'm not losing the center. So I'm kind of bringing the two together, and he congratulates me when the book is out.

Helen Lee 23:14

Good, I love it. I love that you are someone who is expanding people's understanding of these particular books and expanding what is thought of as the center, that you are bringing in perspectives that show that we have a lot more to do and to grow in our understanding of these kinds of narratives and stories so that we can become just more attuned to the fact that there are a lot of perspectives, and a lot of angles and a lot of lenses by which we can study these known well known books of Scripture. So we need more people like you, we need you and more people like you, and more diversity to be able to have more angles.

Chloe Sun 23:53

Every voice counts. Every voice matters.



Ed Gilbreath 23:58

That might another podcast!

Helen Lee 23:59

Every voice matters. There you go. Well, we need to take another quick break, but when we return, we're going to continue our conversation with Chloe Sun, and we're going to find out more about her personal writing habits, maybe some quirks if she has them. And we'll find out how to get a special discount on Chloe's book *Conspicuous in His Absence*. So stay tuned. And thanks for listening to The Every Voice Now Podcast.

Promo 24:24

You're listening to The Every Voice Now Podcast. I'm Ed Gilbreath. Today we've been talking with Chloe Sun, author of the book *Conspicuous in His Absence: Studies in the Song of Songs and Esther*, and keep listening to find out how you can get a special 40% discount on Chloe's book at ivpress.com. But first, let's find out a little more about your writing habits and quirks, Chloe. What were the habits or disciplines that helped you stay on task or write your book?

Chloe Sun 26:01

Part of my personality is, I'm an achiever so I like to reward myself when I achieve something. One way I do is using stickers to reward myself, like Sunday School with children. So after I finish a chapter or milestone in my research or writing, I put a sticker on my calendar. And then when I see the calendar is full of sticker it's just really happy and rewarding.

Helen Lee 26:28

It sounds like what I used to do with my kids whenever they would practice their instrument, we'd always have a wall with a bunch of star stickers. And that was really motivating for some of them. So it sounds very similar to what you are doing.



Chloe Sun 26:40

All my stickers have a smiley face. Happy face, happy face. That's one one way, and I usually make a schedule every semester. It depends on my teaching and administration, I make a schedule to write. And if I don't write or don't progress in my writing, I feel something's missing. Something's not right.

Ed Gilbreath 27:02

And what is the best piece of advice that you've ever received about writing?

Chloe Sun 27:09

Let me show you a book. It's by IVP. Write Better, this book is just marvelous. There's so many writing tips, like how to start and end a chapter well, you know, and the plot and just everything. I would recommend this book, Write Better by Andrew T. LePeau.

Helen Lee 27:34

Yes. Andy LePeau was our longtime editorial director, he just retired a few years ago, but he's still connected to us in a number of ways. He will appreciate that shout out and we'll make sure we link to that in the show notes. Yeah, I'm so glad to know that that's been a good resource for you. Chloe, can you remember any particular moment as you were writing and working on this book, when just something meaningful happened, something memorable happened, either positive or negative, whatever sticks in your mind as being a moment that you cannot forget, as you were working on this particular book?

Chloe Sun 28:12

I struggled a lot when I wrote the part on the temple in Esther, just because I find there are a lot of parallel languages between the description of the palace in Esther and then the description with the description with the temple in Exodus, or the tabernacle of Exodus. So I tried to connect both and wondering if this is the right way to, to, to write my chapter. So I have a lot of struggles and doubts if this is the right thinking. And so at the end, I just used the word "imagine." You know, when I read similarities between these two texts, the similar descriptions



between the temple imagery and Persian palace imagery, I used my imagination to connect to the original reader. The Jewish people who are familiar with the temple, they might have thought about God, God's presence or absence when they read the description of the Persian palace. So I used the word "imagine." So I guess writing is not just about the solid evidence, but also about some imagination.

Helen Lee 29:30

Is academic writing more of a solitary kind of exercise than other kinds of writing you've done? Is there something that's either more or less difficult about academic writing you feel from the different kinds of writing you've done?

Chloe Sun 29:45

I think it's both, because you base your research on your readings. It's also helpful to talk to colleagues and scholars about your ideas, whether they can fly. When I first brought this idea to another colleague a more senior colleague from another school, he questioned whether I can put these two books together in one book. And his rationale was that, you know, the tendency to put two different books together in one book is to flatten their differences. And so that advice has been very helpful. As I wrote this book, I tried to keep that in mind as I wrote, and not to flatten their differences, you know, as Song of Songs and Esther, but also bring out their differences as well. They share something similar, but they also, they're also different genre and different, they have different ideas about what they want to portray.

Helen Lee 30:45

Are there other people who you would say you either look up to or try to emulate when it comes to the area of writing or even academic writing, either one?

Chloe Sun 30:56

May I ask? Is it a sin if I mention white scholars, white male, because I'm trained in the white male context.



Helen Lee 31:08

It is not a sin. They will be very honored, I'm sure.

Chloe Sun 31:17

I'll mention two, then. One is Walter Brueggemann from Columbia, he tackles a lot on the hiddenness of God, the people of God should protest protest against it. And so his writings and his writings on Old Testament theology shaped my thinking and reflection on God, a lot. And another one would be Tremper Longman III. He's actually one of my dissertation advisors. And I like his writings, it's both theologically sound, but also down to earth. They're easy to understand, he doesn't use a lot of academic jargon to confuse people. So I've just mentioned two for now.

Helen Lee 32:03

I am sure that you will become like a person that people talk about and mention as someone who's really inspired them, or who they try to emulate. So I think of you as kind of a groundbreaker. And so, yeah,

Chloe Sun 32:14

Thank you.

Helen Lee 32:15

Well, as we head to the end of our time together, I would love to hear what advice you might have for other other academics who might think of themselves or see themselves as being on the margins like we've been discussing today. And maybe what advice do you have for them as they seek to pursue writing and academic scholarship?

Chloe Sun 32:35



Well, first of all, we have to look at ourselves who we are, as a person, as someone who are made by God, who are wired by God. And then we have to know ourselves and what note or voice and what we can contribute to the academia and to the church. And then we have to be courageous enough to put ourselves out there, you know, make sure you have a voice. And then, and then put that voice out there. And don't give up on publishing and writing. Just keep, just keep trying.

Ed Gilbreath 33:13

That's wonderful. Well, Chloe, we've come to the end of our time. But before we go, we want to give you an opportunity to share with our listeners about any special projects you have going on right now and how people can best reach you.

Chloe Sun 33:26

Okay, I love this question. I always love people asking me, "What are you working on?" Because I'm always working on something. Okay. Right now I'm writing on a commentary on the book of Exodus. It's in the series of Asia Bible Commentary. So I'm writing from the perspective of Chinese diaspora, and how you can reach me, I have a website, ChloeSunPhD.com.

Ed Gilbreath 33:50

Wonderful. Thank you, Chloe. It has been great to have you on the show today.

Chloe Sun 33:55

Yeah, I enjoyed our conversations. Great to be here.

Ed Gilbreath 33:58

And now we want to share with you all that you can find Chloe's book, *Conspicuous in His Absence* at ivpress.com. And if you use the code EVN40, you can get 40% off and free US shipping. So visit the IVP site today to get a great deal on Chloe's book. Thanks, everyone for listening to The Every Voice Now Podcast brought to you by IVP. Our producer is Helen Lee.



And our sound engineer is Jonathan Clauson. If you are enjoying our show, please share about it with your friends. We'd be grateful for your reviews and recommendations on Apple, Spotify or wherever you listen to your podcasts.

Maila Kim 34:38

And we'd love to hear from you directly anytime. You can find us on Instagram and Twitter @everyvoicenow. Or you can email us with your comments, questions, or suggestions at evn@ivpress.com. And join us next time for another inspiring episode of Every Voice Now.

About the Hosts:



Helen Lee, Producer and Creator

Helen is the associate director of strategic partnerships and initiatives; she has a B.A. from Williams College in bioethics, an M.A. from Wheaton College Graduate School in interdisciplinary studies, and an MBA from Babson College in entrepreneurship. She enjoys reading novels by authors of color, finding spots of natural beauty wherever she can, and listening to podcasts such as *Serial*, *The Rewatchables*, *Filmspotting*, and *The*

Disrupters. You can find Helen on Twitter and Instagram @HelenLeeBooks.



Ed Gilbreath, Co-Host

Formerly an editor at IVP, Ed is currently an executive leader at Christianity Today; he earned his bachelor's in communication arts from Judson University and a master's in philosophy of history from Olivet Nazarene University. He is also the author of two IVP books: *Reconciliation Blues* and *Birmingham Revolution*. Follow Ed on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

The Every Voice Now Podcast:

Twitter/Instagram: @everyvoicenow

Website: everyvoicenow.com

Producer: [Helen Lee](#)

Sound Engineer: Jonathan Clauson

Music: ["Staring at the Sun" by Gyom](#)